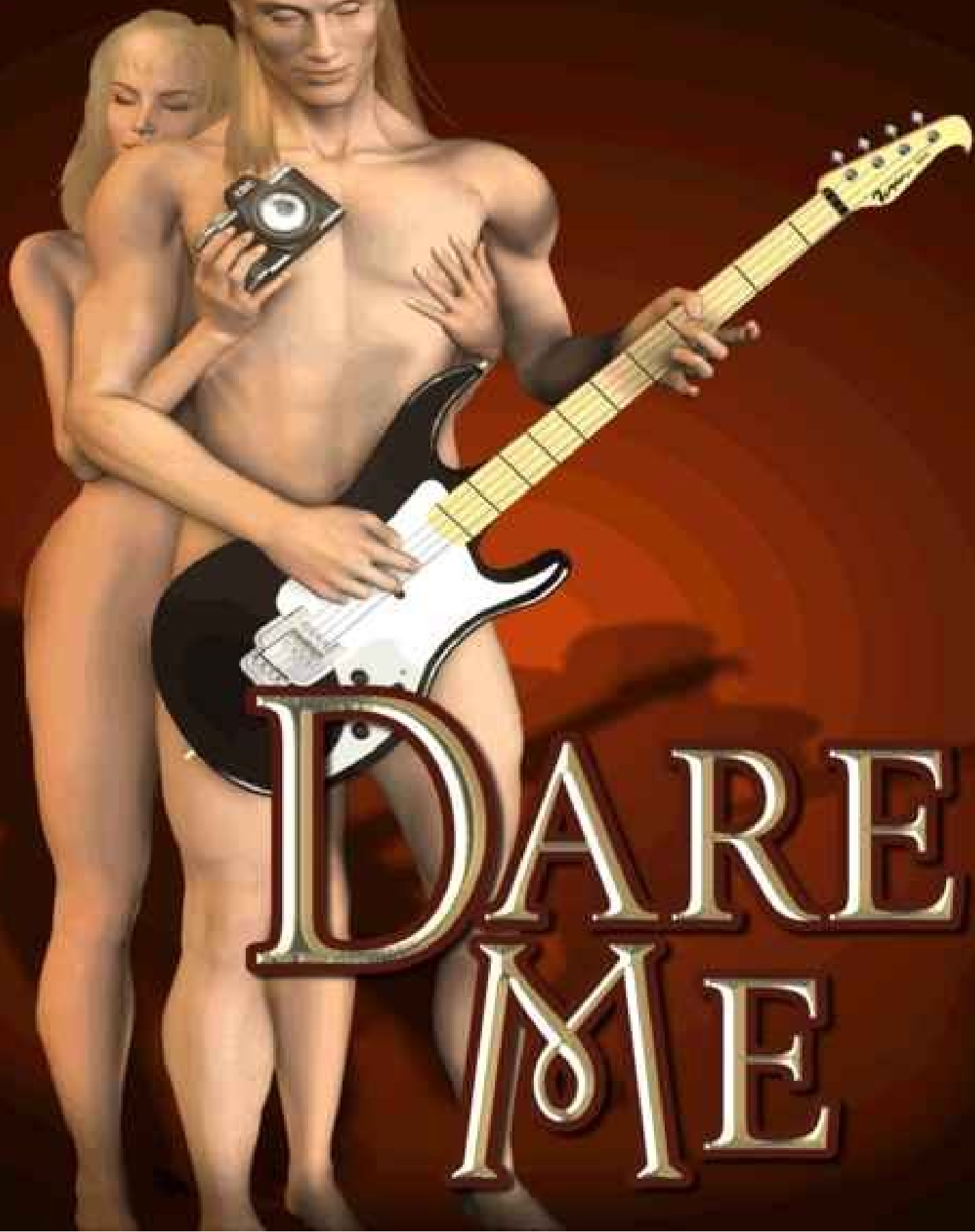


LEIGH ELLWOOD



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One

She pressed her fingers to his temples and tilted his face upward, forcing his tongue away from her throbbing clit. "Who is Ellie?" Trish asked.

Cal Briscoe looked up at Trish, frowning, his tongue still protruding from his mouth. "Wha?"

"You called me 'Ellie.' Who the fuck is Ellie?"

Ellie. Shit. Had he really said that out loud? Quickly his mind searched for a plausible lie. "I didn't say 'Ellie,'" he countered with *faux* annoyance. "I said, uh, 'I love this.'"

Trish frowned. "It didn't sound like you said that."

"I was licking your pussy and talking at the same time. You can't expect me to be coherent while I'm doing that."

Trish's face twisted, contemplating the remark. Just as quickly she brightened and said, "Whatever," and planted Cal's face back into her crotch, where he resumed his oral ministrations.

Trish writhed and heaved with pleasure, licking her forefingers and rubbing them over her erect nipples. "Oh, don't stop. That feels *so* fucking great." The willowy, naked redhead was propped on the butcher-block island of her gourmet kitchen, her legs spread-eagled with her high heels propped against drawer handles on either side. She grabbed Cal by his long hair and pressed him even closer.

"Mmph." The sudden movement on her part caused Cal to momentarily lose his balance and forced him to grasp her quivering thighs. He had already been teetering precariously in a half knee bend, wobbling on the balls of his feet, so he could better eat her pussy. Sure, she was enjoying it, but the position was murder on his neck and back, and the girl was too preoccupied with her own pleasure to at least allow him a second or two to find a chair.

She bucked on the counter's cold, marble surface, groaning loudly as his tongue lapped at her clit and juices. "Make me come!" she repeated over and again.

I'm trying, damn it. He would have liked nothing more right now than to do that. The sooner she came, perhaps they could move on to other things, and more comfortable positions.

A bed, for one. The kitchen was her idea, a realization of some fantasy she claimed to be harboring. Cal's initial thought at her suggestion was puzzled. He thought it strange that anybody wanted to fuck on the same surfaces used for cooking food. That, and the kitchen held the lingering aroma of burnt bacon. Hardly arousing, unless you were maybe into a low-carbohydrate diet.

Of course, Cal couldn't smell that now for the pressure Trish was applying to the back of his head as she brought him ever closer to her moist, engorged slit. All he could smell was her musk. *Any closer and I'll be on the other side of you,* he thought, struggling to breathe.

Her own breathing was a steady wheeze, not unlike somebody performing Lamaze. Perhaps she was close to orgasm, Cal decided. Encouraged by that thought, he opened his mouth wider to suckle her folds and take in her juices, keeping his tongue tapping against that pink button. *That's it, you're doing great.* Just a few seconds more, he hoped, and he could straighten up, undo his pants, and plunge his aching wood into that moistened core.

If, of course, he could reach her from where she was sitting. If not, he would just pull her down from the counter and fuck her on the marble tile floor. Like hell was he going to find a footstool to use for this!

"Ohhh, Carl!" she squealed.

"It's Cal." Only with a mouthful of pussy, it came out as "Ith Cah."

Trish ignored him. "I'm gonna come. Here it comes."

About fucking time. Cal exhaled through his nose.

But she did not come.

Instead of the high-pitched, orgasmic wail he expected, he heard instead the distant sound of a door unlocking and opening. The front door, followed by the beep of a disarmed alarm.

"Trish, babe?" a man called out. "You here?"

Cal tongue froze in mid lick. The buildup stiffening his cock erupted, soiling the front seam of his khaki pants. But he felt no pleasure in it.

Somebody had come ... home. To his ... what?

Cal bolted upright and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Her worried glance was aimed at the kitchen entrance.

"That's my husband," she hissed.

Her *what*? How could Trish be married? She was one of the most popular singers on the scene right now. Every move she made, every nonsensical word uttered from her collagen-plump lips, was recorded in at least three celebrity magazines each week for the past year. When Trish broke wind it was the lead story on *Showbiz Today*. Why hadn't she said anything to him about having a husband when she invited him home from the studio for this midnight snack?

"Trish, honey?" called that deep voice from somewhere within Trish's labyrinthine New York apartment. The guy sounded like a professional wrestler, or a hired thug. Thankfully the kitchen was situated far from the front salon. Unless Trish's beau was either part bloodhound or an Olympic runner, it would be a while before they were caught.

Cal swallowed. Maybe not. At best he had two minutes. Plenty of time to find God and repent his fifty-year backlog of sins.

Trish skidded off the counter and peered out the kitchen entranceway. Her buoyant, gravity-defying breasts bobbed with every teetering step. "We got married in Tijuana a few weeks ago," she whispered. "He's supposed to be in LA still, working on a movie. He's a stuntman."

Cal nodded. Of course he was. He was Vin Diesel's body double, most likely, and ate shards of glass for breakfast before a twelve-hour shift of tossing Volkswagens over his head and pissing away the flames of towering infernos.

Are you there, God? It's me, Cal.

He had to stop doing this. His career as a musician had led him into more dangerous situations than he could count. He should have listened to his mother and become an accountant, or an actuary. How many of those people were ever threatened with death by cunnilingus?

Trish snatched a hand towel from the counter and ran it over her dampened crotch, waving Cal out of the kitchen with her free hand. "Second door on the right, that way," she ordered. "It's a guest room. There's a balcony where you can hide. Draw the curtains. I'll distract Igor."

"Balcony?" *Igor*? Maybe he had been Ahnuld's body double once, and now was incredibly ticked off that the actor had turned politician and left him scrounging for B-film work.

"I don't want to sit on your balcony." Trish's apartment was twenty floors from the ground. "I want to get the hell out of here."

Footsteps echoed in one of Trish's parquet-covered hallways. Igor was afoot. Cal sized up the giant Vulcan oven imbedded in the wall and wondered if he would fit. No, scratch that. Igor might want to bake cookies. Or roast an entire pig and eat it: bones, snout, and all.

He turned to Trish. "*Get me out of here, you freakin' adulteress!*"

"Hey," she protested. "It takes two to tango, you know."

"Well, at least I'm not married. And I don't tango."

"Guest room." Trish motioned. "I'll get Igor in our bedroom and you can slip out the front, okay? Now go." The glow of near orgasmic ecstasy pervading the kitchen was gone now. Cal couldn't decide whether or not Igor's interruption or Cal's adulteress remark annoyed her the most.

Like he cared to press her for detail, either. Stealthily he dashed away and found the room with a view and was behind said curtain within seconds. Precious seconds, too, Cal soon realized, as not long afterward he heard Trish greeting her hubby with exaggerated glee.

"I missed you *soooooooooo* much, tiger," came the Betty Boop-ish wail from the kitchen. Igor's gruff response was muffled, but Cal could detect the man was certainly buoyed by the fact that his wife was naked save for the ice pick heels. Less work for him to do, Cal guessed.

Cal opened the sliding glass balcony door wide enough to suit his lean frame and closed it behind him, sealing him off from the activity inside the apartment. Outside, New York City thrummed and shrieked like the concrete jungle it was. It was late May, and it was cold. A breeze whipped through his long, brown hair, and he realized the elastic that kept it in a ponytail must have shrugged off between the front door and kitchen. Cal's jacket was somewhere in this gray area, too. He shivered in the cold, hoping Igor had not spied either of them.

Good thing, too, that he had left his bass guitar at the studio, locked in the manager's office for safekeeping. He hadn't wanted to drag the thing here, and now he imagined mighty Igor pounding its maple wood neck against Cal's head and using the strings like garrote wire to strangle him. A hand unconsciously touched his throat.

He patted his pants pockets. At least he was still dressed and had his wallet, cell phone, and the key to his apartment, if he needed to improvise an escape. Perhaps if he concentrated well enough, the sweat glistening on his palms would help him stick to the side of the building, and he could crawl down to safety like Spiderman.

Or, he could just jump to certain death. If Igor caught him on the balcony he was dead meat anyway. He rubbed the goose flesh from his arms. Hardened nipples tried to poke through his Polo shirt, but it was hardly a pleasurable feeling. Damn, it was cold!

A rough noise alerted him to the slit between the curtains, and he peered through the glass. Jumping seemed to be his only option right now. Igor apparently could not wait to get to the master bedroom. He had carried Trish into the guest room and tossed her on the bed like a rag doll. Cal could only watch in disbelief as the brick wall with hair undid his pants to reveal a stiff cock the size of Liberty's outstretched arm. All that was missing was the torch. And the Midwestern tourists gaping at the scenery from it with awe.

He could not hear what they were saying, and was terrible at lip-reading, but Cal was certain he could make out the words *fuck* and *death* being belched from Igor's lips. Two things that were likely to happen tonight, he surmised.

"Fuck me," Cal gasped, watching as Trisha spread her legs to accept a cock to make a porn star weep.

"He will," croaked a phlegm-gargled voice.

"Wha—?"

Cal took a step toward the railing and peered over the left side of the balcony. The row of balconies underneath Trish's floor were staggered, and Cal could clearly see the much older downstairs neighbor, a toothpick thin blue-hair wrapped in a red silk robe, smiling up at him with her arms folded. A long cigarette holder was pinched between two fingers; she tapped a long string of ash over her balcony where it floated into the inky night, glowing red briefly before being extinguished by the night air.

"Beg pardon?" Cal called quietly to her. The lovemaking inside had penetrated the tenuous sound barrier provided by the glass doors, and it was loud; he no longer feared being heard.

"You, my friend, were set up," the old woman replied. She shifted her robe so that the valley between her breasts was plainly visible, a move made more than likely on purpose. "You know you're the third guy in two weeks that tramp's had wait outside? She ought to at least keep a beer cooler and a space heater up there for you poor saps."

"You're kidding." In truth, Cal was not surprised by the revelation of Trish's promiscuity. Word among his peers was that despite Trish's youth she was rather experienced when it came to playing the skin flute, and he never figured to be her first. Plus, it was not as if Cal was seeking anything long-term from this liaison. Nothing a condom couldn't prevent, anyway.

"She told me about it a few months ago, at a party I had here. She was drunk, and *oy*, the things she said." The woman stuck the lighter between her lips and inhaled. "They have this role-playing thing. She picks up some unsuspecting horny jackass like yourself for some coffee and hair pie, and Hubby 'accidentally' arrives home unexpected." Finger quote marks accentuated the explanation. "She gets the dope out on the balcony, she and Hubby fuck, then he 'pretends' to discover the other guy and drags him back inside, where he proceeds to ram his giant cock into the guy's blowhole as 'punishment.'"

"*What?*" Cal felt all his organs plummet to his shoes. He glanced back at the slitted activity on the other side of the glass doors. That man could split him in two like a railroad tie.

"Yeah," the woman said. "She gets off by watching it. But they're rather charitable people, too. Hubby paid for the last guy's ambulance ride and stitches, so I heard."

Ambulance ride and st—?

Cal's heart was pounding; the blood surged in his head, making him dizzy. Being raped by a diesel truck was not his idea of a good time. True, he had experimented with a man once before—strictly oral, giving and receiving—but he never once thought of taking one up the ass himself. If that ever happened, it would be by *his* choice, and not the whim of some flash in the pan, Top 40 tart.

He wiped the sweat from his palms and peered down at the old lady's balcony. It was a good ten-foot drop, and with the way the balconies were staggered he could make it. It certainly beat the alternative. His third eye puckered at the thought of it.

"Move out of the way. I'm coming down," he commanded.

The old woman smiled and complied. Cal gripped the railing, took a deep breath, and jumped, pressing his heels together and kicking up and over the concrete wall. He landed hard on the lower balcony and bent his knees to keep from tumbling. Pain shot from his heels through his legs, and they felt as if they would splinter like wood.

When he could breathe again he stood and silently congratulated himself for maintaining his agility. At fifty-one, he looked closer to thirty-five without the aid of surgery or special effects, and thanks to constant exercise he felt even younger. His libido rivaled that of any horny eighteen-year-old, but given tonight's near miss he wondered if that was still a good thing.

"Very impressive," the old woman purred, and with her free hand she undid the silk belt of her robe. "Considering that I literally and figuratively saved your ass, is there some sort of reward I should be expecting?"

Aided by the breeze, the robe flapped open to reveal a thin, senior nude body, burnt by too many days of sunbathing in some resort for rich people. Her breasts were small and tipped with bright red nipples, her pussy covered with a thatch of gray. Wrinkles were where one expected them to be, but on the whole she was not unattractive. On the outset, the woman appeared to have had the good sense not to expose her body to the business end of a surgeon's scalpel.

Tempting, but Cal had had enough surprises for one night. Instead, he drew his savior close and planted a deep kiss on her willing, parted lips. She tasted of menthol and gin.

"I'll have to take a rain check, sweetheart," he said when he broke away, "but at least I know where to find you." With that, he dashed into the old woman's apartment, and, after two wrong turns, found his way into the hall, down the elevator and to the ground, where he hailed a cab heading west.

One floor above the old woman, mighty Igor stood on his balcony, scratching his shaven head. "Trish," he bellowed. "There ain't nobody out here."

"Fuck."

Sitting in the stale discomfort of the first cab to stop for his signal, he finally noticed the dark, wet stain spread across the crotch of his slacks. He reeked of bacon and cum, and fought the nausea bubbling in his throat by swallowing back hard.

He pressed a hand to his heart to still the maniacal pounding, and took deep, even breaths. He was much too old for this fraternity house shit. Most men his age were long ago home in bed with their wives, snoring and unconcerned about near male-rape experiences with the rich and infamous. He needed that kind of domestic stability, or else be choosier about his one-night stands from now on.

He glanced up at the rearview mirror of the cab, catching the reflection of two sharp eyes studying him underneath thick, black brows. The ID card pasted in the rear of the cab told Cal that his driver had swarthy skin and a typically unpronounceable name stuffed with consonants. No doubt the guy had seen worse in his cab than a man who had suffered premature ejaculation *and* near emasculation.

Cal gave his address, and the cab lurched forward with a grunt. Then he checked his wallet to see if he had enough cash; the driver was certain to take the scenic route.

His miniature cell phone spilled onto his hand with the billfold. Since he had spent the whole day in the studio recording Trish's next album, it had been turned off, and as he checked his messages he learned one person had been trying to call him all day.

"Fuck," he echoed. Brady was back in town, no doubt wondering where Cal was, and wanting something. Cal sighed as he punched the call return button and pressed the sliver of phone to his ear. It was late, but Brady would still be alert.

Brady Garriston was his best friend, a famous musician enjoying a successful comeback with a new album, a hit single on the adult contemporary chart, and a nationwide tour set to begin in a month. Their friendship spanned well over thirty years, through many turbulent and joyous adventures.

Brady was also the man who had been on the giving and receiving ends of Cal's only same-sex experience, an enjoyable encounter but one that hadn't been repeated. Yet, despite their closeness, Brady was the last person Cal wanted to see right now.

For where Brady Garriston was, his lovely lady Ellie Shaw was certain to be, too. Cal fell in lust with Ellie the day they met over two months ago, when Brady was hiding out in Ellie's sleepy hamlet of Dareville, Virginia. The feelings gradually developed into something stronger, until it began to hurt to see the two of them together, so happy and loving. Yes, Brady and Ellie enjoyed a mutual taste for sexual adventure that at times permitted Cal to join them in their bed, but Cal felt it was not enough. His feelings for Ellie went much deeper than the blowjob or anal penetration he was allowed to enjoy in these threesomes.

Brady was aware of this, too, Cal knew, hence the limitations discreetly imposed on Cal following the first time all three of them were together, when Cal had done so much more.

The phone rang and rang. Cal wondered if he would be called into service tonight. He would never pass up the chance to wrap his nude body around Ellie's, to suckle her erect nipples or pound his cock into that inviting, heart-shaped ass of hers, but after tonight's fiasco he doubted he could get into the mood again.

Brady didn't even say hello. "What's the point of owning a damn cell phone if you never turn it on?"

"I'm well, thank you." Cal's voice was bored. "How was LA?"

"Wreathed in smog and full of Scientologists. Where are you?"

"In a cab heading home." Cal glanced out the window. They were inching along Broadway, nowhere near his address. The cabbie's daughter must need braces. "I'm beat. Had an interesting evening I'll have to tell you about over a beer at Knick's."

"Tell me now, come over. I have beer."

"S'alright. If you just got in you don't need me crowding you guys." Cal squeezed his eyes shut. It would be nice, regardless, to see Ellie's sunny, smiling face after a long absence, despite the hurt it would bring. The smiles she reserved for Brady were more alluring, sensual. She would never smile at Cal that way.

It would be nice, too, to see those same smiling lips wrapped around his stiffened cock.

Cal sighed. *I must be a fucking masochist.*

He looked down at his soiled crotch. Just the thought of Ellie sent his cock stirring. It throbbed in the deep wrinkle of his slacks. The movement surprised Cal, considering he lived through a near miss that might have sent a regular man's cock shrinking back into his body cavity.

And he had called Trish by Ellie's name earlier, too. He had it bad.

"Fuck," Cal muttered.

He caught the cabbie's glare of disapproval in the mirror. Cal ignored him.

"What was that?" Brady asked. "You went fuzzy."

"Nothing. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Come over. We're celebrating, and it wouldn't be right without you here," Brady insisted, then, "Ellie wants to see you, too."

Cal felt his heart leap from his chest. The reception on the phone was terrible, yet Cal could distinctly detect the change in timbre of his friend's voice, the implication that Ellie wanted to do more than "see" Cal.

Cal wanted to do more than "see" Ellie, too, but not with Brady in the way. Just once, for the two of them to be alone...

He listened on the other end. Ellie's pixie voice was faint in the background, yet he could clearly hear her ask, "Is he coming?"

I just might, babe. Cal closed his eyes and willed away threatening tears. *Damn, what you do to me, beautiful.* Every woman he had fucked since meeting her, or tried to fuck given tonight's abortion, had been a poor attempt to forget Ellie. Very poor. He was interminably connected to her through his friendship with Brady, and pliant to her desires.

He edged the phone from his face and ordered the cab driver to change directions, then told Brady he would be by shortly before snapping the phone shut.

He rested back in the torn vinyl bench seat and sniffed. Apparently he was not the only cum-stained object here. He sighed.

The middle-aged masochist was definitely a dying breed.

I'm much, much too old for this shit.

* * * *

He buzzed the apartment at the front door keypad of Brady's building and announced his arrival. Four minutes later, he stood at the open apartment door as his best friend regarded Cal's windblown hair, weary hazel eyes, and soiled khakis with mild amusement.

"Why do I have the feeling this story is going to last more than one beer?" Brady greeted him with an opened green bottle. The import was cold and tasted wonderful sliding down Cal's throat; it was the perfect solution to wash away Trish. A joint would have been better, but Cal remembered the only one he had with him today was in his jacket, at Trish's place. Maybe she and the Hulk were sharing it right now. No matter. Ellie wouldn't have allowed him to smoke it, anyway.

Cal sauntered into the living room and sank into Brady's leather sofa. "I don't really feel like telling it," he moaned. "What's today, Tuesday? I forget. This month has been a blur."

"Yes, it's Tuesday. Actually, it is Wednesday morning, it's past midnight," Brady chuckled and leaned against the sofa arm closest to Cal. He did not budge when Cal rested his head against his hip, but ran a hand through his friend's thick hair.

"Wake me on Friday." Cal yawned and propped his feet on the other end. "We'll go to Knick's. I'll buy the first round and tell you all about it."

"Cal?"

His head snapped forward, and his gaze steered to the right, toward the open doorway of the master bedroom. Ellie emerged wearing an oversized Jets football jersey that nicely set off her toned, tanned legs. Most likely she wore nothing else underneath it. Cal's breath hitched in his throat, rendering him unable to say hello. As always, she was beautiful, even with her shoulder-length hair mussed from travel, her dark green eyes sparkling.

The way she bit her lower lip, as she was doing now, sent his heart palpitating. There was that stirring in his pants again. Cal tried to cross his legs to hide it, but cringed as Ellie's gaze ventured south. Blonde brows furrowed over those green eyes.

"Cal, what happened to you?" she gasped, and hurried to the couch. Cal lifted his legs to allow Ellie to sit next to him. "Were you mugged?"

"We'll have to wait 'til Friday to find out," Brady said, his voice mirthful.

Ellie frowned. "Why do we have to wait until Friday? I don't get it."

Cal waved Brady's jab away. "Just a joke. No biggie, just had a very unpleasant run-in with an army of one."

Ellie inched closer to him on the sofa, her legs tucked underneath her. The hem of the jersey slid upward and granted Cal a view of her lovely, bent backside.

Mama.

She put a hand around the back of his neck and rubbed his pressure points. "Want to talk about it?"

"Oh, don't tell us now," Brady whined. "El, he was going buy the first round at Knick's."

Ellie reached over Cal and smacked Brady playfully on the thigh. "He's been like this since we left LA," she told Cal. "Ignore him. Now," she resumed her massage, "tell us everything, sweetie."

How could he resist that delightful voice? Always light and perky, evident of her days as a schoolteacher before she left her job to be with Brady, her voice was pure seduction. Cal found it difficult to resist, and quickly he relayed the saga of Trish, Igor the Terrible, and their horny old broad of a downstairs neighbor. Ellie listened with gradual horror widening her lovely eyes, while Brady

turned beet red with restrained laughter, which he politely held until the very end of the story.

"It's not funny!" Ellie scolded her lover. "Cal could've seriously been hurt, jumping off a balcony like that. What if he missed and actually fell to his death?"

Brady stopped laughing long enough to speak, though his words seemed forced coming through short bursts of breath. "El, you don't know Cal as long as I have," he said. "This is child's play compared to what we've done in the past. Trust me, he has lived through worse. One time about twenty years ago our tour bus was headed toward Nashville, and—"

Cal cut off his friend with a raised hand. "Later," he said. Ellie certainly did not need to know about *that* incident.

Ellie stopped massaging Cal's neck and pinched him hard on the shoulder. Cal winced.

"Hey!" he protested.

"What would possess you to do a stupid thing like that, anyway?" she demanded.

"You do understand what the alternative was?" Cal said. "You've seen *Deliverance*, right?"

"I meant going home with that bimbo in the first place. I never liked Trish. She always seemed so fake to me." Ellie released her grip and folded her arms over her ample breasts. The move disappointed Cal; he had been able to spy teasing bits of flesh in the mesh front of the jersey. "And she's secretly married. What else did you not know about her?"

"Tonight was a learning experience, yes," Cal admitted.

"You can't keep going on like this, Cal," Ellie said, concerned. "I'm all for a bit of fun, too, but eventually..."

"I know." Cal knew where this conversation was headed. While the three had enjoyed heavy flirting with each other and the occasional sexual romp, he knew Ellie fancied herself a matchmaker, determined to find somebody to make Cal as happy as she was making Brady. Cal appreciated the thought, but never took Ellie up on her offers to be fixed up with other women. There was always one problem: none of the women were Ellie.

"You're all sticky." Ellie grimaced, as if seeing the mess in his pants for the first time.

"He was in a sticky situation," Brady said, finally calm.

Ellie glared at Brady, then patted Cal's dry knee and stalked into the bedroom. Seconds later both men heard the gentle whir of running water.

She returned with a thick terry robe, dumping it in Cal's lap. "Take everything off," she ordered. "You need to get cleaned up. I got a bath running."

Cal raised an eyebrow. "Is this some new tack on foreplay?"

"You're giving him my good robe?" Brady voiced in mock protest.

"Can I bring my beer?" Cal held up his half-empty bottle.

"I'm sticky, too, you know. It was a long flight," Brady said. "Don't I get a bath?"

Ellie said nothing at first, but regarded both men with a bemused smirk. "To answer all concerns, in order: perhaps if you're good, your album just went platinum so you can buy a new robe if you want, yes, and no." She pointed at Cal. "I want your clothes for the laundry. Now." And she disappeared into the master bedroom, the hem of the jersey just barely covering her firm buttocks and she walked.

Cal watched her retreat with growing desire, then smiled at his friend. "When she did turn into your

mother?"

"Somewhere over the Grand Canyon on the flight home, I presume," Brady grumbled. "But I'll tell you one thing, though, my mother never looked that good."

Cal sighed. *No kidding.*

Three

Brady's master bathroom was spacious and trimmed with ivory tile and antique nickel finish. The toilet had its own separate closet, and the Swedish shower stood on the opposite end of the grand jetted tub, in which Cal now soaked, with all jets positioned within the rectangular basin bubbling the warm water. He sank down so that his shoulders were completely submerged, yet due to his tall frame he was forced to prop his heels on the opposite edge of the tub, allowing the water to cover as much of his long, lean legs as possible.

He closed his eyes. This felt nice, and he was glad Ellie insisted upon it to help him unwind and wash away the unpleasantness of Trish's kitchen encounter. To think about it, he had been spending more time in studios than at home lately, so it had been a while since he last bathed thoroughly, anyway.

The only thing that could surpass this pleasure, he knew, would be to have Ellie join him. The tub was large enough for two, maybe three. To see Ellie step seductively into the tub, sink down into the raging bubbles and wade over to him, to feel her wet skin sliding against his, would be nice.

To have Ellie on his lap with her back against his chest, her legs splayed over his as he stroked her clit with one hand while the other positioned his cock inside her, would transcend nice.

Those hands right now, though, were folded on his abdomen. Unconsciously one slid further south to cuff his limp cock, which he slowly began to stroke. A clear image of naked Ellie, kneeling between his parted legs like some contemporary water nymph, her erect nipples threatening to brush against his quivering chest, surfaced behind his eyes. He was stiff in seconds, and he fingered his circumcised tip.

"How are we doing?"

His eyes snapped open, and he released himself; the image shifted to one of Ellie back in her jersey. No, Cal realized, this was real. Ellie had padded into the bathroom with another beer bottle. She replaced the one beside his head, discarding the empty bottle gently in a nearby trash can.

"Doing fine, this feels great," Cal said lazily, and shifted to make his erection less noticeable under the bubbling water. No such luck, for Ellie leaned over the tub and smiled upon spying the fleshy specter distorted by the water.

"I'm sure it does," she said with a wink. "I love this thing. I could live in it."

"I should get one for my place." Cal knew, though he could easily afford such an expensive tub, he would have to get a new place altogether in which to put one. His apartment was a third the size of Brady's, and the bathroom was nothing more than a broom closet with plumbing.

Ellie sat on the tiled tub edge, facing Cal, and eased her bare legs into the water. With one pointed toe she traced lazy circles in one jet stream. "What I like best about this tub is sitting sideways in it," she said. "I spread my legs and the jet hits my clit just right," her face contorted with pleasure, "and it feels so good."

"Not having a clit, I don't think I can relate," Cal said. Oh, but how he wanted to stroke *her* clit right now. He tilted his view downward for a better shot of her pussy, but the way she was sitting with her thighs pressed together prevented that. "You're more than welcome to demonstrate, however," he said.

She smirked, and playfully kicked a few drops in his direction. "I meant what I said earlier, you know."

Cal sobered. "I know you did." His heart sank. *Not now.*

"We need to find you a nice, *single* girl before you end up having to jump off the Chrysler Building to escape somebody's enraged husband."

"The woman doesn't exist who could tolerate me," Cal said. He shifted in the tub when Ellie's knees

inexplicably parted, revealing a teasing, shadowed view of shaved pussy. "Besides, Brady already has the only woman worth the trouble."

Ellie's smile was soft, as was her voice. She blushed. "Cal."

Speaking of the devil...

"Where *is* Brady?"

"Ordering dinner. We're having Cantonese sent up later. He'll be in shortly."

Cal sighed. Of course he would. Cal could not have one without the other. He would have to make the most of this time alone with Ellie.

Ellie grabbed one of Cal's feet and set it on her lap. She massaged the sole, pressing her thumbs into his tightened flesh and kneading the arch deep. After surviving the hard landing against the concrete of that old woman's balcony, Ellie's touch was pure heaven. He moaned his approval.

"We just want to make sure you're okay, make you feel better, Cal."

The innuendo in her voice was unmistakable, and coupled with her touch Cal was now willing to go for anything. Another man might have balked at the invitation, thinking he might be played twice in one night. But Ellie was definitely not Trish, and was definitely not the type of person to force anything on anybody.

What she was doing to him, now, however, might prompt him to do her bidding entirely without reservation. He shifted again in the tub. His cock ached in the warm water; the jets pulsed against his skin, enhancing the pleased feeling coursing through his body. And Ellie switched to the other foot.

"You keep that up I might just come," he growled.

"I hope not," Ellie whispered. "Not yet."

"You gonna sit there in that damn jersey all night, or you gonna come here and get wet?" Cal lifted his arms and grasped the sides of the tub. The untouched foot sank back into the water and he raised that knee, making room should she oblige him.

"I *am* wet."

Ellie's smile pierced his heart and cock.

"Just thinking about my two best guys..."

Cal's own smile saddened. No need to ask how he ranked on that short list. He imagined Ellie and Brady had primed each other elsewhere in the apartment while he was here, getting wrinkled.

"...and what I could do to make them happy," she finished.

Oh, hell. Cal beckoned her closer with a wink. If Brady was late, he was late. Fine by him. He had wanted Ellie alone for a long time and would take what he could get.

Ellie released his foot, reached behind her for the collar, and shed the jersey with one dramatic sweep of her arm. Cal's breath hitched at the sight of those luscious breasts, tipped with puckered, dark pink nipples, as they lifted and swayed with the movement of her arms. When Ellie smoothed her palms over them to make the nipples stick out farther he thought he would explode right there in the water.

"Got yourself some sun, I see." A bit of raw, pink flesh just above her bust had peeled away in a slight burn. The rest of her body, however, was a delicious golden brown, save for the white triangle highlighting her shaved pussy.

Still cupping her breasts, Ellie squeezed them together and pinched her nipples between her forefingers

and thumbs. "A little too much. Nothing like the sun beating down on your bare body."

Cal wanted that bare body against his.

He held up his hands and sat straighter in the tub. Ellie knelt into the wet warmth and slid closer to him, then lapped her thighs over his, her feet tucked under her knees. Water sloshed around them and spilled over the tub's rim onto the shag bathmat.

Immediately he enveloped her in his arms, bringing his hands together at her buttocks as she arched backward and draped her arms about his neck. Lifting her slightly against him, he dipped his head closer for a kiss, joining her parted lips to his, darting his tongue across her teeth and gently plundering her mouth. As she melted into him he drew in a breath, swallowing her pleased moan and moving his lips downward, breaking off contact.

He drew back slightly and looked into those eyes, which at the moment were laughing at him.

"Did we have a three-way just now?" she joked. The quip was lost on him since Brady had yet to appear, but then he remembered he had been eating Trish earlier. The beer had not completely masked it.

"Fuck," he muttered, and Ellie laughed, touching her forehead to his in a gesture that told him not to worry about it.

Encouraged, he resumed his seduction. His next kiss started at her lower lip and trailed down her chin and throat, then gently circumnavigated her sunburn to tackle one breast. He released one hand from her backside to lift the breast by the underside, so he could better take the nipple into his mouth.

He suckled hard, encouraged when she moaned and pressed her hands to the back his head. She tasted of her own delightful musk and suntan lotion, salty and sweet at the same time. She must have laid out that morning in California. The taste of her could sustain him forever.

"I missed you so damn much," he muttered into her skin. His heart threatened to explode. Had he said that out loud? Brady was aware of his feelings for Ellie, yes, but as far as he knew Ellie had been shielded from the more serious revelations. How would she interpret it?

Ellie brushed her lips in his hair. "You should have come to LA with us, and performed on the show like Brady wanted you to," she chided.

Cal nodded and leaned his cheek against her bosom. He had to turn down that gig, as he was already committed to working on Trish's album. "I would much rather have been on the beach with you than in some television studio," he said. "I would love to have been lying naked on the sand and rubbing lotion all over your body instead of jumping off some crazy woman's balcony."

His fingers traced her spine. He delighted in the shiver it caused on her, despite the water's warmth. Emboldened, he brought one hand around her waist, without breaking contact with her skin, across her abdomen and down to her pussy.

"Especially where the skin is most sensitive," he continued, his lips pressed against her breast. His fingers found her folds and stroked them gently. "So you wouldn't burn." He wanted to do more than that. He wanted to plant her in the wet sand kissing the surf and ram his cock in and out of her as waves of cold ocean water crashed into them, dragging their bodies with the tide. If he drowned, he drowned. At least he would go a happy man.

A throaty giggle vibrated through her chest and into Cal's head, making him dizzy. "You are so crazy," she said.

Crazy for you. "Say my name," he begged. "Please."

"Cal," she whispered.

He inhaled sharply. His aching shaft bobbed against his wrist as he continued stroking her. So damn close, yet so far away. He wondered how Ellie would react if he pointed his cock in her direction and thrust forward. She had never questioned why they never fucked that way again during their subsequent three-way trysts. Of course, considering how much energy was always involved, she was probably always too tired or sated to ask.

Just the thought of burrowing a finger through her folds to find her clit unnerved him. Far as he knew, he had only made Ellie come one time, that first time, and Brady had confided to him afterward that it had made him unhappy. Yet now, Cal thought of nothing else. Dare he try now?

Suddenly he felt a presence other than Ellie, and looked up to see Brady in the doorway, smiling at them. His friend was stripped down to a pair of shiny blue jogging shorts, slit high at the sides, that enhanced his own lean legs and erect shaft. A beer bottle dangled by the neck between two fingers at his side.

Cal smiled back. Brady looked incredible, tan and smooth with a taut chest, a body that belied his fifty-one years. Ellie's love had been good to him.

Cal was not one to consider himself bisexual, his encounter with Brady notwithstanding. Still, there came unbidden the thought of feeling his friend's body pressed against his so intimately, the temptation to reach out and grasp Brady's cock and take it into his waiting mouth.

But he would have to let go of Ellie to do that.

"Feeling better?" Brady asked Cal, his deep voice ringing throughout the tiled room.

"Much," Cal agreed, but was disappointed when Ellie gently pulled away from him to rest against the opposite end of the tub, submerging her breasts underneath the jet spray. He knew what would come next. She would turn her back to Cal so Brady could enter the tub facing her, and Brady would be the one clamped by that sweet pussy while Cal took her from behind. Not that he minded fucking Ellie's ass—he loved doing it—but he was getting tired of always being relegated to the back entrance, like a servant.

But, oh, how he would love to be this woman's slave.

It surprised him, therefore, when Brady approached his end of the tub and sat on the ledge. He shed his shorts before draping his legs on either side of Cal. Brady set his bottle beside Cal's and began rubbing Cal's neck, and chuckled at Cal's appreciative grunt.

Brady kneaded his thumbs into Cal's skin to loosen the knots lining his muscles. The sensation was painful and at the time a welcome relief. "If you were any tighter, my friend, I could shove a piece of coal between your shoulder blades and produce a diamond," Brady murmured. "Relax your neck."

Cal obeyed, dropping his chin to his chest. From the other side of the tub he could feel Ellie rub up and down his shin. "Probably the jump that did it," he conceded. "I didn't tuck and roll like I should have, I guess."

"We're just glad you're not hurt." Brady's ministrations slowed, then stopped altogether as Brady cupped his shoulders. The next sensation he felt from behind was a soft kiss landing where his neck met his shoulders, marred slightly by the light scratch of beard stubble. Cal felt his exposed skin prickle at the touch.

"I do like to joke with you, but you really did scare us with that story tonight, pal," Brady whispered in Cal's ear. "I don't know what I'd do if something bad happened to you."

"There's a million bass players in the world. You'd survive." Cal tried to joke, but hearing the sincerity in his best friend's voice caused his own to crack.

"There's only one you," he heard Ellie say, and Cal looked up as the bubbling water was further disrupted. Ellie had moved closer to kneel before him, and he was now eye level with those marvelous breasts. Water beaded each nipple, and he ached to lean forward to kiss them dry.

Yet as Brady continued kissing his neck and collarbone, he felt powerless to move. This felt good, and Cal's blood surged as his friend's gentle breathing tickled his ear. His cock twitched and ached underwater, more so when a soft hand glided closer to cuff its base.

Ellie stroked him gently as Brady's tongue swirled around a spot just behind his ear. He didn't hear at first Ellie asking him if he was okay. Cal just closed his eyes to enhance the feelings numbing him. He was ready to float out of his skin until he felt two strong hands hook under his arms to pull him out of the tub.

Brady eased back against the wall, pulling Cal closer to him. "Sit up here, with me," he whispered, and wrapped his arms around Cal's waist.

Cal blinked and grasped the edges of the tub to help himself be lifted, and shivered slightly as his warm, wet skin met the cool air around him. It seemed as if the water streaking down his chest, hips, and legs evaporated instantly; the cold puckered his nipples and caused his tightened abdomen to quiver. His erect cock bobbed out of Ellie's grasp as it sprang from the water, flicking droplets against his thighs.

Brady's touch soon returned much of the heat to his body. With Cal's body pressed against his, his arms threaded underneath Cal's, Brady caressed his friend's chest and stomach. His own cock pressed against the small of Cal's back. Cal could feel Brady grind his hips against him, presumably for comfort, but he couldn't help but wonder whether or not Brady would seek to use him for his own relief.

"What's going to happen?" he asked warily. Every three-way they shared, Ellie had been in the center. It was never like this.

"Nothing you don't want," Brady said. Their cheeks were touching now. "When you say stop, we stop."

Cal didn't want it to stop. Yes, there had been apprehensions earlier, but Brady was not Igor, and Ellie was not Trish. Had he remained on Trish's balcony, he doubted he would get a choice. If Brady wanted to fuck his ass, he would probably let him, and return the favor if asked.

Yet, he was so tired; the bath had more relaxed then rejuvenated his spirit. He closed his eyes again.

"Just don't feel insulted if I should fall asleep in the middle of this," he warned his friends, both of whom laughed.

Brady kissed his cheek. "I love you, friend."

"I love you, too. Both of you." And he meant it.

Cal turned his face slightly so that his lips met Brady's, and a deep kiss followed that burned all the way down Cal's chest. At the same time Ellie grasped hold of Cal's cock again and took it deep into her own mouth, then pulled upward with great suction. Cal's pulse quickened with the double rush.

He wanted to open his eyes, turn his gaze downward to see his shaft disappear into Ellie's talented mouth. He was not one to brag about his size, but he had to wonder where somebody with such a slender throat as Ellie put all of it. That, however, would necessitate breaking free of the kiss, which he didn't want to do.

As it was, he was fatigued, and chose instead to remain pliant to his friends' ministrations, though the

sensation of two different rhythms was distracting. Ellie's mouth worked his shaft with increasing speed, while Brady continued to plunder his opened mouth at a gentler pace. Regardless of the disjointed rhythm, an orgasm was imminent. Cal could sense the buildup pooling in his stomach, and when one of Brady's hands trailed down and dared a feather touch to his scrotum he lost all control.

Spasms racked his entire body as he came, his cry muffled by Brady's kiss, his essence drained by the woman planted between his legs. His arms involuntary jerked outward, only to be captured by Brady, who pinned them against Cal's chest so as not to accidentally strike Ellie as she finished.

Brady broke free of the kiss and Cal took a deep breath, then arched his neck back to allow light kisses on his throat and jaw. Brady's heart pounded into his back, and a damp sensation apart from the bath was evident. Brady must have climaxed, too, he realized.

He sensed Ellie rise, heard the disturbance in the tub water, and opened his eyes just in time to see Ellie's green ones sparkling with delight. She kissed the cheek Brady had neglected.

"Feel better?" she asked.

Oh, yeah. But Cal did not realize he hadn't said it aloud. The room slowly turned black.

* * * *

He woke up in Brady's bed, wearing Brady's good robe. He didn't remember how he got to the bedroom, or whether or not he got there unaided, but when he opened his eyes his vision adjusted to the alarm clock on the adjacent nightstand. According to the bright red panel searing into his eyes, he had been out cold for a good hour.

That had to be a true testament to the power of good sex. Those two had worn him to the bone.

He tried his legs, then slowly rose from the bed. Flighty, feminine laughter wafted in from the balcony. Cal turned to see the opened glass doors, the curtains pulled back to reveal Central Park West, alive and humming even in the twilight. Brady and Ellie, both comfortably clothed in T-shirts and sweat pants, lounged at the round, glass-topped patio table. Opened Chinese take out boxes, silverware protruding from greasy flaps, littered the space between them.

Brady caught his stare and beckoned him outside with a smile. A place closest to the rail was already set for him. "Hungry?" Brady gestured to the fare. "Take your pick. I ordered too much, as usual."

Cal snatched a carton of what looked like chicken and green vegetables floating in a deep puddle of brown sauce and took the vacant chair. "Thanks," he said, and tucked into the food without another word. As the spicy aroma tackled his nostrils and the first bite quelled the growling in his stomach, he realized he was indeed starved. He'd not eaten since lunch.

Ellie sat with her bare feet propped on Cal's seat, her toes curling around a wrought iron bar. "I love New York," she cooed. "Where else can you order Chinese food in the middle of the night? Never could do that back home."

Cal tried not to laugh, lest he choke. He had visited Ellie's bucolic hometown of Dareville, Virginia, which seemed to shut down entirely at eight sharp. Ellie's continued awe of the big city was charming. Everything he took for granted as a lifelong resident amazed her to no end. It was yet another thing about her that attracted him.

"Your clothes are in the dryer, by the way," she added. "They should be ready soon."

Cal's initial response was muffled though a mouthful of chicken. He swallowed, and added, "I need to get home anyway."

"Stay as long you need to," Brady protested. "Stay 'til morning. We're not that far off as it is."

Cal reached for the beer bottle at his elbow. "I need to get some rest. I have to be at the studio in a few hours and finish that damn album for Trish."

"Rest here. We're closer to the studio."

Ellie folded her arms. "I think you should have Trish and her ogre husband arrested."

Cal shrugged. "They didn't do anything."

"If what that lady said was true, doesn't that make it premeditated assault or something?" Ellie sat up straight. "You said they've done this to other people, too. They can't get away with it, can they?"

"Money talks, baloney walks, as my daddy used to say," Brady sighed. "I'm sure Trish has enough people in her employ to keep her scandalous fetishes private."

"And nobody's gonna believe me over her," Cal added, reaching for a carton of fried rice. "I'm gonna look like some vindictive peon if I say anything, and Trish'll end up being the victim in the media."

"That's so unfair." Ellie pouted, then softened. "I wish you didn't have to keep working for her."

"I'll be fine. I don't want to talk about Trish anymore." Cal leaned back in his chair and fished a few hated green peas from the carton. "So," he eyed Brady, "when I called you back you said you guys were celebrating?"

Brady looked at Ellie. Ellie held a hand to her face and smiled through her splayed fingers. Cal thought the gesture odd, but when Ellie waggled one finger he realized something was different.

Ellie was now sporting a marble-sized diamond on her ring finger. Had she been wearing that when he arrived? How he could miss a rock as gigantic as that?

He set the carton on the table slowly. Chinese chicken and vegetables and oily sauce roiled in his stomach, threatening a second showing. "When—" his voice staggered.

"He proposed in LA, at dinner, after we taped the show," Ellie giggled. "It was so sweet. The waiter brought out this tray, lifted the cover, and there was the ring box."

"I thought once about doing it during the sit-down interview, but I knew Ellie would have died of embarrassment if I dragged her on TV," Brady added with a chuckle. "Besides, the way I did it was much more intimate."

"Yeah. You don't need the press around you for something like that." Cal was numb, his heart shot full of Novocain. Brady and Ellie were engaged now. They would be married, 'til death did they part, with Cal forever on the outside looking in on them.

He saw how they looked at him, studying his reaction with concern, and he forced a smile. "Oh, God. You must think I'm made of stone. Come here." He held out his arms and welcomed Ellie's embrace and chaste kiss. "Really, I'm happy for you guys. Congratulations." He *was* happy, too. Brady and Ellie were in love, and he knew to expect something like this one day. To hear it, though, after having been double-teamed by them...

He took Brady's hand and shook it vigorously. "When's the big day?"

"Three months from now, thereabouts, after the Vegas show," Brady said. "Ellie doesn't want a big ceremony, and I already did that with my first marriage, so we're just going to check out one of those roadside chapels near the Strip."

Ellie was giddy. "I want to be married by an Elvis impersonator, dressed in a sequined dress and holding a neon bouquet."

"Elvis would look silly in glitter drag, you think?"

"I meant me, you dope!" Ellie rolled her eyes.

Cal laughed. "I know, I'm kidding. I'd love to see that either way," he said, and quieted when Ellie's face fell.

"You *are* going to come, aren't you?" she asked. "I know you're not joining the tour, but surely you can take a day off for this."

"Well," Cal toyed with the fork in the rice carton and eyed his best friend, "am I invited?"

"You're the best man," Brady said seriously. "What do *you* think?"

Cal looked at Ellie. "What about you?" he asked. "Is Claire standing up for you?"

"No, she won't be able to come," Ellie said sadly, and Cal wisely refrained from saying anything more about it. Claire Walker was Ellie's lookalike cousin, and had dated and dumped Brady before he hooked up with Ellie. The two women were allegedly close as sisters, but Cal had to wonder if Ellie's relationship with Brady strained the one she had with Claire, since Claire lived in New York and Ellie rarely talked about her. Hearing Ellie, he had to assume yes, and he realized he probably shouldn't have said anything in the first place.

"Well, then," he said, trying to recover the levity, "I think I need to find a plaid tuxedo to match whatever Ellie's going to wear." It hurt to smile. "Let me know when and I'll book the flight."

And may it crash into the ground en route.

"Oh!" Ellie popped from her chair. "We forgot to get the champagne. Got a whole bottle of Dom chilling in the fridge. Hold on." She dashed back into the apartment. Cal watched her retreating form disappear around a corner before he spoke.

"I mean it, I'm happy for you," he told Brady. "You two are so great together. You deserve it."

"Thanks." Brady's smile was soft. "You know, you deserve the same kind of happiness."

Cal shrugged. Did he? He had never married, and never nursed a relationship for more than a few months, but he didn't have to say this because Brady was well aware of his history. He had spent the better part of his life enjoying the hell out of it, in and out of various beds. When the specter of AIDS first reared its ugly head, Cal took the necessary precautions, but it did little to influence him to pursue a stable relationship.

Only Ellie's presence had prompted that. Of all the women he had known, he had more in common with her—the same tastes in music, sports, everything. Then there was her sexual appetite, which rivaled, if not exceeded, his. Yes, for a woman like Ellie he would stick around for a long time.

Ellie, though, was not his, and seeing Brady's ring on her finger only made it official. He had to accept that.

Also, he had to do one other thing. His insides quaked at the mere thought.

"You do realize," he began, "that once you get married I can't join you two anymore."

Brady looked puzzled at the words, but slowly recognition dawned. "Why not?" he asked, and frowned. "Nothing's going to change. We're still going to be Brady and Ellie."

"Not exactly. Right now you're Brady Garriston and Ellie Shaw. In three months you'll be Mr. and Mrs. Brady Garriston. Whatever you two want to do afterward is up to you guys, but I don't think I'd feel comfortable anymore with you two being married.

"Besides," Cal added, "Ellie's a young woman. She's going to want kids, right?"

Brady nodded. "We've discussed it, yes. I wouldn't mind being a dad again, even at this age." He then smiled. "Melissa's thrilled with the news, by the way. She's already nagging us to give her a little sister," he said, referring to his college-age daughter.

"Then you don't need me around to complicate things, not in that respect, anyway. I'll still be here for you guys, always will." Cal tilted his face toward Brady. "And you can't tell me you aren't relieved to hear me say this. I know you don't like sharing Ellie."

Brady said nothing. He didn't have to speak, Cal knew it was the truth from the very first time he joined them as a fulfillment of Ellie's three-way fantasy. Even during the few subsequent times Cal had shared such intimacies with them, he could detect a modicum of discomfort from his friend. Yet, Cal knew Brady complied to make Ellie happy.

Tonight, after their shared bath, Cal had to wonder about his friend's unease.

"I still had fun, though," Brady said, smiling.

"You're still going to have fun with that great lady by your side."

"Hey, what's with all the frowns? This is supposed to be a party."

Both men looked up toward the glass doors. Ellie stood at the threshold bearing a tray of Dom and three empty crystal flutes, which she set on the table. She handed the bottle to Brady and asked him to negotiate the foil and wire contraption holding in the cork.

"So, what's up with you guys?"

Cal recovered first. "Oh, Brady's still trying to convince me to join the tour," he lied, shaking his head. "I'd like to, but I was just telling him that what I think I need more right now is a break. I've been working non-stop for the past eight months, between his album, and Chelsea's album, and now Trish's album."

"When was the last time you took a vacation, Cal?" Ellie settled back in her chair.

"I forget, which can only mean I'm about due for one." The more he thought about it, though, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to get away for a while. He could jet down to Florida and rent a condo, lie on the beach, and ogle the feminine scenery. Forget about Ellie and Brady getting married ... until he had to fly to Vegas for the actual ceremony. Get drunk, then blow a wad of cash at the craps table. Celebrate with a showgirl or three. Act like a run-of-the-mill, dirty old man.

In other words, just be himself.

Ellie's voice broke into his thoughts. "You know, if you want some peace and quiet you could stay at the house in Dareville. We had it renovated, and it looks really nice. I have somebody watching my cat, and we're not going to be there all summer."

Cal blinked. Dareville? Certainly if he wanted to do absolutely nothing, Dareville was the place to be. Dareville made Andy Griffith's Mayberry look like a sprawling metropolis.

"Don't give me that look," Ellie chided before Cal could speak. "You know it's not all bad. You're not far from the beach, and there's all the bike trails over there that you like. You could rent a car and stay the whole summer."

Brady continued to struggle with the champagne. "I think it's a good idea, Cal," he said. "It's no New York, but you know Dareville did wonders for me."

Cal nodded silently. He knew the story. Brady had been in a creative slump several months ago and

sought to reinvent himself in a place where he could live anonymously. Somehow he ended up in Dareville and met Ellie, and the rest was history.

Ellie's suggestion had some merit, yet Cal had to question why he would want to take a vacation to forget her, staying in her hometown in the house she shared with Brady whenever they were there.

Sleeping in the very same bed where Cal had stroked his cock in and out of Ellie's pussy, and made Ellie come.

A muffled shot startled him. Brady finally popped the cork and a thick stream of bubbles spewed from the bottle's neck. Ellie hurried to help fill the glasses.

"Here." She handed Cal a flute of sparkling yellow liquid, and the three now sat straight, arms raised in toast.

"To my two best friends," Cal said, "and many happy years together."

"To my best friend," Brady said, "to whom our door is always open, here and elsewhere."

"To the lady who *is* out there, for you," Ellie added.

Cal said nothing.

Glasses clinked, champagne downed. Ellie held up her flute for a refill. "Say the word," she told Cal. "I'll give you the keys before you leave."

Cal peered over the balcony railing. He hadn't seen where the cork went, and he wondered if it plummeted to the ground with great force and knocked some unsuspecting night pedestrian unconscious. He envied that person, if he existed, and if it were scientifically possible to be conked out with a cork.

"Sure," he said. Once a middle-aged masochist...

Four

Sue Carmichael defiantly folded her arms and turned her back to face the living room wall, which right now appeared to exhibit more sense than her good friend. "No. I won't do it."

"Please?" Lauren McKenna begged.

"No," Sue insisted.

"Come *on*! It's not like I'm going to sell them or post them to the Internet, you know. Nobody is going to see these pictures except for you, me, and hopefully Jake." Lauren stepped forward and playfully nudged her friend. "Nobody's going to need to know you took the pictures, either."

Sue rolled her eyes. Of course, people would know. She was the only professional photographer in Dareville. She had photographed every child born, every wedding performed, and nearly every major event in town for the past six years. Sue had a distinct style, one any Dareville resident could recognize. And if anybody should happen to see the photos Lauren was proposing she take...

Sue shook her head. No, nobody would see them, she decided, because she wasn't going to take them.

"Sue?" Lauren wheedled, shaking her friend by the shoulder. "Suzy?"

"I'm a photographer, Lauren. Not a *pornographer*. I'm not Harry Flynt."

"You mean Larry Flynt."

"I don't care what his name is. I'm sure you can find somebody in Virginia Beach to do this for you."

"I want *you* to do this," Lauren said pointedly. "Because you're my friend and I'd feel more comfortable with you than with some stranger. I know you'll be discreet, and besides, this isn't porn. It's *budoir* photography, which is legal and can be tastefully done."

"Lauren, you and your hair-brained schemes, I swear," Sue whined, and shrugged free of Lauren's grasp to stalk into the kitchen of the cottage Brady Garriston and Ellie Shaw shared when in town. Since she had yet to close on the house she had recently purchased in the area and needed a place to stay until then, Ellie had readily granted her use of the cottage while they were away. It was good deal, and it beat having to stay in an expensive extended-stay hotel at the beach, since Dareville had nothing of the sort. It was enough she was paying an arm and a leg to store her furniture and other belongings.

There was plenty of room here, too, for Sue to store what photography equipment she did not keep at her studio. All she had to do was water the plants and make sure the place didn't burn to the ground. That, and take care of Ellie's Persian cat, Typhoid.

She grabbed two sodas from the refrigerator and trod a bare foot right into the cat's water bowl. She shook it dry, cursing silently. Where *was* that cat, anyway? He had become rather elusive when Brady and Ellie left for Los Angeles, and Sue was certain the cat had not been able to slip outside unnoticed. *Long as he's still breathing when they get back, my work is done*, Sue thought.

She returned to the living room to find Lauren sitting at Brady's piano, slowly fingering a nursery rhyme learned long ago. A hot pink shopping bag bearing the label of an exclusive lingerie shop rested at her side on the bench. The second Sue spied it in Lauren's hands when she arrived, Sue knew to expect trouble, and some kind of explanation involving Jake Marbury, the widowed owner of Jake's Organic Market. Despite being half his age, Lauren had the hots for the man, and was determined to help him out of his mourning.

Sue, though concerned for Jake, wanted no part of it. When Jake was ready to start dating again, *if* Jake wanted that, she believed it should come naturally. He didn't need naked pictures of Lauren foisted on him.

"Here. I think we both need to cool down." She handed Lauren a dewy root beer can and leaned against the piano. Lauren set her can on the piano and Sue cringed, wondering if it would leave a ring on the expensive finish.

"I'm flattered you asked me, anyway," she continued as Lauren fixed her stare on the keys. "And, yes, I would be discreet because I wouldn't want you to be embarrassed were something to happen and any such pictures of you circulate around town." Lauren taught third grade at the local private school; such a revelation could cost Lauren her job.

"If you were developing the photos yourself, then—" began Lauren's protest, but Sue stopped her short with a raised hand.

"I know, I know. I'm just saying. Stranger things have happened in Dareville. Look at us now, we're in a house that belongs to a famous rock star, and one of our best friends is living with him. Did any of us see that coming?"

Lauren smiled. "Yeah, what were the odds?"

"If *that* can happen, there's certainly a chance something could go wrong with these pictures, and I don't want that for you, sweetie." Sue popped the top of her own can and took a deep drink. The carbonated soda burned a trail down her throat and she coughed.

"Besides," Sue added when she was able to breathe again. "We don't need to be giving Jake a heart attack with sexy pictures."

Lauren cast her a withering glance. "Sue," she chided, "he's as active as any man half his age, you know that. Just because there's some snow on the roof..."

"Doesn't mean there isn't a fire down below, yeah," Sue finished for her, sighing. "I still think it's a bit early for you to be stoking those fires. It hasn't been a whole year yet since Cindy died, and they were married for a hundred years. It may take even longer than a year for him to feel ready to start seeing other women. If he wants to at all."

"If I had those pictures..." Lauren began.

"You'd probably scare him to death. Am I going to be finishing all of your sentences from here on out?"

The two friends looked at each other, then laughed simultaneously. Sue took it as a good sign that perhaps Lauren was rethinking this fanciful notion, but her mood deflated when Lauren plucked her thick pocketbook from the shopping bag.

"I can pay you in cash," Lauren offered. "Twice your going rate. Please, Sue. This is really important to me."

Sue threw up her hands. "*Why* is it so important to seduce a sixty-year-old grocer? It's not like he's a millionaire. He's Jake, good old Jake who used to slip us extra butterscotch drops when we'd buy penny candy from his store." Both women had known the man nearly their entire lives, and Sue never once fostered the notion of pursuing him as a potential romantic interest the way Lauren did. To her, it was akin to seducing an uncle.

"Because he's a good man, a handsome man. He was good to Cindy and I know he'd be good to me, and I think I'm deserving of that for once." Lauren was serious, and Sue said nothing. She was well aware of how horribly treated Lauren was by her ex-husband. Lauren *did* deserve a guy who wouldn't screw around on her or beat her, and Jake would make a good match for a woman of any age.

If and when he was ready for that, of course. For all Sue knew, Jake might be content living the rest of

his life alone with the memories of Cindy to sustain him.

"And you know all the widows in this town are chomping at the bit to get to him, too, once the whole customary year of mourning has passed," Lauren added, her lower lip set in a pout.

"I don't really know that, Lauren. I haven't seen any lines wrapped around the beauty parlor lately. I think it's all in your head."

"Maybe, maybe not. If it isn't, I just want an edge, is all. A chance to show him what's in store if he gives me a shot." Lauren winked.

"There are other ways to a man's heart than through his ... you know, *thing*." Sue couldn't bring herself to say the word. "Invite him over for dinner one night."

"I can't cook."

"Learn," Sue growled.

"Like all those widows aren't planning to do that, with their homemade casseroles and pies." Lauren sighed. "Besides, I'm a better cook *outside* of the kitchen, if you know what I mean." She grinned.

"This plan of yours could backfire, you know," Sue warned.

"It won't."

"I don't want every little old lady in town coming to me asking for *budoir* shots of them, either." Now there was an image Sue would be happy to erase from her mind.

"They won't, because I won't tell anybody you took them." Lauren produced more bills from her wallet. "I'll triple your fee," she tempted. "I know you're going to be tapped once you've paid all those closing costs on your new house. You need this as much as I do."

Lauren was right, and Sue knew it. There weren't enough weddings being planned in Dareville right now to recoup the pending hit to her bank account once the final paperwork was signed. She needed every job she could get.

With a defeated sigh, she padded to the spare room where she kept her equipment. "Fine, get changed. Or not, whatever you're planning. I'll set up. Nobody *ever* should find out about this."

If anyone did, Sue feared, two careers could be shot.

* * * *

First, Sue removed any evidence of Brady and Ellie from the master bedroom, now ordained the set for Lauren's auspicious modeling debut. Pictures and personal knickknacks were crowded in one faraway corner, along with a major music award of Brady's and a framed gold record. In the event something should happen and an unwanted third party get hold of the end product, Sue didn't want anybody spotting anything of theirs in the background, and therefore drag them into the mess that was certain to ensue.

She had just finished adjusting the lighting equipment in the room when Lauren emerged from the bathroom. Sue's eyes widened at the outfit her friend was wearing, or rather almost wearing. Underneath a thigh-length, black silk robe, Lauren sported a sheer black baby doll with spaghetti straps. Black lace trim dangled at her hips and barely covered what looked to be an eye patch that barely covered Lauren's hairless crotch. Thigh-high black stockings topped with elastic bands clung to her shapely legs, and a pair of strappy stiletto heels completed the provocative ensemble.

It was a far cry from the conservative dress code imposed upon the faculty of Dareville Primary Academy. Sue's eyes were riveted to her friend's firm breasts. Saucer-wide areolas with thick nipples

were clearly visible through the flimsy fabric. This was much more of her friend than she had cared to see.

"How much did you pay for that?" Sue asked, still gawking.

Lauren executed a coquettish half-twirl and grinned. "On sale at this lingerie shop at the beach for sixty bucks."

"Sixty—" Sixty bucks, for a scrap of cloth. The price of seduction these days was ludicrous, and Sue suddenly felt bad for taking so much money from Lauren.

Not that she planned to offer a refund. If Lauren wanted these photos, Sue was going to be paid for taking them.

Sue gestured Lauren to the bed and picked up her camera. "Let's get this over with," she grumbled. "I'll let you pose as you please, since I don't know how to begin telling you what to do."

"Just relax. I know what I'm doing," Lauren huffed, and teetered to the edge of the bed and sat. She posed in half-recline, with her legs tucked behind her, and shook her long mane of dark hair. "Just snap the button and make me look beautiful."

Sue aimed and half-heartedly shot the first picture. Lauren was already beautiful, with her almond-shaped brown eyes and medium beige skin, heart-shaped face and perfectly apportioned body. She wasn't wafer thin, either—she more resembled a 40s pin-up girl with her rounded hips, small waist, and ample bosom—but she was alluring nonetheless. No special tricks in the darkroom would be needed to enhance a beauty this well embodied.

And though Sue felt apprehensive about this project, and despite never having felt any physical attraction toward women in general, she could not help but stare, so much that it seemed to take forever to get the first five shots taken. Her camera was bulky in her hands, but looking at Lauren, she forgot she was holding it.

"Okay, change of pace," Lauren announced, and the robe slid from her shoulders and was discarded carelessly to the carpet. Off went the heels next after Sue's voiced worry that they would snag and tear the expensive bed sheets. Rising to her knees, Lauren turned to reveal her toned, mostly bare back. The back of the outfit appeared to taper in a large vee to a thin band around her waist; the eye patch panty proved to be a thong, setting off nicely Lauren's perfect heart-shaped buttocks.

Lauren crossed her arms against her chest and turned back to the camera with a smoldering gaze. Sue's heart thrummed as she snapped the photo, double time as Lauren bent to all fours, offering the lens just the slightest hint of smooth labia shadowed between her ass cheeks.

No doubt about it, Sue observed, Lauren was sexy. She had clearly moved beyond making love to the camera; this was a full-fledged sexual assault. Sue doubted even Jake would be able to look at a photo like this and not feeling something stirring in his chest, or pants.

Something not unlike the tingling sensation coursing through Sue's veins, shooting pleased sensations to her erogenous zones, prickling her skin.

Sue took a deep breath. The lights made the room hot as it was, and though she was wearing a tank top and shorts it still seemed like too much to wear. The flash continued to pop. "Okay," she croaked. "What now? I still have about a third of the roll left."

Lauren said nothing, but let her hands smooth slowly down her breasts to her hips. She twisted around to sit and scooted back to lean against the headboard, forcing Sue to move closer to the bed for a better close-up shot. Sue watched her friend through the lens, adjusting the zoom, and nearly panicked when Lauren spread her legs wide, causing the crotch of her thong to ease to one side and reveal her

moistened, bare pink pussy.

Oh, God.

"No." Sue lowered the camera. "What you're doing now may be French, but it sure as hell isn't *budoir*. We are beyond *budoir* now."

Lauren crossed her arms to release the straps from her shoulders. "Come on, Sue," she wheedled. The sheer bodice tumbled, freeing her breasts. "Just one or two *really* sexy shots. I promise you, nobody else will know."

"Right." But Sue did not lift the camera back to her face. She could only watch Lauren idly pluck a nipple with one hand while the other smoothed the baby doll away so that her privates remained exposed. Her movements seemed so natural, so comfortable, like Lauren could do this in public without a care for anybody watching. Sure, Sue had always known Lauren to be straightforward, but acting like this...

And many thoughts surfaced to Sue's mind, unbidden, lustful feelings. What would it be like to take hold of one of those beautiful, large breasts, and brush the nipple with her thumb? To hold it closely to her face and pop that nipple in her mouth? How would Lauren react to that? Would she jerk away in disgust, or respond in kind?

Sue blinked. Why was she thinking like this? She wasn't a lesbian!

So why was her own pussy wet at the sight of Lauren?

Lauren smiled at her, seemingly unaware of the turmoil raging through Sue's mind and hormones. "Why don't you take a picture, sweetie, it'll last longer?"

"Right," Sue echoed. Trembling hands adjusted the zoom, but Sue waited several seconds before firing off a few more shots. Lauren licked her fingers and stroked her breasts, plumping each nipple to its greatest thickness, and held both breasts high in a proud display. This pose, though, did not rattle Sue as much as when one of those hands immediately snaked south to finger Lauren's pussy.

Sue bit back a gasp when two fingers split apart the cleft to reveal the treasure within, and she nearly dropped the camera when Lauren began stroking her clit with one finger while the other traced the border of her slick opening. As close as she stood, she could smell Lauren's arousal, and that did little to calm her own. Her own pussy throbbed, and Sue hoped the evidence of her own arousal wasn't visible on her shorts.

Lauren closed her eyes and tilted her head back, licking her lips and swallowing hard. Her expression confused Sue at first, but she attributed it to what her friend wanted on film. Sue obliged quietly with a few head shots, but as the camera's view panned down Sue could plainly see Lauren had sped up the finger work on her clit.

Oh, God. Was her friend *masturbating* in front of her?

"Lauren?" Sue ventured softly.

Lauren didn't respond immediately. She seemed to be lost in her own erotic world, working her clit as her thighs bucked back and forth. Sue was at a loss, unable to decide whether to nudge her friend ... or continue watching.

It scared her that she was reluctant to force Lauren to stop. It scared her more that the urge to ease down next to her friend and touch her while she was stroking her clit was strong.

Instead Sue balanced the camera in one hand, leaving the other free to cup her own pussy over the fabric of her shorts. Roughly she massaged her aching crotch, detecting a dampness along the inseam.

She would have liked nothing more at that moment to shed her clothing and mimic Lauren, but who knew how Lauren would react when she opened her eyes.

Who knew what would happen afterward?

"Um, that's nice," Lauren moaned, her face pinched in an ecstatic smile. Suddenly her back arched and her motions increased in time to Sue's heartbeat. Her pussy was pink and shining now. Lauren's breathing hitched, and Sue gasped. Her friend was going to come right here.

And she did, loudly, and plunged one finger in and out of her slick cunt as she did so. Sue's own trembling fingers brought the camera to her face, and she pushed the button for a few more shots to capture Lauren's orgasm until she heard a loud click. The roll was completed.

Thank God. "Okay!" Sue exclaimed and quickly set the camera to rewind. "I think we've done enough damage for one night."

Lauren's eyes shot open wide, and she took in a ragged breath. "I can't believe I just did that." The look on her face, however, told Sue that she had no regrets.

"You're telling me."

Lauren's face suddenly fell, and she straightened. "Oh, shit, Sue. I'm sorry. I just got carried away. I really made you uncomfortable, didn't I?"

"No," Sue lied. "I'm sure stuff like this happens all the time at the *Playboy* studios. Anyway, we're done now."

"Aw," Lauren whined. "I was really starting to have some fun with this."

No kidding. "Trust me. One roll of pictures should be plenty to get Jake's attention, especially those last few pictures," Sue said, her back turned to Lauren so her friend could not study her obvious discomfort. The last few pictures certainly had *her* attention! It would probably be best to destroy those as soon as possible and just leave Lauren with the tamer photos. She could always claim part of the roll was overexposed.

Right. Sue sighed. Then Lauren would want more pictures taken.

She heard movement behind her. Lauren was off the bed and gathering her things, and probably restoring the baby doll to how it was supposed to wear. "Oh, come on, Sue, like I'm going to show Jake pictures of me playing with myself. I know my limits. So, how soon can I have them?" she asked.

"A couple weeks." Sue removed the film from the camera and placed it in its cylindrical container. "I'm out of developing fluid. Besides, this place isn't set up for a darkroom, and I want to get the okay from Brady and Ellie before I start doing anything to their house."

She heard water running in the background. Lauren was washing her hands. "You're going to develop them here? Why not go to your studio and do it?"

Sue didn't look at her, though she could picture Lauren bent over the sink, that perfect heart-shaped ass teasing her. "You wanted discretion, so I should do them here," she said. "With pictures like this, and with the way my workspace is cluttered over there, I don't want to risk a photo slipping out and falling into the wrong hands." *Especially if there are children around*, Sue added to herself. She didn't need any parents finding out she was doing this. Gossip in Dareville spread like wildfire. She would lose her entire customer base. Either that, or attract a whole new, unwanted one.

She expected further protest, but was surprised when Lauren instead hugged her from behind. Her friend's touch sent her skin tingling again, and she stiffened in Lauren's quick embrace.

"That's fine. Very considerate of you, too," Lauren said airily. "Jake will keep until I get them. I can't wait to see how they turn out!" With that, the teacher slid on her pants and blouse over her sexy outfit and grasped Sue from behind again in a bear hug. Sue yelped, nearly dropping the camera again, but Lauren paid no attention.

"Thank you *so* much for doing this," Lauren cooed. "I swear I've never been so excited in my life." Neither had Sue, the photographer realized.

Five

She was relieved that Lauren had not lingered long after their modeling session to chat. Being it was close to the end of the school year, Lauren still had to be up early to go to work. Sue kept her own hours, yet was far from ready to wind down for the night. Images of Lauren's provocative posing and luscious body continued to fill her mind. The soda she drank earlier hardly quelled the heat pooling in her belly. She needed something stronger to help. Maybe to forget.

Did she want to forget?

Ellie had told Sue when she moved in to help herself to anything left in the pantry and refrigerator. Sue returned Lauren's unopened soda can and plucked a bottle of expensive white wine from the door. She bypassed the hanging rack of wineglasses positioned underneath the sink and reached in the above cabinet for a large, plastic tumbler. To just drink straight from the bottle was tempting, but would have been *too* unladylike. The tumbler was a happy medium, she decided as she filled it to the brim with Chardonnay.

Cup in hand, she padded into the master bedroom and set to work dismantling her equipment with trembling hands. She had thought the worst of the session was over, but realized there was still the task of developing the pictures. Once more she was going to have to gaze upon Lauren's body, take in those ample breasts and fleshy thighs, that tempting pussy. She would have to relive Lauren bringing herself to orgasm only a few feet away from her.

The memory of it sent Sue's own pussy throbbing again.

She stacked everything back in the spare room and sighed loudly, padding back down the hall. *Stop thinking like that. I'm not gay, I'm not gay, I'm not gay...*

She closed her eyes to a perfect imprint of Lauren kneeling on the bed with her back turned. Now Sue was there, enveloping Lauren in her arms, smoothing a hand across Lauren's bare ass and inserting a finger between her folds, cupping one of Lauren's breasts with the other, leaning around for a kiss...

"Stop it!" she shouted to the ceiling, and waited for a response. There was no sound, not even a meek mewling from Ellie's elusive cat. Where *was* that damn cat? Sue knew he was around; she had noticed Typhoid's food bowl had been disturbed since Sue and Lauren retreated to the bedroom to take pictures. The level of food was lower, and bits of hard kibble were scattered on the kitchen floor, but Sue didn't feel like cleaning it up. At least the cat wasn't starving.

She flopped backward on the bed, startled momentarily by the reflection cast in the mirrored tiles on the ceiling. Of course, she knew about them. They startled her the first night she stayed in the cottage and crawled into bed. Just one more thing about Brady and Ellie she didn't need to know.

Sue was surprised Lauren had said nothing about the tiles during the shoot, for certainly she would have made much of it. Of course, Lauren's attentions were focused on the camera, and Sue.

No, they weren't. Lauren's attentions were focused on Jake Marbury, and how Jake was supposed to morph into a six-foot erection after seeing these pictures. Lauren was probably thinking of Jake while she was masturbating. Lauren wasn't into women at all, and neither was Sue.

I'm not gay. I like men.

She rolled onto her stomach and crawled to the nightstand for her wine, and guzzled. So why was she thinking these things, fantasizing this way?

She could think of only one reason: simple transference. How long had it been since she had been with a man, had felt a pair of strong, masculine arms crush her into a hard, musk-scented chest? How long had it been since she last felt the scratch of a beard's growth tickling her inner thighs as a man's tongue

probed her labia in search for her clit, licking and suckling her to orgasm? Since she last felt a hard cock stroking in and out of her slick core?

Sue exhaled, blowing a strand of blond hair from her face. "If I have to ask..." her voice trailed away. Of course, it had been too damn long, much longer than she cared to recollect. Seeing Lauren tonight, tarted up like a *Playboy* model, only allowed these repressed feelings to surface and simmer. Never did Sue think she could become so horny as to consider grazing on the other side of the fence.

Not that the view of the other side wasn't appealing. Yes, Lauren was definitely sexy. If Jake didn't bite, pictures or no pictures, Lauren would find somebody to make her happy. Sue hoped so, anyway. Heaven forbid she be employed to take more pictures!

A hand fluttered to Sue's rapidly beating heart, then trailed to one side to fondle a breast. *I'd like to be that happy again.*

She finished off the wine, then leaped ungracefully from the bed to secure the house and shut off the lights. The tumbler, which had contained nearly half of the bottle found in the refrigerator, had long ago set her senses to dizzying heights, affecting her dexterity.

After a quick toilette, she stripped completely and slid beneath the covers of the king-sized bed. Sue remembered that she had not eaten since lunch, so the alcohol was working double-time, and she was out within seconds of closing her eyes ... and into a dream...

* * * *

Lauren pranced toward the bed in that same sexy baby doll nightie, leaning over Sue, her breasts dripping from the sheer fabric. Sue, powerless to move, could only watch her friend tease and tempt her.

Lauren slid her hands beneath the sheer fabric of the bodice she wore and cupped her breasts, kneading them in circular motion while pinching her nipples into hardened pebbles. "This feels so good," she cooed, "but it would feel even better if you were doing it. I'd love to feel you sucking on my tits."

Sue was frozen, helpless. She willed her hands to move, to rise and touch Lauren, and couldn't decide what was holding her back. Was it being in this dream state, or some unconscious feeling preventing her from doing so, letting her know it was wrong to want another woman?

She willed Lauren to evaporate, but the image strengthened. Lauren then climbed onto the bed, straddling Sue over the sheet as the nightie melted away. Lauren fingered her clit as she ground her pussy into Sue's pelvis, moaning with delight. Sue felt nothing at first but the beat of her own heart as she watched, and quickly became aroused.

"You are so beautiful, babe." Lauren's voice was huskier, deeper now, almost sounding like a man. "I want to make love to you all night long."

Do it.

Lauren cocked her head and smiled. "Yes?" she purred. "You want me to? You want me to make you come?"

Yes! To hell with what was right and what was wrong. Let Jake wallow in his widowhood, never knowing what he could have right now. Sue wanted to be seduced. Didn't matter who did it.

The dream was more conciliatory now; Sue could feel more and more with each passing second. Lauren's touch had set off a chain reaction of passionate feeling. Sue's moistened pussy ached for any kind of contact, and she heard herself gasp as Lauren rose to tug at the sheet covering her. It slid away easily to expose her body to the cool air.

Skin touched skin, *her* skin. As Lauren bent over Sue, her breasts brushed against hers lightly; Sue's nipples sprang to life. Sue tried to call out for Lauren to take at least one of them in her mouth, but no words would come. The dream allowed her only so much, but Sue was willing to be rendered mute in exchange for a greater, orgasmic payoff.

Her appreciative moan, therefore, remained unspoken as Lauren's tongue laved first one nipple, then the other, then traced a straight line down Sue's abdomen to her pussy. Fingers gently stroked her folds and traced the edge of her moistened slit before exploring her from the inside.

Yes. Sue relished the touch, and willed her legs farther apart to allow Lauren deeper access. So it was with an ethereal smile that she reached some success; her legs bowed and the space between them widened. Lauren took advantage to fondle Sue's inner labia, lubricating them with Sue's own juices.

She felt a rough patch on her inner thigh. Lauren's cheek was resting there, maybe some of her long hair was pressed between them. No matter, so long as Lauren didn't stop what she was doing.

Quickly, however, Sue's heart froze. Lauren's face was drawing nearer to her. *Oh, dear.* Lauren was going to put her tongue ... there. Sue willed her legs to clamp shut, but her body resisted. Only one other man had gone down on her, and grudgingly so. His whispered remarks had hurt Sue deeply, so much that she discouraged future lovers from going south. The few she had had since then, anyway.

Lauren, however, appeared undeterred.

"God, you smell so good," Lauren whispered. "I know you'll taste even better. I've wanted this for so long."

Sue's heart swelled at that, and her resolve quickly melted. It *was* a dream, after all. Maybe there was no sense of smell, therefore no worries.

Well, what are you waiting for? She wanted to shout. She wanted to feel Lauren eating her pussy, feel her fingers prying apart her cleft as if peeling the rind of some exotic fruit. She wanted to feel Lauren's lips tracing the edge of her core, kissing that sensitive spot where her pussy lips met the bend of her thigh, doing everything that inept ex-lover only wished he could.

At the first contact of Lauren's tongue to her clit Sue quaked, then calmed as she allowed her entire body to relish the sensations sparking her desire. How she had missed this! *Yes.* Even in this dream state, her voice was breathless.

Her upper body, though aware, still couldn't move, yet Sue managed to tilt her neck forward slightly to see through slit eyes a mass of dark hair covering her pubic bone. Lauren's head lolled from side to side with her ministrations. Sue wished to see her face; she wanted to look into Lauren's eyes as she ate her pussy, she wanted to see that Lauren was enjoying doing it as much as Sue enjoyed being on the receiving end.

The ensuing orgasm, however, took precedence as Sue's silent scream racked her body. Her legs twitched and her abdomen pulsed as Lauren rapidly lapped at her labia to prolong the sensation for her. After the initial wave crashed, Lauren leaped forward and covered the length of Sue's body with her own, and covered her face and neck with sloppy kisses.

She claimed Sue's parted mouth roughly, plunging her tongue so deep Sue thought the other woman might be able to scrape the back of her neck. She tasted herself in that kiss, along with something else she could not quite discern, something sweet and at the same time smoky, which was odd because she never knew Lauren to smoke.

Finally she gained the use of her hands, and clasped Lauren's back, pressing the other woman to her. She stroked downward to take that beautiful bare ass in her hands, squeezing and caressing the flesh

before trailing around Lauren's waist.

She was startled, then amused upon discovering that Lauren had suddenly grown a thick, pulsing erection, which Lauren was now rubbing against her.

Oh, my.

She heard a chuckle, this time from her mouth. Had she finally reclaimed her voice? *One way to find out*, she thought as she took the hardened shaft in hand and stroked upward.

"Fuck me." The words were hoarse, foreign to her dream body, but they were hers. They had some affect, as Lauren's dream cock now twitched in her grip.

"Yes?" Lauren was breathless.

"Yes." Sue's breathing was labored. "Want. Your. Cock."

Sue smiled as her grip was released. It was going to happen. She couldn't wait for Lauren to be inside her, and stretch her to the limits.

This was proving to be one hell of a dream.

* * * *

He should have left New York earlier, he knew. He should have known to anticipate midday traffic bloating all of Manhattan. He should have just flown to Norfolk and rented the car there, but he had his road bike, bass guitar, and amplifier to consider. He didn't want the burden of lugging them through La Guardia and raising the hackles of an already overworked security staff. In retrospect, though, that would have been preferable to baking in a rental car parked on the lip of the Holland Tunnel during a traffic jam, a million angry commuters honking their horns behind him.

Eventually there was movement, and Cal managed to free himself from the city. He reached the Dareville town limits close to midnight. Little had changed since his last visit, as expected. Thick pines lined the narrow two-lane thoroughfare leading to the town square, giving way to a few buildings poorly lit by flickering street lamps in need of maintenance. There was the school where Ellie once worked, the very one he helped Brady save with a benefit concert to rebuild the failing structure. As the headlights of his car sprayed the area, he could see the money raised was already being put to use. Traffic cones and construction paraphernalia littered the area surrounding the school; orange road signs warned pedestrians away from gutted sidewalks.

There was the local grocery store, where Brady mentioned he and Ellie had first met. Down a spur road was the park, where the concert was held, and where Cal had last played in front of a live audience.

Where Cal had watched Brady carry a giggling Ellie into his trailer after the show, and watched the lights in the circular windows dim, wishing he were in his friend's place.

He squinted in the dark, looking for his turn. This was a mistake, he realized, to come here. How was he going to get his mind off Ellie when everything he saw sparked memory of her? He had half a mind to execute a U-turn and drive back to the city, and would have done so were he not so exhausted.

No, he'd give it a day or two, he conceded, and if he still felt miserable he would find a place in the Outer Banks of North Carolina and veg there for the remainder of his vacation.

There was a car parked in the driveway, but Cal paid it no mind, figuring it belonged to either one of the cottage's permanent residents. He emerged from the compact car and stretched his long body, working out the kinks and aches of the nearly twelve-hour drive. Taking only the bag of fast food hamburgers bought from a late night detour in Virginia Beach to a drive-through restaurant, he took a seat on one of the plastic chairs situated on the front patio. The luggage in the back and the bike

strapped to the roof could wait until morning, he decided as he reached in his jeans pocket. This couldn't; he needed the buzz.

Only one rule had been imposed upon him for the duration of his stay: if he was going to bring weed, he had to smoke it outside. That suited Cal fine. He knew Ellie was not fond of the stuff, and was less enthused that Cal partook of the occasional toke, but after years of sampling different vices Cal found fewer things could relax him as well without being too detrimental to his health.

Of course, there was sex, but he didn't expect to get any of that right now. Maybe after a few days he would check out the bar scene at the beach. Dareville didn't seem to offer much in the way of casual feminine companionship, from what he remembered of his last visit. Seemed everybody was either married or male or just not interested in casual sex.

He lit the wrinkled joint clamped between his lips and drew in a puff of pungent smoke, holding it deep in his lungs for several seconds before exhaling. The weed seemed to work its magic instantly, dissolving the discomfort of the long drive and encouraging some anticipatory euphoria for this new adventure. His body and brain tingled, his skin felt sticky in the humid night air, and an unexpected gust of laughter burst from his lips, surprising him. He hadn't expected to get so high so quickly. Maybe he should have eaten another hamburger first.

When the joint dwindled to half its original size, Cal extinguished the burning end with his fingers and replaced it in its plastic baggie for later. It took three tries to get Ellie's key in the lock, though the security light over the door provided enough illumination for him. When he finally entered the cottage he stumbled a few steps forward before catching his balance.

But not before catching his foot on something soft, and alive.

An impatient mewling alerted him to the floor, and he paused to let his eyes adjust to the dark. Something furry and warm and purring circled his ankles and looked up at him, expectantly, with glowing eyes. Ellie's damn cat. What was its name again? Was it Tyrone, Tyler? No, Typhoid.

What was it doing here? Cal remembered Ellie saying something about a friend taking care of it.

"Terrific," he muttered. Perhaps the friend was only coming by to check the water and food bowls, and to occasionally change the litter box. No doubt said friend would soon discover his presence and abandon all cat care duties to him. Just great. He could only hope the furball wouldn't die on his watch.

He loped through the dark into the kitchen; the cat followed. The pot was giving him the munchies, but Cal fought the urge. Instead he opened the refrigerator a crack to study the cat bowls in the light and, upon seeing a near depletion of kibble in one, produced one of the hamburgers from its bag and tossed it in. Whomever Ellie had asked to cat sit apparently wasn't doing a good job of it. The cat should be fine with the hamburger, he surmised. There was nothing in a hamburger that would kill a cat.

Leaving the rest on the counter for tomorrow's breakfast, he padded down the hallway toward the bedrooms, stripping as he went. A shower could wait until morning, too, though he could have used one. And, despite his exhaustion, he wasn't sleepy. The pot had raised his ire somewhat, and seeing what he could of the cottage brought memories to the surface. He could only imagine what feelings would hit him once he entered the master bedroom.

He flexed his right hand and sighed, certain he would be making good use of it tonight if he didn't pass out first. By the time he reached the door he was naked, his cock stirring to life.

Fine. He would concede to jacking off, then worry about a shower *and* laundry in the morning. His head bowed, he entered the bedroom, and paused at the foot of the bed.

What feelings, indeed! So very strong, like the scent of a woman's musk that immediately slapped him

in the face.

The soft, eerie glow of a night-light emanating from the open bathroom area filtered into the large room, casting a scant bit of light on the king-sized bed. Cal caught his breath at the sight of it, and of the distinct raised lump silhouetted in the sheets.

Somebody's sleeping in my bed, Papa Bear.

Somebody female, Cal could tell from the shape of an exposed arm, and a rounded, raised hip.

Somebody with blonde hair, but it sure as hell wasn't Goldilocks!

No. It couldn't be. Was his imagination working overtime? Was it the pot making him hallucinate?

Had Ellie slipped away from New York, from Brady, to surprise him here? The tour wasn't supposed to begin for another two weeks. Feasibly, she could have done it if she hopped a plane early this morning. The car outside could be a rental.

Would she have done something like that, though?

He took a tentative step forward and peered at the still, sleeping figure, stepping backward at a sudden movement. The sleeper now lay face up, and smiling. Yes, definitely a woman, Cal could see from a glimpse of bare breast exposed as part of the sheet pulled away from her form.

And her lips rubbed together in a smile, clearly enjoying some delicious dream.

"Ellie." His voice was barely a whisper. Oh, God. It *was* her.

He remained still, yet the dizzying tremor pounding in his head made him feel as if the room moved around him, and he eased his arms apart to maintain balance. He waffled between trying to rouse Ellie and offer her a much better option to her dream, and just letting her sleep, and store the energy for an orgasmic wake-up call.

Whatever happened next, Cal knew he had to do it in a more comfortable position. He wobbled in place, his cock throbbed. He needed to at least sit down, so he leaned forward to grasp the edge of the bed and crawled.

In seconds, he was straddling Ellie. Her face pinched at first, then softened as her eyelids momentarily fluttered. Was that another smile?

One look at those beautiful breasts lolling to each side, nipples puckered and aching to be suckled, also helped Cal make up his mind. To hell with waiting until morning, he decided. Ellie wouldn't have come all this way to surprise him now if she wanted to wait until morning.

"You are so beautiful, babe," he said. "I want to make love to you all night long."

His breathing stopped. He could swear through the blood pounding in his ears that he heard her mumble something.

Do it. That's what she said. He knew it. She wanted him!

When he was able to breathe again, he darted a glance toward the bathroom, then toward the far window, then craned his neck to the open bedroom door. When Brady's form didn't emerge from the shadows, Cal turned back to the softly writhing creature underneath him, whose every movement rippled underneath the sheets, accentuating her every curve, and so many secret places he longed to explore again.

"Yes? You want me to? You want me to make you come?"

He listened, then heard a *yes. Yes!*

He wasted no time in ripping away the linen barrier that separated them, and immediately bent forward to taste each of her nipples, delighting in the appreciative moan superseding the pounding in his head. His hand shot downward to stroke her pussy, and as he slipped a finger inside her he could tell she was already wet. Ready for him.

As much as he would have like to remain suckling her breasts, however, he wanted something more, something he hadn't enjoyed in a very long time.

For if this was a dream, he didn't want to wake before he could take Ellie's sweet pussy into his mouth and feast.

"God, you smell so good." His voice cracked. "I know you'll taste even better. I've wanted this for so long."

In seconds his face was nestled between her thighs as he raked through the thatch of tight curls covering her pussy—Ellie must have let them grow back since he saw her last, about two weeks ago.

Not that he was complaining. It hardly diminished the experience of eating her, which he did with much enthusiasm. She tasted as good, even better, than he remembered.

And when her muted orgasm hit, Cal experienced a high no amount of pot had ever given him. *He* was doing this, not Brady. He was making her come, and he happily lapped up the result before springing up her length to claim her in a deep, rough kiss.

He felt her hands on him, on his back, then his ass, grasping him for dear life. He twitched in place when a hand cuffed his shaft and squeezed his scrotum, ready to milk him into a body-shuddering orgasm. *Easy, babe*, the voice in his mind admonished. He fought the urge to come in her grip; he had waited too long to be snug inside her pussy to spoil the moment with premature ejaculation.

He broke free of their kiss and nuzzled into her neck. Then she spoke, clearly this time. "Fuck me."

He raised his head and looked at her. Her eyes were still closed, but fluttering maniacally underneath her lids. He brushed a light kiss against each one. "Yes?"

"Want. Your. Cock."

Yes.

Cal groaned, and he burrowed his hips deeper in the cradle formed by her parted thighs. If this was indeed a drug-induced haze, he was going to track down the man who sold him the dime bag and kiss him hard on the mouth. Maybe even slip in the tongue.

For now, though, the guy would have to wait in line. Wresting her grip from his cock, Cal pointed its throbbing head toward her waiting slit and, after a few seconds of teasing, plunged into her. She was wet, tight, hot, everything she was the first time he had fucked her like this.

Only now she was his, and his alone.

He thrilled at her sharp intake of breath, her soft whine as he filled her pussy, and her increasing moans as he slicked in and out of her. She seemed to find better voice with every thrust. Though he wanted to keep the pace slow and prolong the sensations quivering through his body, he found her mewling only encouraged him to work harder.

So he pistoned hard into her, grinding her into the mattress. Her hands found his back again, her fingers sliding in the sweat beading on his skin, rubbing his aching muscles and pressing against his ass as if to keep his cock buried deep.

He watched her body shimmy underneath him, and listened to the bed groan and twitch. He shuddered

as he bent his head low to feel her breath tickling his ear, then lowered himself entirely on her. Gently, though, so as not to crush her.

"I'd love to do this to you all night," he gasped. He would certainly try, anyway.

Seconds later, her breathing gave way to a low-pitched cry, and he winced as the sound tore through his head. Fingernails bit into his back. A heartbeat, not his own, slammed against his chest. He couldn't believe it ... he made her come again. He watched her mouth round and exhale one last silent moan. She looked so damned beautiful.

Now it was his turn. Arching his neck toward the ceiling, he focused on the building sensations pooling between his hips and swelling in his scrotum. He had waited long enough, and he needed release. He needed to explode, shoot his seed into Ellie, and float down from this incredible high.

And when he did he thought he could shatter every window in the cottage and trigger every car alarm within a fifty-mile radius, he was that loud. With his hips pinned against hers, he came in a long, steady stream that sent shockwaves straight into his heart, numbing every nerve in his body until he was certain he would die right there from exhaustion.

Instead he collapsed back atop her for several seconds, unmoving but for the activity in his lungs, until he found the strength to roll onto his back. *Wow*. Never before had an orgasm hit him with such force, like having his body slammed against a brick wall. He wanted to weep for the joy he felt, but found between the sweat and come expended he was completely dried out.

The mirrored reflection overhead was nothing but blurred flesh and fabric, though Cal swore he could make out a sated smile on Ellie's lips. He turned for confirmation and noticed she had already turned on her side, facing away from him.

She was gone. He couldn't believe for the noise he made that she hadn't sat up straight with her eyes bolted open. He really must have worn her out.

He spooned her into his arms, his limp, sticky cock pressed against her backside, and kissed her shoulder. As his breathing slowed he noticed the heat in the room begin to subside, and his bare flesh cooled as the air conditioner triggered and hummed. Gently, he fisted the discarded top sheet and pulled it over the two of them, but not before one last deliberate brush against Ellie's sumptuous breasts.

"Goodnight, beautiful," he buzzed in her ear, kissing a trail down her neck. He felt her purr against him in blissful sleep. It wasn't long before he closed his eyes and joined her steady rhythm, his arms tight around her waist, his cheek pressed against her hair, his body and soul satisfied.

"Um, no. Go away," Sue whined.

But the sun wasn't listening. It continued to penetrate the bedroom curtains and flood the bedroom with light. The insides of her eyelids blazed fiery orange, and Sue fought in vain to resist all urges to wake. She never wanted to join the living again. After experiencing the most erotic, most realistic sex dream ever, she concluded consciousness was too damned dull.

Let somebody else take pictures of wedding parties and drooling babies. Sue just wanted to remain in bed and relive every touch, every tingle, every second of the ethereal orgasms enjoyed in that wonderful dream. If only she could will it back for an encore.

But the sun persisted, and reluctantly she opened her eyes to the mirrored tiles above her. The bed was a soaking, wrinkled mess with the top sheet askew and the fitted sheet peeled away from the mattress. She must have thrashed around quite a bit in time to the ministrations of her androgynous dream lover, she surmised.

Her hair pointed in all directions. Sweat beaded between her breasts, and what parts of her were dry were sticky to the touch. The musky residue of sex clung to her thighs, gluing them together. It certainly looked and smelled like she had had sex. Was the dream that powerful that she had actually come unaided, or maybe she masturbated in her sleep and didn't realize it?

She gazed at the reflection floating above her. She looked terrible, yet never felt so beautiful. The words spoken to her, the hands touching her ... it all seemed so real. A climactic cry still rang in her ears, so loudly she could barely hear the *whoosh* of water coming from the master bath...

Huh?

Sue sat up in the bed and quickly gathered the top sheet around her bare body, wincing as a sharp pain tore through her head. The wine had come back to haunt her, and the sensation burned her skull.

When the pain subsided, she held her breath and listened.

Somebody was in the shower.

Was it a burglar? Why would a burglar use the shower? Granted, it *was* a nice bathroom with high-end amenities, but still...

Lauren? No. Sue shook her head. She had locked the doors before coming to bed, even in her tipsy state she knew she had done that much. That left only the cat—no way—or either Brady or Ellie, and she knew they were both in New York getting ready to go on tour.

So who was in the shower?

She tried her legs on the carpet, and when she didn't collapse she tiptoed to the adjoining bathroom. The door was ajar and leaking a steam that filled Sue's lungs and caressed her skin. She pressed against it slightly so it opened quietly. The large mirror above the vanity was fogged, and the marble counter and Ellie's perfume bottles were coated with thin dew. A raised hand poked from atop the railing that supported the thick, terry cloth shower curtain surrounding the antique claw foot tub Ellie had installed many weeks prior.

Sue inhaled quietly, her heart thudding so strongly it nearly dislodged the sheet tucked around her breasts. That was definitely a man's hand. Had that hand been on her, inside her, last night? Was it *Brady* in there? Why would he be here now? Surely he would've given her warning that he was coming to Dareville.

Of course, Sue had to wonder why Brady would have come alone, much less helped himself to the

shower while she was sleeping in his bed.

She touched her throat to stifle a growing lump. Had he slept there, too, last night? Had he helped himself to *her*?

No. Brady loved Ellie. He would never...

But she had dreamed of Lauren, too. A woman. Could that have been Ellie? Could both of them have ... ?

A voice broke into these thoughts, quickening her heartbeat. No, this was a total stranger, a man. Brady's voice was deep, where this one had a lighter pitch.

"Morning, beautiful," he said.

Sue did not respond, but tried to back away from the room. *No*. She shook her head. *Please tell me...*

"I'd have asked you to join me, but I didn't want to wake you this morning, you were so gone."

And the curtain shimmied away to reveal a naked, soaking man, his eyes squinted shut against the spray.

And what a man.

He was lean and tall, with tight arms and legs. And a huge cock dangling between his thighs, one that could stretch her to the limits.

Sue swallowed back that lump. *No* ... she didn't, she couldn't have, not with this guy.

White suds matted the light patch of hair on his chest as he massaged a dwindling bar of soap across his neck and shoulders. He had yet to open those eyes. "I don't know how much hot water is left," he was saying, "but you're more than welcome to share what I—"

Then the eyes opened and looked at her, two shining, hazel eyes set against a long, beautiful face that shifted from smiling to confusion in under a second.

* * * *

Huh?

He blinked.

Why was there a strange woman standing in the bathroom, wrapped in one of Ellie's bed sheets? Where was Ellie?

Cal stopped washing himself, and peered over the stranger's shoulder to see better through the doorway. He detected no moving shadows to indicate any activity in the bedroom. Was Ellie still asleep? She had still been in the same position as he left her last night, her back curled to him with her face buried in a pillow. When he woke, he decided against rousing her, thinking she needed the rest before going another round. So, he had kissed her shoulder, rolled out the other side, and headed for the shower.

Maybe Ellie got up shortly after he did? It didn't, though, explain who this person was staring back at him with a shocked expression on her face. What was she doing in here anyway? She should have known from hearing the active shower that the bathroom was occupied.

And what about the sheet wrapped around her curvy body? Surely Ellie didn't invite her over for...

Cal raised an eyebrow. Did she? Before breakfast?

Well, the woman *was* looking at his crotch with some interest.

Wow. An incredible night with Ellie, followed by the opportunity to be the filling in a blonde babe sandwich? Was today his birthday?

He opened his mouth to speak again, but the beautiful blonde stranger spoke his next intended words. "Who are you?"

"What?" His voice echoed dully in his ears. The water shooting overhead was a constant, swishing noise, distracting him. He leaned his head away from direct contact and wiped a soapy hand over his face. "I was about to ask you that. Where's Ellie?"

"Ellie?" The woman looked at him as if he were insane. "Ellie Shaw? She's in New York. What's she got to do with your being in my shower?"

"*Your* shower?" He looked around the confines of the bathroom, and his body chilled despite the water's warmth. What was this woman going on about this being her place, and why was she saying Ellie was in New York? He knew better. He had just been with Ellie only hours prior. No way could Ellie have slipped away to get back there so quickly, not without saying something first. The drive to the airport alone would take her an hour.

No, it was real, she was here, he told himself. Ellie had been real, and not the product of some pot-induced haze. He had touched Ellie, made love to her, and enjoyed the most incredible orgasm of his life with her. No other woman could have drawn that kind of sexual reaction from him, he was certain.

He stared hard at the woman before him. Though angry, she was beautiful, and she did resemble Ellie with her hair cut in a similar style. Her eyes, though, were grayer compared to Ellie's green, and she appeared to have wider, more dangerous curves.

He took in a breath. *No.* He didn't. Not with a total stranger. Even in his wildest days, touring with Brady and various bands, he had always been lucid enough to know whom he was fucking. And last night he was with Ellie.

He prayed for Ellie to pop her head around the threshold and yell *Gotcha!* When it didn't happen, he leaned back into the spray to rinse off.

"Ellie's in New York?" he echoed, his voice cracking.

"Yes," the woman snapped.

Fuck.

An uneasy thought struck him. "Am I in the right house? I mean, the key fit last night—"

The woman folded her arms over the sheet, pinning it to her ample breasts. "I didn't mean *my* shower literally. This house belongs to Brady Garriston and Ellie Shaw—"

"I know *that*." His voice masked his discomfort. Inwardly, though, Cal was relieved. He *was* in the right place, physically. At least there wouldn't be another jealous husband to deal with soon.

He hoped not, anyway.

"—and I'm house sitting for them while they're away. They said nothing about other guests, which means you're trespassing," the woman finished, and turned on her heel. The steam from the shower had caused the marble tile underneath to sweat, making her movements all the more awkward as she retreated, the sheet trailing behind her. "And I'm calling the police."

"What?" Cal reached above his head and yanked at the shower faucet, cutting off the water. He reached for a towel and wrapped it around his waist before following her into the bedroom, still soaking and covered in soap. "You can't do that, because I'm not trespassing. I have—"

Further words faded as he discovered her on the opposite side of the bed, her hand gripping the phone receiver. The other hand poised over the keypad, a forefinger brushing over the 9.

"I have a key," he finished calmly. "Ellie gave it to me two weeks ago when she offered me use of the place for the summer."

"Ellie never told me—"

"It's in my jeans pocket, over there." He pointed to the hallway; the woman's suspicious gaze followed.

"My name is Cal Briscoe. I'm a friend of Ellie and Brady's. I've known Brady for nearly thirty years. I can prove it, and I can prove I have permission to be here. Ellie will tell you. Where is she?" he asked again, though this time he wondered if the question was pointless. The woman's eyes darted back to him, and her mouth set in a firm, worried line. That appeared to be answer enough for him.

"Oh, fuck," he muttered, and twisted around to fall back on the unmade bed. The woman really was telling the truth, as much as he wanted not to believe it.

The tinny beeping of a busy signal startled him, and he listened as the woman replaced the receiver.

"Yeah, that's about what happened," the woman sighed. Cal felt the mattress bounce as she sat on the other end. "Please tell me you used a condom."

"A what?"

"A condom," she seethed. "Please tell me you put on a condom before you, you—"

"Don't you mean *we*?" He sat up, bracing his hand against the wet spot left behind on the mattress.

"Don't say what I think you're going to say," he warned. It wasn't rape. You can't rape the willing, and whoever had been with him last night was *very* willing.

"You didn't use one, did you?" the woman squealed. "Oh, God."

"You didn't ask me to." It was a lame comeback, he knew, but the best he could do at the moment.

"You weren't real. You weren't supposed to be, anyway. I thought I was having a dream."

"Yeah, well, you were supposed to be somebody else."

"Really. I was supposed to be Ellie, wasn't I?" she accused, and narrowed her eyes at him. "Some friend of Brady's you are, if that's true." With force she yanked up the trailing sheet and stormed around the bed toward the closet. "A blind one at that. Can't even tell Ellie apart from another woman."

"It was dark, and anyway..." Cal threw up his hands. "Hey, why do I need to defend myself? You weren't exactly resisting."

"I was drunk!" the woman shouted.

"So? I was high."

"And that makes it excusable then?" The woman's eyes narrowed at him. "Wait a minute, I know you now. You *are* Brady's friend, you're that seedy guitar player from the benefit concert." She huffed.

"Hopped up on drugs, trying to steal Brady's girlfriend. That's disgusting."

"I'm a bass player," Cal corrected. Seedy? "I still don't know who you are."

She didn't answer, but turned back to the hallway. Then she gathered up the sheet to further cover herself. "Your pants are ringing, Mr. Bassman."

Seven

The second he stepped out of the bedroom she slammed the door behind him and locked it. Sighing, he dripped a trail down the hall, gathering his clothes in his arms along the way and depositing them on the couch. He fished the cell phone from his pants pocket and answered on the third round of "Back in Black."

"What happened last night?" Brady's voice was tense. "I know with you, something did."

Cal sighed and leaned back on the leather sofa. His damp back slid slightly from the lack of friction. He closed his eyes and imagined varied scenarios, all of which featured his hands wrapped tightly around Brady's throat. "Nothing happened," he countered dully.

"You're lying."

"Yes, I'm lying." He sniffed the air. What was that thick, awful stench coming from the kitchen? "You could've told me somebody else was staying here."

"I would've, if I had known," Brady said. "Ellie didn't say anything about it to me until this morning. I had no idea Sue was there."

"Her name is Sue." So now he wouldn't have to call her Blondie. Or Bitch. That took some of the awkwardness from the situation at hand.

"Sue Carmichael, she's one of Ellie's friends. Remember, too, she was the chick at Knickerbocker's being bothered by that drunk?"

"When?"

"A few months back, when I returned from Europe. Before I moved down to Dareville. You dragged the guy away and took him home."

The fantasy murder sequence brewing in Cal's mind was quickly replaced with the memory of that incident. Yes, he remembered now. He and Brady had gone out to dinner, and they were talking when they noticed a pretty blonde at another table being harassed. He had deposited the drunk—G-G-George, his name was—into a taxi and saw him home. Brady stayed at Knick's and flirted with the blonde, while Cal got vomited on somewhere on the East Side helping the guy to his apartment.

"That's the same girl?" He wondered if she remembered him from the incident, and not exclusively as some seedy bass player. "Small fucking world, eh?"

"She's staying there until she can close on a house she bought, and she's watching the cat."

Great. Cal pinched the bridge of his long nose. He fucked the cat sitter. That had to be a first for him. All he had to do now was lay a Girl Scout leader and a Denny's waitress, and life's sexual scavenger hunt would be complete. "Why didn't Ellie say anything before she offered me the house?" he asked, but as the words came out and as he listened to Brady's even breathing over the phone, the answer became clear.

"No," Cal said, angry.

"She *is* a nice lady, Cal," Brady wheedled.

"Two minutes ago she was looking at me like she wanted to rip my balls off and shove them down my throat."

"Sounds like a promising beginning to me. My parents didn't get to that stage until after they'd been married for twenty years."

"I'm going to kill Ellie for tricking me like this. This is no way to introduce somebody to a potential girlfriend."

"Ellie will be happy to know you're thinking that way, that there's potential."

Cal shook his head. "I'm not thinking any way! How many times do I have to tell *your* girlfriend that I'm not interested in being fixed up, especially like this!"

"Like what?" Brady asked slyly. "What happened last night, guy? You know I'm going to find out somehow."

"Nothing happened," Cal said quickly.

"Liar." Brady chuckled.

"I'm gonna get Ellie for this."

"Trust me, Ellie will get her punishment in due time. And I'm sure she'll enjoy it as much as you enjoyed what you say didn't happen last night." Brady's voice was mirthful now. Cal heard movement in the background; Brady was probably on a cell phone, too.

Soon he heard a slap, then a woman's giggle. Playful banter followed before Brady returned to the line. "I'll call you later. Be nice to Sue, okay?"

I was really nice to her last night, when I thought she was Ellie. He wasn't going to mention that last part, though. "Can I still stay here?" he asked.

"Of course."

"What about this Sue?"

Cal's answer was a distant feminine squeal followed by a disconnection.

* * * *

"You did what?"

Sue pulled the phone away momentarily so she could slip a red T-shirt over her head. Ellie was talking rapidly on the other line, and Sue asked her friend to repeat herself.

"You remember Cal, he's a studio musician. Worked with Brady for years. He played the bass at the benefit concert," Ellie was saying.

"I figured that much out. What's he doing here, breaking into the house in the middle of the night?"

"What do you mean, breaking in? I gave him a key."

"You gave him a—," Sue sighed. How could she fight that? It was Ellie's house, not hers, and Ellie had that right. They had no formal lease drawn up for this arrangement. "Well, you could have given *me* a clue," Sue wailed. "Instead I had to find out this morning when I walked in on him in the shower."

Before that, Sue then realized. More like last night, when she and Cal were rolling around in some wild, erotic dream. But it wasn't really a dream...

"Really?" Ellie giggled. "Hope you got a good look at him. He's got a great body, doesn't he?"

Oh, I got more than a look, sister. "That's not the point, Ellie." Sue gripped the receiver tightly. She thought she could hear the plastic casing buckle with her anger. Like hell was she going to give Ellie the satisfaction of knowing that she agreed with her, that she thought Cal had an *incredible* body, and that the things he had done to her in her unconscious state were nothing short of amazing.

Damn it! She pinched her arms against her tightening breasts. Why was she lusting for the man? She

was supposed to be angry right now, with Cal for taking advantage of her inebriation, and with Ellie for manipulating the situation in the first place.

"You're not disagreeing with me, are you?" Ellie sang. Then, in a conspiratorial whisper, "Did you get a good look at that splendid cock of his?"

"Oh, I got more—" And Sue wisely clamped her lips shut. The ensuing laughter crackling on the other end shot an embarrassing heat through her temples and flushed her skin.

"Okay, girl, I want every last filthy detail," Ellie said when she caught her breath, "and when you get to the end, I want to hear it again."

"I am not telling you a damn thing, I'm mad at you. And how do *you* know about his splendid cock?"

"So you agree with me then?"

"Stop putting words in my mouth!" Sue cried.

"You'd rather it be something else in your mouth?" Ellie teased. "Maybe again? I bet he gave your jaw a workout last night."

"No, he—" And Sue paused, realizing that, no, for all that happened last night she hadn't given Cal a blow job. She flashed back to Cal in the shower, and his third leg. Even limp, it looked quite impressive.

Then came another flash, and Sue saw herself kneeling before him, tracing every raised vein of his shaft with her tongue, wondering how in the hell would she be able to swallow him whole, wondering how Ellie knew...

"Again, I ask you," Sue began.

Ellie's voice was hushed, rough and labored through the receiver. "Remember that three-way Brady and I had that I told you about?"

How could Sue forget that? They had gone out to the beach for drinks with Lauren before Ellie left for New York. Ellie's sexually explicit monologues about her life with Brady had kept Sue enthralled, and envious, as she nursed martini after martini. "Him?" Sue cried. "*This* was the other guy?"

That made sense, Sue realized, for Cal to think she was Ellie then. Perhaps Cal had gotten more out of the experience than Ellie did. Dare she mention that to her friend, though?

"You're not mad, are you?" Ellie said. Sue detected a pout. "I mean, there's nothing going on between me and Cal."

Does Cal know that? "Yes, I am mad, El. You should have warned me, you should have said he was coming here." That he was coming, period. *That I would, too.* Sue slapped her head. She had had sex with a complete stranger, without a condom! She could be pregnant now, or worse.

"If I'd done that, neither one of you would've gone for it. Cal wouldn't have gone to Dareville if he knew I had an ulterior motive, and you wouldn't have liked the idea."

"Well, if you knew all this to begin with, why the big plan?"

"He is the *sweetest* guy, Sue," Ellie pleaded. "He's smart, funny, and he's perfect for you. I haven't met a nicer man since Brady, and I just had a feeling you two would hit it off if I could just get you two together."

"A sane person would have arranged for us to meet for dinner someplace." Someplace where everybody was dressed, and sober.

"Well," Ellie wheedled, "this was certainly more memorable, I'm sure."

"A great story for the grandkids, yeah," Sue muttered.

On the other side of the bedroom door, Sue heard a clatter, then a loud, anguished, "Oh, fuck!" Sweet man, indeed.

He's in love with you, Sue wanted to say. It didn't matter who was in that bed last night, Cal was making love to Ellie, and nobody else.

Sue kept her voice rigid, and she slipped on her jeans and sneakers. "I'd like to think I'm capable of finding a guy for myself, Ellie," she said instead, and waited for a response. There was none.

"Ellie?"

"Brady, stop." She heard her friend playfully admonish her lover in the background. "Sue, I'll have to call you later. Be nice to Cal, okay?"

"Why? He's not staying here for real, is he?"

The line went dead before Sue got her answer.

* * * *

Cal was standing in the kitchen, dressed yet barefoot, with a murderous expression on his face when Sue finally emerged from the bedroom.

"What the hell is going..." Her voice trailed into silence upon seeing Cal's bare foot planted in a thick, brown puddle on the kitchen floor.

"What's that?" She pointed at the mess.

"Ask her." Cal returned the gesture, and Sue looked down at her feet to see Typhoid slithering toward them.

"You mean *him*. Ty, there you are," she cooed, and scooped the fluffy white animal into her arms. "Are you hungry, sweetie?"

"Your sweetie threw up all over the place. You can't smell that?" Cal spat, and lifted his foot to give Sue a better look at the feline vomit that covered it. "What the hell kind of cat sitter are you?"

"Hey, I've been taking damn good care of this cat, thank you. I've—Is that a hamburger?"

They both looked at the food bowl and the object in question within. It was actually a half-eaten hamburger, with a thin trail of ketchup congealed over the rim of the bowl near a wilting pickle slice perforated with teeth marks. Sue looked up at Cal with shock.

"You fed the cat a *hamburger* and you're calling *me* a bad cat sitter?" she cried, and held Typhoid close. The cat craned its neck forward to lick one splayed, furry leg. "Cats aren't supposed to eat people food. Were you trying to poison him?"

"There wasn't any food in the bowl last night, and I was too tired to hunt through a dark house for Meow Mix," Cal protested. "At least *I* wasn't trying to starve the little furball."

"Cats only need one bowl a day. He had plenty." Sue stalked out of the kitchen, with the cat now draped over her shoulder. Typhoid stared back at Cal without apology as they retreated to the master bedroom.

Too tired to hunt for cat food! Sue sighed. He wasn't too tired to hunt for *pussy* last night.

She set Typhoid on the oval pet bed near the window. Seconds later she heard the kitchen faucet run,

then stop. Then there was the sound of the front door. Her throat constricted. Was Cal leaving?

She felt a massive weight clear her chest. Good. The sooner he was gone to some hotel the sooner normalcy would return to her life.

And leave her to develop X-rated photos of the girlfriend she had fantasized about, the one who turned into Cal, in the flesh, pressed against *her* flesh.

"Fuck," she muttered. Things would never be normal around here again.

She padded to the living room to find the front door ajar. Peering outside, she saw Cal, now shod, shutting the hatchback door of his rental car. A bicycle leaned against the driver's side door, and he carried a large black box in one hand as he approached. Sue noticed the tight cords in his arm straining against the weight of it. He was strong.

She pictured those strong arms wrapped around her body, caressing her the way they had last night. Her heart throbbed as she recalled those same hands, now curled around luggage and case handles, fingering her clit, stoking fires she thought could never be revived.

Immediately she shook away the image. She was supposed to still be angry at this cat-poisoning brute.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

Cal stopped in his path and scowled at her. He shifted his grips to better accommodate his hold on the bag and box, which Sue now realized was a small amplifier. "I'm taking my stuff inside," he said. "I told you I have permission to stay here, and that's what I'm going to do. I didn't drive all the way from New York to stay in a hotel when I can stay here rent free."

He didn't wait for her to give way, but stepped around her toward the cottage door. Sue followed. She couldn't call him on it, Ellie pretty much said Cal had the right to stay, and the guy did have a key. Legally, there was nothing she could do.

"What am I supposed to do?" she cried to his retreating back. She realized Ellie never said for certain that she could stay put. She thought of calling her friend, but figured after their conversation that Ellie and Brady were probably fooling around.

Maybe I should call anyway, Sue thought. It would serve her friend right to be interrupted.

"Do what you want. Stay, go, I don't care," Cal said, weary. "It's a big enough house."

"Yeah, but..." Sure, the house was big, but Dareville wasn't a big enough town to get away with something like this. Surely somebody would see the two of them and get the wrong idea. News that she was shacking up with some guy would spread across the gossip lines quickly, she knew. What if it affected her business?

She would have preferred people found out instead about Lauren's sexy photos.

"But, people will *talk*."

Cal's pace stopped in the hall, and he dropped his belongings. His head hung low, his shoulders slumped, but he didn't look back at her. "People in New York live together all the time and nobody says anything."

"This isn't New York. How can we both stay here? It's inappropriate."

"Considering last night, simply sharing the same roof is hardly scandalous. Besides, Brady and Ellie live here together, does anybody talk about them?"

"That's beside the point." People did talk about Brady and Ellie, though, and opinions varied. Sue

knew, at the very least, that some of the more conservative parents at Ellie's school weren't happy about it. But Ellie had eventually left her job, so the point was moot. "We're not them," Sue said.

"You won't even know I'm here, and I don't intend to be underfoot twenty-four hours," Cal said. "You'll just have to live with it."

"Yeah, well, *you're* certainly not going to be living in the master bedroom. That's mine. My stuff's already in there."

Cal sighed and retrieved his baggage, then executed a sharp, sudden left into the guest bedroom. "Fine, whatever. You won't see me in there again until I'm invited."

"Invit—" Sue scoffed. Invite him, to her bed? Not hardly! He had already invited himself once, and that was more than enough for her. Like hell was she going to give him the satisfaction of thinking that if, *very* big if, they would have sex again that it would be by her insistence. She was going to lock her door every night from now on. And sleep with one eye open, clutching a baseball bat.

No, sir. If Mr. Cal "I'm a friend of Brady's" Briscoe wanted sex, he was going to have to be creative with his right hand or go elsewhere, or else beg her for it.

And if he does, then I'll sure as hell give it to him.

She cringed. If only her inner voice had as much conviction.

Cal's angry voice reverberated throughout the cottage. "What is all this crap in here?"

Sue sat up, and she remembered her equipment. Her spare floodlights and gels, fragile bulbs and lenses, all stacked around the room. She heard a *clunk* and her heart stopped. That so-called *crap* that oaf was probably kicking around was expensive to replace.

"Don't touch anything!" she shouted. "I'll clear it away in a minute, just don't touch any of it."

A heavy sigh trailed out of the room, and Sue leaned back, covering her eyes with the back of her hand.

Definitely, he was going to have to beg, if she didn't kill him first.

And if he did beg her, would she bend, and let herself be taken advantage of again?

She leaned against the sofa. Memories of her incredible "dream" surfaced again. Her pussy twitched just thinking of that splendid cock being pile-driven into her.

That splendid cock she didn't want in her bed.

Who are you kidding?

"Fuck," she whispered meekly.

Eight

You won't even know I'm here.

Right, Sue thought. As a roommate, Cal was about as stealthy as a thundering herd of elephants. This she discovered only minutes into their first full day sharing the house as he unloaded bag after bag. Two weeks had since passed, and her patience had rapidly dwindled in contrast to her rising blood pressure. She wondered if she killed him, would anybody notice?

His eating habits were atrocious, for one. Rare was the night Sue came home from her studio to find the kitchen, and for that matter the living room, since he always seemed to eat in front of the television, tidied. Greasy burger and taco wrappers frequently littered the counter and coffee table, and dried water rings left from dewy soda cups stained the furniture. And, despite her insistence that she handle the responsibility of caring for Typhoid, she still spied an occasional shred of taco shell or fajita meat sticking to the cat's bowl.

Cal's negligence infuriated her. Who was going to call Ellie when her cat was at the vet getting dewormed due to a poor diet, or resuscitated after choking on a Big Mac?

Most times she couldn't call him on his behavior because he wasn't home for her to berate. He stayed out all night; where he went, she didn't know and didn't care, and he didn't come home until the wee hours, clattering through the house and scaring her awake. On the rare night or two he was in the house for the evening, he was usually holed up in his room, pounding on his bass guitar while she tried to watch television or read a book. The shouting matches that ensued only caused her further headache, until Sue elected to just retreat to her studio for peace and quiet during these times.

Yet for all the aggravation caused by this living arrangement, Sue was irritated more by the fact that her attraction to Cal remained strong. It didn't help matters that when he was home he elected to wear nothing but tight T-shirts and flimsy jogging shorts that nicely showed off his legs, and the package nestled in between.

Of course, Cal would never have the satisfaction of knowing that. Her resolve was firm, and Cal had not been invited back to her bedroom.

This morning found Sue rifling through a utensil drawer for some salad tongs. Successful in her search, she marched to the living room, where she used them to pick up a pair of discarded zebra-print briefs draped over an arm of the couch. They looked like something Cal would wear, and she didn't want to know how they wound up there, or what Cal was doing on the couch the night before that necessitated their removal. On impulse she scanned the leather-covered seat for any telltale manmade stains, then shuddered at the thought that she had actually felt the need to do that.

"Ugh," she spat and padded to the end of the hall, tongs held far in front of her, and deposited the underwear in the laundry hamper reserved for his garments. Sue kept her laundry separate, and actually washed it. Cal could do his own, and Sue had to wonder exactly how much Cal had packed, or if he just went out and bought new clothes to replace the soiled ones.

She hoped laundry day would soon come for him, regardless, as the hamper was about to burst. She wasn't about to stoop to the role of being Cal's housekeeper, and if he thought *she* was going to wash his ratty old clothes ... *ugh!* It was enough she was picking up after his fast-food binges, without one word of thanks, at that.

She stood outside his shut bedroom door and listened. There wasn't a sound, not even the labored breath of a deep sleep. It was eight in the morning; she had already showered, dressed, filled the cat's bowls and changed the litter, and had breakfast. She would be leaving soon for her studio to see to some appointments. In all this time there had come no sign of life from the other side of this door. Not

an unusual phenomenon, but at best she could hear a rattling snore as she sauntered up and down the hall during her morning rituals.

He had gone out last night, of course. Was he still gone? No, that didn't explain the underwear, which were definitely not on the couch when she retired around eleven. Maybe he stumbled in sometime in the wee hours, stripped, and went to bed, like he did the night of his arrival? But there would be more clothes lying around if he did that. To say nothing of the unmistakable stench of marijuana she'd been trying to conceal with various air fresheners since he arrived.

Sue stepped quietly back into the kitchen, looking for her car keys, which she found on the counter resting on her appointment book. She grabbed both and started toward the door, then stepped outside to see his car parked in the driveway next to hers.

Odd, she thought. So he had come home after all, and didn't come and go. Maybe too much drink rendered his snoring mute.

Concern shadowed her features. Maybe he was so drunk and stoned he hacked up during the night and choked on his own vomit? Maybe right now he was lying dead in bed, with pinkish gray goo crusted on his lips and cheek, yet another victim of hard living. Wasn't that how Jimi Hendrix succumbed? Sue's skin shuddered at the thought of having to go back into the house to check and see...

"Hey!"

She looked up, startled, just as a thin bicycle tire squealed to a halt beside her. A cloud of white dust kicked up from the impact of the brakes, and Sue scowled at the dripping man panting over the curled handlebars that nearly poked her in the ribs. Cal was wearing sunglasses and a gleaming blue bike helmet that resembled a plastic comet; the getup nearly concealed his facial features, but she knew it was him, and she was none too happy.

"You ought to watch where you're going," Cal admonished her. "I could have run you down."

"I had to pick up your zebra underwear off the couch this morning," she said.

Cal's lips distorted and his brows furrowed over the dark lenses, then raised to his scalp. "Oh, yeah?" he said, and elaborated no further. "Thanks, and good morning to you, too."

Sue punched the unlock button on her car remote fob. The headlights of her car blinked once, followed by the *click* of her doors unlocking. "I wish you'd at least pick up after yourself," she grumbled. "I sit on that couch, too, and I don't want to know what you were doing on it that—"

"Like I had planned to tell you anyway."

Even with the glasses, Sue could tell the man was rolling his eyes at her. She watched him dismount from the bicycle, trying with all her willpower not to rest her gaze on the pronounced bulge in his tight black cycling shorts. What kind of animal print had he on underneath? Of course, Sue had to look, and saw no telltale indented lines in the smooth fabric hugging his hips and ass. Was he wearing any underwear at all?

Cal righted the bicycle and steered it toward one corner of the house, heading for the backyard. "Not that it's any of your business, but that was a clean pair, thank you," he called over his shoulder. "It must have slipped from the pile I had on the couch when I was folding laundry late last night."

"How did you—" Sue's words died in her throat the second her gaze panned down again to that tight, retreating ass. Molded against the Spandex of Cal's shorts, it looked all the more delicious. Oh, to just be able to smooth her hands down his backside and grab hold as he pounded her like a hammer to wood...

Cal's words cut into her thoughts. He had turned back to smile at her. "I get a lot done at night when you're not looking, you'd be surprised," he said, then winked. "Actually, you know that already." With that, he disappeared around the corner, leaving Sue in the driveway, speechless.

It was a full minute before she regained consciousness, and when she did her job was forgotten. "Hey!" she cried, and followed him to the backyard, wobbling across the soft lawn on high heels. "What the hell's *that* supposed to mean?"

* * * *

When Cal reached the back patio, his mirthful attitude had instantly dissipated, and he no longer felt like further yanking Sue's chain.

Sue reached the patio, and he turned to her, scowling. He pointed to the ashtray resting on the glass-topped umbrella table. "Where is it?" he demanded.

Sue frowned. "Where's what?"

"You know damn well what." Cal's body quaked lightly, partly from anger and partly from withdrawal. He had ridden a good thirty miles around and through Dareville and was looking forward to coming home to relax with the remains of the joint he had left in the ashtray last night.

Only the ashtray was empty now, save for the tiniest bits of ash even the sharpest of roach clips wouldn't pick up. The joint was missing, as was the dime bag resting on the table beside it, and he said as much.

"And so you know," Cal added, "dime' doesn't mean I paid only a dime for it."

"I know what it means, and I didn't take your stupid pot," Sue said dryly. "I don't do drugs."

Cal exhaled sharply through his nose. A hit off a joint would probably do Her Majesty some good, he surmised, but he kept that thought to himself. He was light-headed and parched from the ride and definitely not in the mood to argue. She had to be lying, he knew. The cottage sat on a remote piece of land just within Dareville's borders; there wasn't a neighbor for at least three miles, and the property sat on a cul-de-sac, so traffic was a non-issue.

"Well, if you didn't take it, and I know I didn't move it from the backyard—" Cal began, his tone patronizing.

"How do you know you didn't move it?" Sue challenged. "Perhaps you were so stoned at the time you just don't remember."

"It wasn't in my room when I left for my ride this morning. I would've seen it otherwise, even with all your crap lying around." All the crap that had been lying around his room for the past two weeks, that Sue had said she would move. Maybe her neglect in following through on her promise was her way of trying to get him to move out altogether. Fat chance.

"I'll move my stuff when I can," Sue insisted. "My studio is too small to hold everything, and I haven't had the time to move my equipment around to make room."

"Seem to have found the time to move *my* stuff," Cal grumbled as he yanked hard on the front zipper of his bike jersey.

"I didn't take your stupid pot!" Sue echoed, her voice a screech.

"Well, if you didn't, who did, then?"

"Well..." Sue dramatically took a seat in one of the patio chairs and nodded to the wooded area bordering the backyard. "I suppose we could sit here and wait to see how many woodland creatures

come stumbling from the forest with the munchies. Maybe we'll see Bambi and Thumper raiding the garbage cans."

"Very funny. I don't need this." Cal pulled the jersey over his head and used it to wipe away a few beads of sweat lining his breastbone. He bit back a smile; the catch in Sue's throat as he flexed his muscles was too audible to miss, and the sudden drop in her gaze spoke volumes. He watched her shift uncomfortably in the chair until he could no longer resist.

"You okay?" he asked sweetly. "You went all quiet there for a second."

"I'm fine." Sue's annoyance betrayed her discomfort, easily. "It's just ... this stupid chair. It's so stiff."

He was ready to let another comment fly when suddenly the catch transferred to his throat. Sue wiggled her hips and crossed her legs, and when she did so a well-timed breeze lifted the hem of her flared skirt. Cal was granted a view to rival the infamous *Basic Instinct* money shot: a flash of creamy flesh—no stockings—and feather soft pubic hair just barely covered by a patch of ... was this woman wearing a thong under that conservative dress?

Now it was Cal's turn to wriggle like an awkward teenager. He clutched the bike jersey close to his shorts and hoped Sue wouldn't be able to tell that he was using it to conceal his stiffening cock, which would surely become quite visible underneath the Spandex. The movement, however, did nothing to vanquish the image in his mind of what Sue would look like wearing just the thong, of his tongue gliding across her hip and following the string trail down to her pussy. He saw her open wider for him, granting him access to her slick core and throbbing pink clit...

He pressed his other hand against the shirt covering his crotch, and hoped Sue didn't have X-ray vision.

To his relief, Sue bolted upright and straightened her skirt. "You know, I'd love to stick around and argue more about your absent-mindedness and your enabling of bunny rabbits, but I'm late for work," she said, and started back around the house. "Try not to do anything foolish today, like burn down the house or kill the cat."

"Hey, you think maybe Typhoid took my stash?" Cal called back. "Maybe *he's* the one enabling your furry friends." *Cripes*. What kind of lame comeback was that?

Sue did not turn around, but flipped back her hand toward Cal and extended her middle finger. Another breeze teased at her skirt, but it wasn't strong enough to expose anything above the backs of Sue's thighs.

Nice thighs they were, too, Cal observed. Smooth and supple, and supporting a nice, heart-shaped ass, one he never really appreciated during their accidental coupling.

Oh, but how he would have appreciated rubbing his oiled-up cock between her cheeks, and spraying his hot seed onto her back...

He shook his head. No, he was going to stand by his word this time. He wasn't going to initiate intimate contact; she would have to do it.

And if Sue did, why would he accept? He didn't even like her. He liked Ellie. No, he *loved* Ellie, wanted Ellie, wanted to be with Ellie.

Well, buddy, not liking a girl never stopped you before, his conscience nagged.

Shut up, you.

He sighed as he trudged into the house through the back door. If he was so much in love with Ellie, then how come Sue had been occupying his thoughts for the last two weeks?

She went everywhere with him, in his mind—to the local market, the beach, the jogging trails, and every nightclub he had visited since arriving. Every time he would see an attractive woman, he found himself comparing her to Sue rather than Ellie. Suddenly, Sue had become the standard by which all others were judged, and it unnerved him.

Once in his bedroom, he stripped away the bike shorts, a difficult task as his erection snagged in the stretchy fabric. He rubbed at the reddened imprints the elastic waist and leg bands made on his skin and wondered how Sue would react on knowing she was doing this to him, that just the simplest of gestures, like crossing her legs in a patio chair, could make him hard. She no doubt would laugh, and revel in his suffering.

Imagine how her ego would inflate, too, to know that Cal had not gotten laid since arriving in Virginia. Oh, there had been opportunities, for Cal had met more than a few lovely young women while club hopping. Any one of them could have been easily talked into bed, or the back of Cal's rental, or onto a patch of smooth sand as the cold Atlantic sea water rushed over their melded bodies, cooling their skin but not their desire. But it seemed each time the notion came to Cal to proposition somebody, the words did not follow. Every woman, no matter how beautiful or curvaceous or charming, somehow didn't measure up to Sue.

To Sue! A woman who drove him nuts, who nagged at him constantly like a British fishwife and accused him of animal cruelty. A woman whose crap was *still* cluttering his room, though she had assured him the camera equipment would soon be gone.

A woman who had given him the best sex of his life, memories of which were still vivid despite his inebriated state at the time.

Cal growled. This was also a woman who had to have taken his stash and flushed it. She had to be lying, Cal decided as he padded into the adjoining bathroom and cranked on the shower. Sue, it turned out, was as militant with the anti-drug stance as Ellie was, if he could correctly judge the look of disgust on Sue's face every time he headed for the back patio.

Well, if she didn't like pot, she didn't have to smoke it, he had surmised the first day. He stood by that logic now as he prepared to step in the shower.

He grasped the metal edge of the glass shower door and winced. His erection, tapping at his belly, to say nothing of the tightness in his balls, did little to make walking even the shortest of distances easier. He was going to have to do more than soap himself down in the stall in order to feel totally refreshed.

Cal groaned. He had been pretty much doing that every night since arriving in Dareville, thanks to his inability to get laid.

No, he mentally corrected himself. He could get laid anytime he wanted, he just didn't want to. The novelty of fucking a total stranger had lost its appeal since all could he think about was fucking Sue—"Ellie!" he shouted. *Ellie, Ellie, Ellie*. He wanted Ellie.

Fuck. Who was he kidding? He had it bad for yet another woman who would never reciprocate his feelings. What was wrong with him?

He leaned against the shower door, listening to the harsh shushing of the spray inside the stall. He cupped his scrotum with one hand and squeezed his eyes shut, conjuring an image of naked Ellie waiting for him in the stall, soaked in more than one respect. He watched her soap her arms, then her tits, then plunge a hand down to her folds, beckoning him closer with her free hand.

He watched her hips become rounder, her breasts larger and more firm, and her green eyes darken into steel. Soon he was stroking to an image of Sue, who suddenly flipped him the bird and slid the shower

door shut with a *bang*, waking him from the fantasy.

Just as quickly, his erection floundered and his cock fell limp between his legs. The shower didn't look so inviting anymore; Cal was restless and claustrophobic. He needed to get out of the house again, and expend this pent-up frustration. Masturbating wasn't going to help this time.

Though his legs felt like gelatin, he decided a run to go with the bike ride was in order. He recalled the park where he and Brady had played that benefit concert had some good trails.

With the water supply cut off, Cal grabbed a towel and blotted away what sweat remained stuck to his skin. As he was about to toss the towel on the floor, he spied a shiny object in the wastebasket by the pedestal sink. There was the baggie that had held his stash, only now the sparse remnants of weed clung to the plastic zipper.

I'll be damned. So he *had* smoked his entire supply and didn't realize it. Sue had been right all along.

And now his one major vice was kaput. No way was he going to try to score pot from somebody he didn't know or trust. He doubted he could find any weed in Dareville, anyway. All that remained were alcohol, which did little for him, and sex, which he probably wasn't going to get.

"Fuck," he muttered, and stubbed his toe kicking the metal wastebasket.

Normally Sue would have welcomed the opportunity to work outdoors. The studio, cramped as it was in between two other storefronts along Dareville's main square, could be stifling at times, particularly if several people were waiting in Sue's tiny lobby. Plus, Sue enjoyed the spontaneity of nature's backdrop in her work.

If only bride-to-be Sharyn Mortensen felt the same way, Sue realized as the woman, resplendent in a long, sleeveless gown, fumed in the middle of the jogging trail at Dareville Veteran's Memorial Park. Right now the woman would have looked more at home stomping through downtown Tokyo, demolishing buildings with her petite, heeled shoes as the natives fled in terror. Staying at home and arguing with Cal over marijuana and zebra underwear was preferable to enduring Bridezilla's wrath.

Sharyn's face was upturned towards the sky, and pinched with fury. "This light isn't flattering at all," she was saying for the hundredth time. "It's too bright."

It's the sun, Sue wanted to retort. As if there was a way she could adjust it to Sharyn's satisfaction. Sue sighed; to think, too, Sharyn had hired her to photograph the wedding in addition to these portraits. An *outdoor* wedding! Suddenly the idea of taking *budoir* pictures of little old ladies to impress Jake Marbury didn't seem like a bad racket.

"You look wonderful," Sue assured the bride-to-be.

"I look fat," Sharyn whined, and twirled her toothpick thin figure in place. Crinoline rustled underneath layers of satin.

Sue elected not to comment further; Sharyn was fishing for compliments and Sue didn't feel like taking the bait. Sharyn made every woman in Dareville look like Mama Cass, and she damn well knew it. "Sharyn, how about you turn to one side so I can get a shot with the trees in the background? Hold your bouquet up to your bosom, like this," Sue suggested, gesturing to Sharyn. "And tilt your head down like you're looking at the ground. The way the sun is bearing down through the branches, it's making this nice filtering effect. The rays look so ethereal, it would make a great soft focus shot." Sue held up her camera and adjusted the zoom.

Sharyn, however, was not cooperative. The bouquet of silk lilies, tight in her gloved grip, now hung limp at her side as the bride-to-be pouted. "It's gonna look stupid," she whined.

"It's going to look beautiful. Marty's going to love these pictures."

"You don't even have me looking at the camera that way," Sharyn protested. Sue expected her to stamp her foot like a petulant child. "Is anybody even going to know it's me in these pictures? I swear, you've had me pose in so many wacky ways, I'm wondering if Mother was right, if I should have just sprung for Art at the beach."

Sue felt the anger flame her cheeks. Art Johnson was another photographer who set up shop in Virginia Beach, and was Sue's main competition. Sue had been fighting for years to take from him the Dareville Primary Academy account, and since Bridezilla's mother sat on DPA's board of directors, Sue felt obligated not to ruffle any feathers. One disparaging word to Mommy Dearest, she knew, would mean Art Johnson would be taking next year's class photos, *and* the wedding shots.

She took a deep breath. *Make her happy. Take nice pictures.* That was all she thought she had to do. That, and not have the end result resemble a sow engulfed in a white silk sausage casing.

"Honestly, Sue, do you really know what you're doing?" Sharyn rolled her eyes.

"Hell, yes, she does."

Sue looked up from studying Sharyn through the camera's eye. That was not her voice. That was...

Oh, no.

She had not heard the labored panting tickling her ear, had not felt the cloud of dust rise from the ground to veil her bare legs. The stench of sweat and musk was strong, even with her head turned away.

She felt her heart dance. She didn't have to turn around to know Cal had come up behind her. What was he doing here?

One glance at the amused change in Sharyn's face had Sue hoping Cal wouldn't blow this for her. But as he stepped to one side and sauntered toward her client, her heart stopped. Cal was stripped to the waist, his hair secured in a ponytail. His tight, muscled back gleamed with sweat, and the loose green jogging shorts he wore left nothing to the imagination. Sue could only wonder what Sharyn was thinking at the moment, being granted a view that resembled somebody unsuccessfully shoplifting a jumbo Hickory Farms beef log in his shorts.

Sharyn's smile was wicked, her voice suddenly husky. "Beg pardon?" she asked, striking a demure pose, her eyes definitely on the prize. Sue could only assume the groom was not so blessed.

"You ought to listen to Ms. Carmichael, she knows what she's doing." Cal stepped around Sharyn, assessing her with leering eyes, careful not to smudge her train with heavy footfalls. Hands on his hips, he inhaled deeply and started back toward Sue, kicking away potential leg cramps. "You have the opportunity right now to have a very beautiful portrait taken by a consummate professional. I'd do it now while the weather's still good."

Consummate professional? Had Cal been reading a thesaurus in his spare time? How could words of praise such as this come from a man who only last week had teased her for watching the soap operas she had taped during the day?

Unconsciously both women looked to the sky. There wasn't a cloud in sight. Sue lowered her eyes and turned away quickly as her gaze fell upon Cal's crotch. Her pussy twitched in response and she shifted her stance. She doubted Hickory Farms beef logs came in *that* size, or tasted as good.

Like you would know, she berated herself, and fought to maintain control of a sudden rush of lust.

Sharyn frowned, though Sue could tell the woman was also sizing up Cal's goods. "Do I know you?" she asked.

Cal grinned. "No," he said. "This would be my cue to invite you to get to know me better, but it would appear you're taken."

Sue huffed audibly and rolled her eyes. She was ignored. Sharyn giggled.

"Dare I ask if Ms. Carmichael has taken *your* portrait?" The tone of Sharyn's question, however, implied much more.

Cal shook his head. "Not quite. You see those pictures of Brady Garriston from the concert he did here?"

Sue's mouth dropped open. She had taken those shots at Lauren's request as a favor to the building committee, for some kind of scrapbook Lauren was planning. Brady and Ellie, too, had requested photos of the show. She had made extras and framed them for display in her storefront window, but she had no idea Cal had noticed them.

"You get a good look at the bass player in the background of one of those shots?" Cal asked Sharyn when she nodded, and the bride-to-be's eyes lit with recognition.

"Yes, I know you now. That was a great show," she exclaimed. "So, you're Brady's friend?"

"And Ellie's," Cal added. "In fact, I'll be a witness at *their* wedding in a few months."

"I see." Sharyn's tone dropped, and Sue tried not to laugh. Yes, a number of women in town had expressed hope that they might have a shot at Dareville's most famous part-time resident should he and Ellie split, and Sharyn was no exception, despite having spent the last few months preparing for her wedding. Perhaps Sharyn thought it wouldn't hurt to hedge her bets should Brady dump Ellie or vice versa, but Sue knew better. No other woman in town, or the country, existed as far as Brady was concerned.

"Those pictures *were* nice." A sarcastic connotation returned to Sharyn's voice, "but anybody with a camera and a seat as good as Sue's could've taken quality shots like that, don't you think?"

"No." Cal's answer was immediate and resolute. "I don't know much about photography, but I feel comfortable enough to say that it has to be more than just pointing a camera in somebody's face and telling that person to say 'cheese'." He turned to Sue and smiled. "Apparently, from what I was told, the photo editor of *Rolling Stone* was quite impressed with her work when he purchased some of those photos."

"Really." Now Sharyn was impressed, and Sue wanted to slither into the distant trees and fade away. How could he tell such a bold-faced lie without flinching? Perhaps it was something he had perfected over years of tomcatting around the country with Brady and his other horny musician friends, making it easy to smooth talk a woman. Or maybe this was yet another way of getting under her skin.

A light rustling alerted Sue to Sharyn's approach. "Okay, Sue, I suppose we could try it your way," she said, waving her bouquet in Cal's direction. "If you're good enough for a national magazine, I mean, who am I to argue?"

"Fine." *You won't listen to me, but you'll defer to the so-called expertise of a half-naked man whose name you don't know.* Sue bit her lip. A happy bride was a foot in the door to the DPA account. She guided Sharyn back onto the trail for the planned pose and stepped out of her earshot.

"Let me adjust the lens and we'll get to work," she told Sharyn and turned away, but not before clandestinely beckoning Cal closer with a crook of the neck.

"*Rolling Stone*?" she hissed once they were far enough away. "Did you find your stash and finish it off? Because you definitely must be high to tell her that!"

"Hey, it got her to cooperate, didn't it?" Cal pointed her to the trail, where Sharyn was positioning herself according to Sue's directions. "I could hear you two screeching from the parking lot."

"We weren't screeching, and what am I supposed to say when she starts blabbing around about my photos being in *Rolling Stone*? Did you even think of that?"

Cal shrugged. "Hey, I'm just trying to help. If anybody asks, you can tell them later the mag couldn't use them and gave you a kill fee. Besides, she looks more like a *People* Magazine chick to me, and she'll probably forget about it later on."

Sue roughly adjusted her camera. "I doubt it. People have long memories in this town. And I was doing fine before you showed up. Stop that," she bit out as Cal snorted. "Let's just hope Sharyn doesn't expect to be on the cover of *Modern Bride*."

"If she does, tell her they're full up for the year." Cal eyed the trail with some longing. "See you 'round, Annie Leibowitz." With that, Cal broke into a slow jog, nodded as he passed Sharyn, and retreated down the trail. Two pairs of eyes followed until Cal hit a turn in the woods and disappeared.

"Oh, my," Sharyn breathed, and idly gathered her skirt around her. "Did you see what that man was smuggling in those shorts? Are all rock musicians hung like that?"

"I wouldn't know," Sue lied. Interfering at home, now at work. Would she find Cal sitting at her mother's table coming Thanksgiving, she wondered? "Aren't accountants hung like that?" she asked, referring to the groom.

"I wish. Wouldn't mind me some of that, I tell you," Sharyn said.

Sue only grunted and held the camera to her face. "You want some cheese with that beef log, sweetheart?"

"What?" Sharyn turned to Sue. "Cheese?"

And Sue snapped her picture.

* * * *

He should have known better to expect gratitude from that woman. The bride could have charged at her with a pickaxe and he could have jumped into the path of attack to protect her, and Sue would probably have berated him for spoiling such a good action shot.

Come to think of it, Cal didn't recall Brady mentioning Sue being grateful to them for getting rid of her unwanted suitor in New York all those months ago. Well, Sue had been grateful to *Brady*, who had done nothing, and she even flirted with him as he spent the rest of the night at Knick's playing piano and milking the crowd for compliments, so he later heard. Cal hadn't been mentioned once in the entire exchange; it appeared neither one of them would have cared then if the drunk tried to mug him on the cab ride home. Perhaps Sue's distaste for Cal had been ingrained at birth.

Whatever. There was no sense in letting the woman get under his skin and make his run unpleasant, especially since he had come out to here to forget about her. The nice day and the warm sun, illuminating a beautiful backdrop of pine trees and wildflowers, was a big help in distracting him as he kicked his heels higher and hastened his pace.

He finished a lengthy route along three intertwining dirt paths and cooled down with a slow walk around the park's perimeter. The park, he noticed, was a heavily utilized place. Mothers with strollers, kids on bikes, and seniors in sweatbands and track pants were prevalent on the trails, each offering a friendly smile and hello as he passed. In the large green space within the trail's borders, people tossed Frisbees and footballs, while others lay on towels and soaked up the spring sun, with library books splayed open on knees and chests.

For an instant the scene reminded Cal of a typical lazy day at Central Park, and he felt a slight pang of homesickness as he started for the gravel parking lot. The smog and noise of surrounding Manhattan traffic, however, was not missed. A hot dog vendor, on the other hand, would have been a welcome sight, Cal realized as his stomach rumbled.

To get back to his car, he had to cross the green space, and he marveled at its visual deception—the park was larger than he realized. The last time he was here was at night, on stage playing Brady's benefit concert. He had been amazed then that Dareville had managed to cram so many people in one spot, but now it didn't seem so impossible.

Sue no doubt had made good use of this park in her work, producing shots as good as the ones done at the show. Brady had shown him her handiwork, and Cal had to admit that the photos were good. *Sue* was good, good enough for *Rolling Stone*, if not better.

"Hmph." Photography had to be where she was putting all of her positive energy. Her social skills were definitely lacking as a result.

No. He had no right to think that. As grouchy as she had acted toward him, no way could she match *his* behavioral low points, many which were also worthy of space in *Rolling Stone*, in the gossip section, or in *The National Enquirer*.

He didn't head for home right away. Being alone in Brady's house with all those awkward memories did little to lift his spirits, so he put on the spare T-shirt he kept in his car and headed for the main town square, walking across the narrow street. He killed time roaming around the small bookshop by Sue's studio, then bought a bag of chips and a Coke at Jake's, which he enjoyed leisurely on a bench at the park as time cranked slowly forward in Brady and Ellie's bucolic second home. Pigeons cooed at his feet, and he obliged them with a few salty crumbs, laughing as two birds pecked each other over a large potato chip.

Strangely enough, he wasn't as bored as he had expected he would be here. He thought he would constantly miss the bustle of the city, the need to be in the studio all day and a club all night, but this ... this wasn't bad, either. A man could live well in Dareville, not having to worry about sitting in traffic or locking his doors at night. The more he thought about it, the more Dareville seemed like a good place to retire.

If he wanted to retire, and he didn't. Feasibly he could, he had enough money, but *retirement* was a word he had always associated with *death*, and he was hardly ready to go anywhere.

Besides, he realized as he pitched his trash in a nearby can, what fun would it be to retire to a sleepy little town if he didn't have Su—

Ellie!

If he didn't have *Ellie* here to enjoy it with him, *that's* what he meant, what he wanted to think.

"Ellie," he seethed. Why was he constantly getting their names confused? "Ellie, Ellie, Ellie!"

And he stamped his foot like a petulant child, just as an elderly couple walked past, arm in arm. Pigeon wings ruffled and flapped as the birds scuttled for safety.

The woman turned to Cal and smiled. "You better try calling them by different names," she suggested. "I don't think they like that one."

* * * *

A reddish dusk painted the sky as Cal slowed his rental to a stop alongside Sue's car. Illuminated windows alerted him to activity within the house. Inside, Typhoid lounged along the top of a recliner and stared at him through the front window, as if asking him where the hell he had been all day.

"Sorry, cat," Cal muttered, testing the front door knob to see if he needed his key. He didn't. "No treats for you tonight." His stomach growled, and he hoped something reasonably edible had materialized in the scant pantry since this morning. He was burned out on fast food, and nothing at Jake's had appealed to his appetite. He didn't really feel like driving all the way to the beach to eat, either.

He opened the door to the seductive aroma of marinara sauce, scented with garlic and sun-dried tomatoes. Lights were dimmed. Soft jazz wafted throughout the house from a small boom box on the kitchen counter. Moving shadows and clattering cookware alerted Cal to Sue's presence in the kitchen.

Cal inhaled deeply and smiled. For a second he thought he had walked into the wrong house. This was a welcome suited to a husband coming home after a long day of filing insurance claims or selling cars, not for a guy like him.

Sue poked her head around a corner and smiled wanly at him. A dark apron covered her T-shirt and shorts. "Where were you all day?" she asked pleasantly.

The question surprised Cal, for Sue had never before been interested in his whereabouts. He shrugged and followed her into the kitchen. "Everywhere and nowhere," he said, ducking into the refrigerator for a soda.

Sue stood over the stove, stirring a pot of bubbling noodles. "Hey, don't bother with that. I have an open bottle right here."

She lifted a wooden spoon out of the pot and pointed toward the counter. An opened bottle of Pinot Grigio sat next to a filled wineglass, its rim branded with the rose-colored imprint of Sue's lower lip. Looking at the bottle, Cal guessed that Sue was at least on her second drink.

"Okay, thanks." This was certainly a change from earlier today. Maybe he really was in the wrong house, or maybe when he stepped across the threshold he had entered an alternate universe. Whatever, at least there was alcohol here.

He shrugged again, replaced the can, and retrieved his own glass. "I was just taking in some of the town. I didn't get the chance last time I was here, not that I had wanted to before. But I enjoyed myself today."

"Wouldn't take the whole day to do that, small as Dareville is."

Jeckyll, meet Hyde. Was she annoyed with him again? What did he do now? "Well, some things were worth looking at more than once," he said. "Smells good."

Sue smiled her appreciation for the compliment. "Just angel hair with jar sauce, though I cheated by chopping some veggies into the mix. Nothing to get too terribly excited about."

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes the simplest things are the ones we should look forward to the most." Cal leaned against the refrigerator and looked past Sue into the dining room. Two places were set opposite each other atop a white linen cloth on Ellie's dining table. Nothing fancy—there were no candles or expensive china plates—but it appeared to Cal that Sue had gone to some trouble to create an intimate atmosphere.

Nothing fancy, but it was clear Sue was expecting company. That's probably why she was irritated, she had a date and he was horning in where he didn't belong. But why offer him a drink, then? Weird.

Cal sighed. He really didn't want to make himself scarce tonight, he had hoped to just flop back on the couch and flip through TV channels, assuming Sue didn't have a show she just had to watch tonight. Being sent to his room like a punished child held even less appeal. Maybe he could go back to the park and watch fireflies.

Sue nodded to him and reached for her glass. Cal watched her benign gaze rake over his entire body. "You like the wine?"

Cal swirled the contents of his glass before taking a sip. "I like it fine. In fact, I think I helped Brady pick this one out."

Sue glanced back at the bottle's label, appearing to study it. "Yeah, Ellie's told me about how big Brady is on wine, studying vintages and going to tastings and all that. You're into that, too?"

"Yeah, a road manager from one of Brady's old tours got us into it. He thought it would be nice for two young pricks like ourselves to be schooled in something refined, and unrelated to groupies."

Sue laughed, a bit too loudly, Cal noticed. "Surely there must be some correlation between groupies and alcohol."

"Trust me, a guy like Brady Garriston in his prime didn't need to know a Shiraz from a Riesling to impress a groupie. He did rather well with a bottle of Mad Dog and some Ritz crackers." Cal chuckled

at such resurrected memories of his and Brady's misspent youth.

"Seems to me Brady's still in his prime, the way Ellie talks."

"Yeah." Cal sighed. Ellie would certainly know that, she had a hand in it. "I'd like to think the same of myself."

Sue said nothing, but let her gaze wander all over him again. Her crooked smile was answer enough for him.

"Well, all's I know is that if it tastes good, I like it." Sue's words were slurred, and as she drained her glass Cal realized that drink was likely not her second one, either.

"Ick," she said, and wrinkled her nose.

Cal arched an eyebrow, amused with this sudden change in her expression. "I take it the bouquet is not to your liking?"

"The *boo-kay* is dandy. *You*, on the other hand, stink. Phew!"

"Huh?" Cal lifted the arm holding the glass and caught the stench of dried sweat and jogging trail under his arm. No green vapors had alerted him, so he had probably gotten used to the smell. "Ugh, you're right," he said, and drained his own glass. "I should hop in the shower."

"Don't worry, I won't take too long," he added. "I'll be out of your hair before your date gets here."

He turned toward the hall just as Sue asked, "What date?"

Cal turned slowly back to her. Sue's expression was difficult to read this time.

"You're cooking dinner, you have the table set, which neither of us have used—since I got here, anyway," he said. "Aren't you expecting someone?"

"I am." Sue returned her gaze to the stove. "After you left me and Sharyn at the park today, I realized I was a bit too hard on you. You really did help me out there, and I figured to make up for my lousy attitude I'd cook you dinner."

"Yeah?" Cal watched Sue fill her glass again and wondered if he should say something. Sue was practically wobbling in place. One false step might have her slipping and falling face first into the saucepot.

"Sharyn's a real bitch, but she's a connected bitch, and she was very cooperative after you left. In fact, she was so impressed with your glowing recommendation of me that she hinted to throwing her support in my direction when the Dareville Women's Club meets to discuss their summer events calendar."

"Meaning?" Cal prodded.

"Meaning I could be taking pictures of all future DWC events, and maybe land other accounts as well, like the school and some of the churches around here." Sue raised her glass in a toast. "When I first hung up my shingle here, I had a hell of a time getting business. There are so many other established photographers at the beach, and I was kind of a real goof-off in high school, except for photography class, of course. Few people took me seriously at first."

She sniffled, her eyes downcast. Cal felt the urge to reach out with a sympathetic touch to the shoulder, but held back. He couldn't gauge how Sue would react.

"I tried a long time to do everything myself, but I've only recently realized I do need help. I'm thankful, too, for friends like Ellie and Lauren who believed in me..." Her voice softened. "And you."

"Me?" He smiled when Sue nodded. "So we can be friends now?"

"I'd like to be your friend," Sue said. "I'm sorry for being such a bitch these last few weeks. Between my job and the hassle in buying a new house I haven't been my usual perky self."

"I haven't helped matters, either, with my attitude. I should apologize as well." Cal nodded. Was the wine talking for both of them? Did it really matter? Being friends with Sue Carmichael didn't seem like such a bad deal. Cal liked seeing this much softer side to her, so much that he could forgive her for neglecting to remove her equipment from his room.

"I'd like that, too, for us to be friends," he said. "And I meant what I told your bride lady. I've seen the pictures you took of the concert. You do great work, don't let anybody tell you otherwise. I didn't like the way that woman was talking to you, and I couldn't just let you go through that again." He set down his glass. "Now, I'd give you a friendly hug, but I smell like a pigsty, so I'll just hop in the shower real quick. Will the pasta keep?"

Sue turned down the heat on both burners. "Sure. Don't be long now."

"I won't." And as Cal ambled down the hall to his room he wondered how long Sue would keep for all the wine she drank.

Fuck.

Cal stood under the steady stream of hot water and lathered his chest, replaying his earlier conversation with Sue. *I couldn't just let you go through that again*, he had said. He was referring to G-G-George from Knick's, and had forgotten for the moment that Sue had yet to make the connection. Would she now? Would she be angry, thinking that in some way he had not been truthful to her?

He couldn't see why she would be upset, though. The incident with the drunk was so long ago, and he saw nothing sinister in neglecting to tell her. Cal figured, actually hoped, Sue's memory of it was sketchy and more focused upon her time with Brady.

Plus, she had been drinking quite a bit before he came home, so he doubted anything he had said to her before he hit the shower made sense.

He tilted his torso back and let the water cascade down his chest and rinse away the suds. No, he wouldn't say anything more about it. They would have dinner, and he would enjoy himself, and hopefully the rest of the evening would be pleasant and free of tension. His mouth watered and his stomach growled just thinking about tucking into a big bowl of pasta. The chips and soda from earlier had barely sustained him.

Light taps rained down the other side of the bathroom door. Cal heard nothing at first for the loud shushing of water. He had just soaped his face and neck, and his eyes were pinched shut, therefore he didn't see the door open either.

"Anybody home?" Sue called.

"Huh?" Cal opened his eyes to the image of the fleshy specter floating across the frosted glass of the shower door. The notion to cover himself passed fleetingly through his consciousness; it seemed silly to do so now, since what he had was hardly a secret to Sue anymore.

Still, that Sue would brazenly breach his privacy was confusing, yet curious. His blood pulsing, he slid the door open just a crack to find Sue, naked, standing on the bathroom rug.

At least, she was trying to stand. She looked ready to topple. Had she finished the bottle?

What the ... ?

"Room enough for two in there?" A flighty giggle bounced off the tiled room as Sue fondled a breast, eyeing him the way Typhoid did his food bowl.

Whoa! "I thought you were cooking dinner," Cal said. God, how stupid did that sound? Was this a dream? As he recalled, the last time they met in a bathroom, things didn't end well.

This moment, though, held some promise. If only Sue wasn't so obviously blottoed, he wouldn't have hesitated, but just pulled her into the stall.

He hoped, though, that she had at least enough sense to turn off the stove before barging in here like a modern-day Godiva.

His hand, still palming the soap, unconsciously slid down his abdomen to rake through the patch of damp pubic hair covering the base of his now growing erection. Sue's gaze followed, and she licked her lips.

"I asked you a question," she said.

"That's right, you did." He was too distracted by her, and amazed he had been able to get out that sentence. He gazed at her. She was a perfect hourglass with perky, rose-tipped breasts, her pussy

covered in feather-soft hair. Her skin was taut and flawless, her curves in all the right places.

"You're drunk," he observed. It was not an answer, nor was it a question.

"I'm fine," Sue insisted, and grasped the metal edge of the shower door. Her breasts swayed with the movement; tiny water needles shot from the shower onto her skin. Steam misted the vanity mirror behind her. "I remember you now, you know."

"You do?" Cal's smile looked pinched. Where was this going? "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were suffering from short-term memory loss." He tried to make it sound like a joke. "But, yes, I am the guy who's been leaving underwear all over the house. I'll try not to do it again."

"That's not what I meant!" Sue squealed and bent slightly forward. Her breasts appeared to drop low. All Cal could think about in that moment was how his cock would feel being suffocated by those two perfect mounds.

"New York City, earlier this year. I was sitting in a bar being bothered by some asshole when you came along and got rid of him for me?" she sang. "Sound familiar?"

And Brady got the credit. Cal scratched his head. "There's a lot of bars in New York," he hedged. How did she figure it out? Certainly not from his earlier slip. Maybe Ellie had called and tipped her off. "Lots of gorgeous blondes being harangued by drunks, too. I can't keep track of every damsel in distress I rescue."

"Come on," Sue goaded. "I saw you at Brady's table that night, even though I didn't recognize him at the time. You, on the other hand, have a rather unique look about you. Who could forget a face like that?"

"Uh, thanks?"

"And you know it was me there, too. Don't tell me you don't remember me from back then." Her face softened. "You really think I'm gorgeous?"

"Yes." What else could he say? It was the truth. His erect cock didn't lie, either. It was a divining rod, leaning away from his body to seek out the heaven between Sue's luscious thighs.

"My hero," she gushed. "You deserve a special thank you for that night, too. Would you like that?"

God, yes. Did people in Hell want ice water?

He had to wonder, though, if Sue's idea of a thank you matched what he had conjured in his head, despite her current state. It would have been a cruel joke to play on a friend if she had only come in here to tease him.

He said nothing, however. Sue frowned.

"Why won't you answer me?" she asked.

"I'm afraid to. I'm not sure of what will happen if I say yes." *That* was a lie. Cal knew damn well what would happen if he opened the door wider and welcomed her to press against his dampened flesh. He wouldn't, however, take advantage of somebody who was drunk.

"I know what will happen," Sue teased. Cal didn't take the bait.

"I'm not drunk," Sue insisted in a harsher voice, as if reading his mind. Her face twisted with annoyance, her words were slurred. "I just thought you needed some help in there. That's what friends do, they help each other."

"Trust me, I'd never turn down such a friendly offer to help," Cal had to agree, "but I'd rather wait until

I knew these words were really coming from you, and not from a bottle."

But as his own words spilled forth, Cal had to wonder if his mild protest was merely in vain. He watched as Sue rolled her nipple between her thumb and forefinger, bringing it life. He wanted to laugh at the pouting expression on her face. He couldn't do it, though. She wasn't being funny; she was too sexy for that.

When she lifted that heavy breast to her face and scraped her aureole with the underside of her tongue, Cal thought he would go mad. He certainly wouldn't have minded helping her do *that*.

He cupped his swollen scrotum, caressing the growing ache, and worked his hand slowly up and down his shaft as Sue watched. A knowing smile played about her lips and their eyes locked.

"I know what I want, and I want you," she whispered, letting her breast fall. "I want to be doing that, and sucking on that splendid cock." She pointed to his crotch.

Splendid?

Cal groaned audibly. Oh, what those words were doing to him, causing him to shiver, even in hot water.

He looked down at himself and released his grip. He hadn't even realized he was touching himself that way. "You don't really know that," he said. "I'd rather wait—"

"I've waited two damn weeks!" Sue nearly shouted. "No, scratch that. I've been waiting *years* to wrap my lips around a dick like that. You gonna let me or not?"

And Sue pressed her arms over those luscious breasts, impatient, awaiting an answer. Cal could only stand underneath the spray like an idiot as Sue cocked an eyebrow at him.

"You sure you want this?" he warned. Oh, but how he wanted her! How he wanted those lips working his cock like it was a Popsicle. Drunk or not, right now she was impossible to resist. "Once I open this door all the way..."

"Open sesame." Sue folded her arms and bobbed her head like Jeannie.

"You're not going to yell at me and threaten to call the cops afterward like you did last time, are you?"

"The only yelling I want to do is when I come." Sue's voice was suddenly husky, her gaze heavy-lidded. "Make me come, Cal."

He shivered. The way she said his name—breathless, quiet, yet deep—did more to him than any woman's touch could. But he wanted her touch, too.

Cal swallowed, and hoped neither one of them would regret this later. He slid the door open farther and helped Sue into the stall, then took her in his arms and positioned her directly under the showerhead. Once they made contact it was as if clarity, and lust, gained control of their senses.

He lowered his head to hers and his mouth claimed hers, then pried her lips apart to allow his tongue to gently explore the shallow cavern of her mouth. She was relaxed in his embrace, and her cheeks hollowed as she inhaled his kiss, pulling his tongue deeper inside her.

He groaned into her mouth as her lips pursed. He could only imagine the tightness of her hold on his cock. He had to get her down there before he exploded.

Still clutching the slick, green sliver of soap, he first lathered her tapered back and pert bottom while her hands reached upward to clutch at his shoulder blades before sliding south. He felt her nails dig into his backside and broke free of their kiss.

Sue arched her neck back as Cal planted light kisses down her throat. Her hands clamped to his buttocks, she pressed him close and ground into his torso. His erection rolled across her abdomen.

"Mm." Her delight vibrated in her throat and numbed Cal's kiss. "That's nice." She maneuvered herself so that the tip of his cock was pressed against the puckered ridge of her bellybutton.

"Oh, dear," Sue said with mock concern and wriggled in Cal's arms. "I don't think it'll fit in there."

"There are other places we could try." Cal nibbled her earlobe.

"I know one place. Hold that thought." And Sue raised her palms to press against his chest, planting a kiss on his Adam's apple before sliding her opened mouth downward as she sank to a kneeling position. When the tip of his cock tapped at her chin she smiled and pulled away from him slightly, then freed one hand to cuff the base of his shaft.

Cal looked down into those gray eyes, smoky yet serious under a thatch of blonde hair matted down by the spray. It appeared Sue wanted to ascertain his reaction to her every move, and Cal hoped he didn't disappoint her as she pulled him closer and, her gaze still locked to his, took him into her mouth.

"Oh, God. Yes." He closed his eyes, braced his arms against both sides of the stall, and widened his stance slightly. This allowed for Sue a more comfortable kneeling position, and Cal watched her edge her bent knees against his legs. She licked him lengthwise from the ridge of his reddened circumcised tip to his scrotum, tracing with her tongue one thick, raised vein before swallowing him whole again. He felt her teeth gently rake his skin and she bobbed her head, easing him gently in and out, in and out, applying enough pressure to send him teetering on the brink of orgasm without falling completely off the edge. The sensation was sheer torture, and pleasure.

He opened his eyes again to see that Sue's gaze was frozen, as if she hadn't blinked. Cal's heart raced, wearing out his skin from inside his body. Her eyes were soft, gray embers, evident of the fire burning deep inside her. She pierced his soul with that look, and Cal felt the shockwave ripple through his entire body. No woman had ever before evoked such a feeling—not his first lover, and certainly not Trish.

Not even Ellie, he realized.

"Do you have any idea what you are doing to me?" he growled.

Normally he might have found the sight of a woman smiling with a mouthful of cock amusing, but on Sue it aroused him all the more. His balls tightened and ached in Sue's gentle touch, threatening to explode. He sucked in the hot, misty air trapped with them in the stall, trying his damndest to prevent release. Much as he would have loved the feeling, he didn't want to come in her mouth.

Sue, it appeared, could sense his reluctance in doing so and frowned. Cal's unspoken decision only spurred her to quicken her pace, so that Cal had to still her with a touch to her shoulder.

Sue leaned back and let his cock slide carefully away from her. It wobbled back to a precarious upright position as Sue idly stroked a finger up the inside of one of his thighs.

"What's wrong?" she asked, disappointed.

"I know what you want, and believe you me, I wouldn't normally refuse," he said. "I don't want to come that way, not this time."

Cal eased her back to a standing position and crushed her to him to keep her from wobbling off balance. His kiss was rough, invasive, desperate. To his fleeting relief Sue was not resistant. She pressed a hand to the back of his head to prolong their connection; Cal tasted himself in her kiss. The force was so great Cal actually had trouble breaking free.

He turned her around so that she was in the spray's direct path. A thousand water needles stabbed her breasts and belly as he joined his hands together around her waist. He ground his hips into her backside until his cock was wedged well into her buttocks.

"When I come, it's going to be inside that sweet, tight pussy of yours." One hand lowered to tap at Sue's clit. Cal reveled in her pleased reaction. "I want to be buried so deep inside of you that you can feel me when you breathe."

Sue leaned her head back in the crook of his neck and turned lazily toward him, her faint smile widening, her lips dangerously close to his. Cal pressed his finger harder against her clit, tugging it in an elliptical motion until Sue's breath slowed to short, labored gasps.

"But first," he said, "you're going to come for me."

"Yes." Sue's voice quivered.

He shifted their bodies to catch some of the downward spray himself. "How do you want me to make you come? Tell me, Sue. Should I keep doing this?" He sped up the ministrations to her hardening pink bud. "Do you want me to lick your pussy instead?"

Sue shook her head vigorously; her matted hair itched against chest. "Just keep doing this," she begged.

Cal's hand ached, but he compiled. "You sure? You sure you don't want me to go down on you? Run my tongue up and down your pussy? I think I'd like doing that." She had tasted so good last time, and he hungered for her now. The pasta was long forgotten; he wanted to eat her now for dinner. "I think you'd like that, too."

"No," she slurred quietly, and looked down at the tiled floor, her head wavering from side to side as if searching for something. Cal followed her gaze and locked on the object of her search. The soap, now shrunk to the size of a credit card, rested at the lip of the drain. He watched Sue's arm dangle at her side and her fingers flex outward, as if willing the soap to fly up into her hand.

And Cal understood. Even with her inhibitions presently cast away, she still had her insecurities. She was concerned about body odor, embarrassed.

Strange, though, that she had not resisted when he went down on her the first time. Of course, he was a dream to her then. A sweet, drunken dream.

He nuzzled her neck and fingered her clit some more. He would have to make sure Sue knew that he preferred the taste of a real woman to soap. Her scent was just fine, more than fine, and it drove him wild.

For now, however...

Sue stiffened, then quickly turned to jelly as her body quaked with orgasm, and her breath hitched with loud, pleased sobs. Cal held her tightly around the waist with his free arm as she cried out, and kept her upright as she threatened to collapse.

He released her clit and inserted one finger into her moistened opening, then two. "You're wet for me? I'm not talking about the shower either."

Sue's eyes were shut, her lips upturned in a tired smile. Her chest heaved as she calmed down. "Yes."

"Are you ready for me?" He traced the shell of her outer ear with his tongue.

Sue moaned and nodded. "Please, Cal. Please fuck me."

"No," Cal whispered, and chuckled at the look of bewilderment twisting Sue's lips. "This isn't just

going to be a fuck."

This, he decided, was going to be much more. He had fucked plenty of women, and none of them twisted his emotions and set his heart to pounding the way Sue did. He had fucked plenty of women without a second thought of them afterward. Sue occupied his thoughts constantly now, pushing Ellie to the backburner.

And before Sue could say anything, he slid open the shower door and stepped one foot onto the shag area rug. Leaning forward as far as possible, he grasped a vanity drawer handle and fished through a thousand travel size shampoo and lotion bottles before finding the box of condoms he had purchased at the Dareville drugstore. It was still sealed, and Cal had to wrestle with the box one-handed for several seconds until he successfully retrieved a packet.

Ripping open the tiny envelope and sheathing himself took less time, as did guiding Sue around in the stall so that she faced away from the shower head. He had her press her palms against the opposite wall and extend her arms.

Cal positioned her hips so that her buttocks were thrust upward. Taking his cock in hand, he nudged it between her cheeks and scraped his tip against her, blindly searching for entrance.

"No," he sighed. "This isn't going to be just a fuck."

Sue craned her neck to look at him, her features beaded with water droplets, her smile bemused. "No?" she challenged. "Then what is it?"

"This," Cal arched his back and teased the edges of her cunt with the tip of his cock, "is going to be much better."

With that, he slammed into her warmth, relishing how her smile curled into a surprise gasp. Her guttural, ecstatic cry rang in his ears and bounced off every wall in the room. He smiled with every moan elicited by his every thrust, and he picked up the pace.

He leaned back slightly, the better to watch his cock disappear between her swollen labia, sliding in and out, in and out. Beautiful. "Babe, you should see the view from here."

Sue's head dropped between her arms; her breasts wobbled in a steady rhythm as his scrotum slapped against her ass. "Oh, right there," Sue wheezed, and sucked in the shower's steam through pursed lips. "Harder."

Cal obliged, and nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt Sue's channel tighten around him. He was so snug he could barely move, and compensated for the sudden slowing in his pace by swiveling his hips to adjust the angle of entry, hoping to hit the right spot to make Sue feel good.

His diligence was rewarded when Sue shivered with another orgasm, and he felt his own peak soon in coming.

"Oh, God, Sue," he gasped, and cried out his pleasure with one last thrust. He pitched forward and pressed himself against Sue's back, molding her to him, making his breath hers as his orgasm washed away with the suds.

He didn't move. He couldn't move. He was ready to slide down into the drain himself. This was better than last time, when he thought he was with Ellie.

Sue was much better than Ellie.

"Now," he panted, "wasn't that better than just a fuck?"

Sue licked her lips, giggling. "Oh, yeah."

Eleven

Waterlogged and spent, they stumbled out of the shower, kissing and grasping each other. Sue's hands slid down Cal's back as she tried to maintain her hold, but he was too wet, and her motor skills had yet to overcome the effects of the wine to compensate for it. Her mind, however, was sharp, and she was aware of everything that had happened.

Good lord, she thought, *what did I just do?* And quickly her reciprocation of Cal's caresses stilled, and she finally clutched his shoulders, happy to maintain the grip. Cal, however, appeared not to have noticed as his lips traced a line along her jaw.

"God, you're so fucking amazing," he grunted. "Come on."

Sue felt herself being pushed gently forward, out the door. "W-where?"

"To bed. I want to make love to you again."

Again?

Twice within the hour?

Was that *possible* with the same man?

She had never been with a man who could do that. Then again, she hadn't been with very many men to begin with, so maybe her sampling was not representative of the norm.

Sue looked down between them. Obviously, Cal was capable. His growing cock was evident of his desire. She watched with awe as it hardened and seemed to rise, searching unaided for her pussy.

And at once the wet warmth of the shower was replaced by the cool, dry air evaporating the water streaking down her bare flesh; it prickled her skin. She shivered. The sensation of Cal's thick, warm shaft slamming in and out of her had lingered, and her pussy ached from the void. She felt suddenly lost without him inside her.

Yet, a feeling of regret and dread nagged her. The room turned dark despite the naked, sterile glow of the bathroom lighting.

Cal, meanwhile, kept guiding her backward steps. They had breached the threshold and were stumbling slowly toward Cal's unmade bed.

He palmed one breast and let his hand slide under the swell before raking his fingers across her belly. "You are a goddess. I want you so bad it hurts." Cal lifted the breast and sucked in the nipple, nibbling lightly until it hardened in his mouth.

Sue tried to squirm away but found it a futile effort. Her body and mind were now opposite camps, though both were rather flattered at being called a goddess. Another first for her. "Wait," she protested meekly. "We're all wet."

Cal released her breast and a husky laugh escaped his throat. "Oh, yeah." He dipped her onto the mattress and smiled down at her as her hair fell askew on the rumpled sheets, and her breasts spilled slightly down either side of her body. Sue peered down the length of her body and noticed the slight bulge rounding her abdomen. Had Cal noticed it? Maybe he did when she danced naked like an idiot outside the shower stall, but maybe he was too drunk with lust now to make much of it.

All the same, she sucked in her gut and willed her abdominal muscles to tighten. The bulge was still there, but not as prominent. If only she could do the same with her thighs, which seemed to double in width as Cal pressed her deeper into the mattress.

Cal, however, didn't seem to notice her holding her breath as he leaned forward and reclaimed her left

nipple, sucking and tugging harder.

The air escaped and Sue groaned from the delight of his touch. *Oh, God. Yes.*

No!

What have I done? She had seduced a man, gone down on him in the shower and let him fuck her. She had never done anything like that before. What had possessed her to do such a thing?

She had a glass of wine, she remembered. Okay, she had two before Cal came home. She had wanted to erase Sharyn from her mind, to say nothing of the bride-to-be's drooling appraisal of Cal as his tight ass jogged farther and farther away. All throughout the remainder of their photo session Sharyn carried on like a wannabe groupie.

"A runner with his own personal pole vault, is what he looks like," Sharyn had murmured, licking her lips. "He could go the distance with me, that's for damn sure."

And Marty can't? Sue wanted to ask. *The man you're going to marry?* Perhaps the groom didn't get to the track very often, Sue surmised, and decided against bragging about having gone the distance with Cal herself. Who knew how Sharyn might react to that, aside from at the very least telling everybody in town.

So Sue ended the photo session as quickly as possible before Sharyn could pry into Sue's relationship with Cal. She headed straight home, refilled Typhoid's water bowl, and joined the cat for a few drinks. She'd decided to develop the pictures tomorrow when she was in a better frame of mind.

As she relaxed in the dining room and sorted through the mail, her gaze fell upon Cal's vinyl Mets jacket draped over the opposite chair. The collar was ragged and the stitching on the Mets logo was coming apart, and it reeked of stale pot. Yet Sue could only picture how comfortable Cal must have felt wearing it, else why would he hang onto something clearly about to fall apart?

Those thoughts shifted slightly, to how comfortable she might feel in his arms, neither of them wearing the jacket, or anything else.

And as she lifted her glass to her lips a memory struck her. She had seen that jacket before, in a bar in Manhattan, on a man fitting Cal's description.

Only it *had been* Cal with Brady Garriston that night she was being harassed by the drunk. Being Brady's best friend, it only made sense the two would hang out together. Cal was wearing the jacket when he escorted the drunk away from her table, saving her from embarrassment and probable groping.

My hero, Sue had thought wistfully, searching the cabinets for a box of pasta. And later, when Cal mentioned not wanting her to be harassed again, it only confirmed her beliefs. He remembered that night, too, and it triggered a desire she had never felt for any other man. Cal had wanted to help her then, and wanted to help her now. She needed his help, and much more.

Now, her hero was kneeling on the floor, wet and naked and worshipping her as her legs dangled over the side of the bed. He wedged himself between her knees and burrowed the tip of his tongue deep into her navel, threatening to touch her spine. Sue lifted her head and watched; he seemed to be directing his full attention to that one spot on her body.

He flicked his tongue upward with a soft popping sound and kissed a trail further south. Sue felt each kiss send a tingling sensation to her pussy, making it ache for him, but she stilled his head when his lips reached her mound.

He looked up, frowning. "What?"

Sue shook her head. She knew what was coming next. She knew *she* wanted to be coming next, but she

just couldn't let him...

Cal rested his cheek on one thigh—one bloated thigh, Sue winced—and gently eased a finger up and down her slit. She dampened inside instantly at the touch. “You don't like oral sex? You seem to like giving it.” He grinned.

“No, it's not that.” Sue's head bounced back on the mattress. She was relieved the guest bedroom, unlike the master, was not equipped with an overhead mirror. She didn't really care to see her body sagging into the mattress, a victim of gravity.

“It's just...” she faltered. How to explain this without making Cal, or herself, want to puke? “It's just that the last guy who...” Her voice trailed into silence when Cal gently shushed her.

“S'okay, you don't have to explain,” he said, then added. “That guy was an idiot. Or gay.”

“Yeah,” she readily agreed, but she still felt tears prickling the corners of her eyes. She blinked to release them. “Funny how long ago that was, but when it's about to happen again it feels like just yesterday...”

“Bad memories have a way of doing that, like a bad meal,” Cal agreed, then smiled down at her pussy and parted her labia with his forefingers. “This ... most definitely would not be one, if you'd let me eat.”

He pressed his lips against her, and Sue felt the blood rush to her labia, engorging them. Cal inserted a finger and swirled it around for a few seconds, driving her to the brink of orgasm. But before she could fall entirely he withdrew and sucked his finger clean.

“Mmm.” He smiled. “Put this on the pasta, and I'll have seconds.”

Sue's mouth gaped open. “Gross!” she cried with a laugh, then gasped. She *had* turned off the stove before ripping off her clothes, right? Yes, she remembered. The angel hair was still in the pot, and probably softened to mush by now. Hardly a fitting dinner.

Her body shook with laughter thinking about pasta smothered with marinara and cum, then inhaled sharply when the flat of Cal's tongue covered her cunt and licked upward, scraping up her clit and driving her mad.

“I love the scent of you,” he murmured, and buried his nose into the triangle of curls guarding her mound. His tongue flicked against her clit and her pussy twitched. “Nothing tastes better than pussy, and yours is especially delicious. Don't ever let any man tell you different.”

“Huh.” His remark was a comfort and a bother. Were there going to be other men after this? Was Cal thinking this was some temporary fling? She didn't do flings.

Stop it, she admonished herself. Why couldn't she just relax and enjoy herself? She had an incredibly talented and well-hung man buried in her crotch ... not something that had happened often in her thirty-plus years. *Just go with the flow, girl.*

Slowly Sue curled her neck forward and saw Cal staring back up at her, his jaw concealed by her spread legs and raised mound. With his nose planted on her thatch of pubic hair it looked as if he was sporting a mustache that had gone out of control, and she bit back a laugh.

Cal was too smart for her, however. “What's so funny?” he wanted to know.

“N-nothing,” Sue sighed, and hoped she wouldn't have to explain herself.

“Let me pleasure you, Sue,” he said. “Let's make that bad memory go away.”

“Okay.” It was time, and right now she ached for him, for any kind of contact he offered. She rested her head back and waited for the fireworks.

But nothing happened. She leaned forward again; Cal hadn't moved.

"Tell me what you want," he said. "Tell me what to do to your body."

"I-I think you know."

Cal's smile nearly touched his ears. "I want to hear you say it."

Uh ... Sue's face fell. She didn't do dirty talk, either. At least, she didn't do it well. She felt silly enough thinking such things.

How soon you forget, her conscience nagged, and Sue groaned. Yes, the shower. She had said those things, but that wasn't really her, she knew. Splendid cock. How Victorian was that? It was the wine that made her say it. And the wine was all gone.

"If you don't tell me what to do, I won't do anything at all," Cal teased.

"Okay, okay." She swallowed back a lump forming in her throat and her voice pitched high with unease. "I-I want you to..." She shook her head. Three more words she had to say. Why was it so hard?

Cal's tongue darted past his lips and traced small circles on her flesh, nowhere near where Sue wanted it to be. She had a good mind to yank that tongue out of his mouth and apply it to her clit herself, if it would ease the ache.

"Say it," he wheedled.

"Lick my pussy." The words spilled into many inaudible syllables, and she took a deep breath. "I want you to lick my pussy."

"Well, now," Cal said, "was that so hard?"

Harder than your cock, Sue wanted to say. That would have been a good retort, suitable for continuing the dirty talk, she decided. But Cal had moved within striking distance and was complying with her request. He lapped at her pussy and swirled his tongue around her clit, and whatever words she had planned to say next were twisted in an orgasmic cry as she came.

"Mmm." Cal ducked his head lower and slurped up her juices, then stilled, his lips still pressed against her slick opening. Sue's head bent forward and her eyes locked with his. An inexplicable sense of dread washed over her, and she kept her gaze fixed on him, hoping his smile would alleviate her worry. But she couldn't see his smile for her mons in the way, only the creasing at the corners of his eyes, indicating he was going to try something he hoped she would enjoy.

Her fears were washed away in yet another wave of pleasure when Cal plunged his tongue deep inside her. Sue arched her back and gasped. The sensation shot straight down to her toes, and her legs curled around him, pinning him to her. Nobody had ever done that to her, either. Was that allowed? Why was he not repulsed by doing something so ... intimate? Private? Her last lover had looked like he wanted a clothespin for his nose when he bent his head over her mons, she recalled.

Come on, you put the man's penis in your mouth, her conscience nagged.

True, but at least everything on a man is on the *outside*.

Cal didn't let it end there, either, with his tongue sliding in and out of her, pausing intermittently to swallow. Sue felt another delightful sensation as fingers traced her anal opening and one pushed gently inside her. She squirmed, but it felt good. She had never considered anal sex before, and given the size of Cal's cock she wondered if it would feel comfortable. This, however, wasn't too bad.

His finger slid deeper and was joined by another one. No, that didn't feel so bad, either. That felt pretty damn good, and coupled with Cal scraping her inner walls with his tongue it brought her to a new

personal best of three orgasms in one day—not counting self-inflicted ones.

As she calmed down Cal withdrew completely from her and backed into the bathroom, muttering something about condoms. Sue couldn't hear him, and didn't see him, for the orgasmic haze clouding her senses. She didn't realize he had returned to bed until she felt his hands on her, pushing her gently up the mattress as he straddled her on the bed.

Water from the shower dripped from his brows. His sheathed cock tapped her belly. The smell of the lubricant burned her nostrils. "I need to be inside you right now," he murmured. "How do you want it? How do you want to do it?"

"In my pussy," she begged, and sighed. That word was getting easier to say.

"I know that," he chuckled, "I meant do you want to be on top or ... oh, the hell with it." He maneuvered himself so that his hips were cradled between her thighs and drove himself into her with one hard, upward stroke. He had done it with such ease, she was that wet, and she clamped her hands on his butt to help his pace.

"Oh, this is nice," she stuttered between thrusts, and lifted her head to meet Cal's glazed open-mouthed smile in a searing kiss. The taste of her on him didn't bother her like she thought it might. "I would've asked for this position anyway."

Cal pumped hard into her and lowered his upper body, crushing Sue's breasts. "Next time we'll try something different, you think?"

"Sure." Sue smiled. Shame, though, to have to wait.

* * * *

Sue didn't have to wait very long. Not twenty minutes after coming, Cal was raring to go another round. Since she was still sore from the shower, though, she managed to convince him to wait a while longer while she caught her breath and got something to drink.

"No, I'll get it." Cal eased her back under the sheets and leaped out of bed. "Rest up. You'll need it."

Sue watched his retreat, her gaze fixed on his nicely sculpted backside. Oh, if Sharyn could see him now, all tightened muscles and smooth skin, a body that belonged to a much younger man. Poor Marty wouldn't stand a chance.

She leaned over the mattress and pulled the remaining length of thick comforter drooping over the side up to her chin. If Sharyn could see *her* now, she'd have a fit. Her, Simple Sue, rolling around with a hunky musician, shennanigans in the shower aplenty. Such an image hardly befit the once chubby, shy girl from Dareville High who stayed home on Saturday nights taking pictures of her stuffed animals for practice for her future as a photographer, but here she was.

"Me," escaped the soft word from her lips. Was it really her in this bed? Was it really Sue Carmichael that Cal had made love to this time? He had called out her name, yes, and offered detailed attention to her body, but was he really seeing her? Was there a chance that Ellie's face, and her firmer breasts and flat belly, were superimposed over Sue's more ample offerings in his mind?

Possible, she thought, and were it the truth Sue could hardly blame him. Ellie was gorgeous, always was. In high school she and her cousin Claire had been the "it" girls, persued by jocks and brains alike, yet neither let her looks swell her ego. Their kindness toward everybody and light-hearted nature had only served to make them more beautiful. Sue could not blame Cal for being in love with her, if he still was.

Her face suddenly fell. He had to be, she decided. What was she but a temporary distraction? He was

on vacation, and he was going back to New York eventually. One good fuck wouldn't prompt him to move; he could get that anywhere.

She, on the other hand...

She sighed and slid deeper into bed. Best not to broach the subject, she decided. As rarely as she experienced afterglow, she saw no reason to darken it with her insecurities. She would just live in the now and enjoy the hell out of it.

Cal returned presently with a glass tumbler of water and a small china bowl. He handed Sue her drink and scrambled under the covers. "Noodles?" he offered, holding out the bowl.

Sue peered down at the clump of pasta. Overboiling had washed away the starch and turned the noodles nearly white. "Ick, no," she said, and grimaced when Cal lifted a strand and sucked it into his mouth. He probably didn't have to chew, they looked so soggy.

Cal nodded, noncommittal. "Far from being *al dente*, but otherwise it's not bad. He pinched another strand between his fingers and, eyeing Sue, draped the wet noodle over Sue's breast. Sue twitched, uncomfortable with the sticky sensation on her skin.

But when Cal leaned forward and nibbled away the thin string it felt good. She sighed as Cal's teeth nipped at her as he lapped up the pasta. "Um," he moaned. "We should have Italian more often."

Sue giggled and playfully pushed him away. "Oh, like this is the first time you've eaten food off a person," she teased, then turned serious. "Is it?"

"Actually, no."

"Ah." Sue's heart sank. Of course, she should have expected such an answer. Cal Briscoe was a man of the world; being Brady's friend, he had to have been. Of course his sexual expertise far outweighed hers. Eating food off of somebody was probably akin to first base for a guy like him.

Still, her curious nature got the better of her, and she asked, "So, what? Tell me about it."

Cal scooped up a clump of angel hair and gobbled it in one swallow. "Tell you about what?" he mumbled between bites.

Sue turned on one side and propped her head on an elbow. "When was the first time you ate food off of somebody's body? And I'm not talking about whipped cream, even *I've* done that."

"Ooh," Cal shot her a glance. "Wild woman."

Sue slapped him again, harder. Cal raised the bowl in surrender. "Okay, okay. About five years back, Brady and some friends and I went to a bachelor party at a naked sushi bar..."

"Naked sushi bar? You mean the waitresses were naked?"

"No, the tables." Sue frowned, and Cal elaborated. "A nude woman lies on this low table, covered in sushi. We all sat down and ate. We used chopsticks to pick up the food, end of story. Nobody had sex with her afterward, at least I didn't, anyway. My memory of that night is spotty as it is."

Sue tried to imagine lying naked on a cold table with slabs of raw tuna covering her nipples, and Cal leaning over to nibble. Hell, a party of men surrounding her sashimi-covered body, ogling her and nipping her with chopsticks, seemed rather erotic. Being soused in soy sauce, however...

She leaned back and allowed Cal to coil a few more strands over her breast, and giggled as each thin string slid over her skin as he sucked them into his mouth. "Interesting. Sorry to say you won't find any restaurants like that around here. Ow!" She rubbed the patch of skin Cal nipped a bit too hard in his zeal to finish his snack.

"Sorry," he mumbled into her skin.

"Is this the craziest thing you ever did?" she asked. She expected him to say no. Getting overcooked pasta eaten off her body was certainly the craziest thing *she* had ever done, or had done to her. Cal, she suspected, could probably write a novel for what he had experienced.

As he pondered the question, a pang of regret burned slowly in her heart. What if the craziest thing was his three-way with Brady and Ellie? She could just see his eyes start to glaze over, talking about wonderful Ellie, the memories triggering again his want for her. She would be Simple Sue again, forgotten and alone in his giant bed. Why did she even ask?

So it was no surprise when Cal looked away, almost shyly, and smiled. "Well," he began, "there was this time we were headed toward Nashville..."

"Nashville?" Ellie had told her nothing of Nashville, and who was *we*?

Cal nodded. "One of Brady's tours, about twenty years ago. We had picked up some groupies in Atlanta and were heading in the bus toward our next gig. We were drunk, stoned, high, everything you could think of, and crawling all over each other in one massive, ball of flesh in this moving bus."

Sue tried to respond in kind as Cal chuckled to his memories, but the image in her mind was more disturbing than amusing. She supposed she had to have been there, and let Cal continue.

"I'm surprised I can remember all of this," he said. "Actually, I don't remember *all* of it, but Brady's seen fit to remind me on occasion. Anyway, we're in this bus, thick marijuana smoke cloud hanging in the air, and we've all got the munchies. Somebody convinces the driver to pull off an exit and steer this bus into the nearest White Castle, and we basically order the store.

"Geez, was the bus driver affected by all this smoke and sex?"

"I think there was a curtain dividing the cab from the bus." Sue rolled her eyes at this answer. "Anyway, this chick I'm fuc—er," Cal faltered, amusing Sue as they looked into each other's eyes, "*having sex* with suddenly leaps off of me and runs to the front of the bus, butt naked, to help the driver pick up the food at the drive-through window. Can you believe that?" He laughed. "And of course *I'm* upset because I wasn't done yet, so I go to the front of the bus and I see ... I see..."

Sue noticed Cal was having difficulty breathing, and that his merriment was contagious. Her smile was wider now, anticipating a hilarious conclusion to this story. She was so entranced she didn't realize Cal was still draping soggy strands of pasta on her breasts.

"This chick, this naked chick, is bent over the bus driver who is sitting upright in his seat and he doesn't know *what* to do, and hanging out the drive-through window is this scared little girl in a White Castle uniform holding up two giant sacks of hamburgers. This chick is reaching out the window for the food, her breasts swinging over the driver's crotch." Cal snickered. "I can see her ... her..."

"Pussy?" Sue supplied. It *was* getting easier to say.

Cal grinned, then lapped up the rest of the pasta and downed it in one swallow. "Yeah. That and her beautiful brown eye, winking back at me. I'm high, hungry, and horny, and in a state like that I could only satisfy one urge at a time, so while she's bent over I lean forward and do my business, so to speak." The bowl now empty, Cal tossed it on the night table next to him and sank back into the sheets.

"You're kidding." Sue was aghast, but she had to admit to herself Cal's tale made for an interesting visual. Imagining herself bent over in that bus, with Cal slamming his cock into her from behind as other people watched, aroused her all the more.

"And while I'm doing that, she decides the bus driver's looking a little uptight." Cal's body quivered

with his laughter. "So she tosses the bag to the floor and unzips his pants to suck him off. Of course, he's not protesting."

"Of course not," Sue murmured. What kind of man was Cal Briscoe that stuff like this happened to him?

"But things didn't really get interesting until this patrol car pulls alongside the bus. The door to the bus had a window, you could see everything, too ... I didn't look back myself, but I can only imagine the view the cop had of my bare ass pounding into this poor girl."

"Oh dear." Sue pressed a hand to her mouth to prevent a laugh from escaping. "You guys got arrested?"

Cal shook his head. "The driver saw the cop, freaked out, and hit the gas. Next thing I knew we're shooting forward. I lose my balance and roll into the orgy in the back. I don't even think we paid that poor cashier for the hamburgers."

"Wow." What else could she say, hearing a story like that?

"So," Cal snuggled up to her. "*Quid pro quo*."

Sue frowned. "Huh?"

"I told you my big secret. Tell me yours."

"Your big secret?"

And Cal turned suddenly serious. "Yeah," he said softly. "I mean, it wasn't a secret to anybody on that bus, and I don't doubt that chick from the White Castle has told the story at a few dinner parties, but, you know..." He looked down at his hands. "I haven't told that to anybody before."

Not even Ellie? Sue resisted the urge to ask. Perhaps Ellie knew already from Brady, but to know that Cal thought to confide in her first was encouraging. She felt her heart lift, then thrum wildly as Cal traced a finger up and down her bare arm.

"I'm waiting," he sang.

"What? You don't need me to tell you the craziest sex thing I've ever done. You were there for it."

"Really? Which part?"

Sue blushed. "All of it." She was relieved when Cal didn't laugh at that, and she added, "I don't take the bus."

"Trust me, it's not all it's cracked up to be. C'mere." Sue leaned into Cal and relished the warmth of his body against hers, yet winced when he dipped his head lower and questioned her frown with one of his own. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she sighed. "It's just that..." She sighed again. How not to sound ungrateful for the most incredible sex she'd ever had? "I guess I feel like an amateur when it comes to sex. Hearing that story, and knowing what El—er, some of my friends have told me about their sex lives, I still feel like a virgin."

Cal buzzed a kiss into her ear. "You feel fine to me."

"I can't have been the best you've had," she insisted.

"You shouldn't sell yourself short, Sue."

It wasn't a *yes*, but it wasn't a *no*, either. "I know," she whined, "but you're so, so..."

Cal raised an eyebrow. "I'm so what?" he wanted to know, and Sue bit her lip. He looked somewhat

annoyed.

"Worldly," she said finally, inwardly relieved when he relaxed. "I haven't been with many men myself, but at least with each one I was their first at something. Like the first with oral sex, whatever. I—" She felt ready to tear up. "How can I be the first of anything with you?"

"Easy," he said, and tugged her so that she lay on top of him. He kissed her nose. "Of all the, ah, encounters I've had with women, I usually have a hit off a joint before I get down to business. I didn't tonight."

"Probably because I didn't give you enough warning." Sue smiled wryly.

"Doesn't matter. Sometimes I need the hit, tonight I didn't." He nuzzled her. "You were potent enough for me."

Sue blushed.

"And, I can also tell you how those other encounters ended: the same damn way, with me putting on my pants and going home, or back to my hotel, or somewhere else. Sometimes right afterward, sometimes after I regain consciousness."

"There's a story for another day, I'm sure."

He then brushed his tongue along her lower lip. "After I make love to you again, you're going to be the first woman I wake up next to."

Sue sank back into the bed and lifted her arms to allow Cal to straddle her. She closed her eyes, sighing with every kiss and caress. Yes, it would be nice to wake up next to a warm body for once, especially with the promise of more lovemaking.

It would be nicer, though, to wake up next to a warm body every morning.

Did she want that body to be Cal's? And would Cal want to wake up next to her because he *wanted* to, and not because Ellie wasn't an option?

Twelve

Cal thought he had kept his end of the bargain, but when he rolled over in bed and patted the other side of the mattress he realized Sue wasn't around to witness it. He woke up alone, again.

He fisted the rumpled sheets and scanned the room with bleary vision, but saw no moving, flesh-colored blur to indicate that Sue was still in the room. The imprint left by her body was somewhat warm, indicating that Sue's disappearance was fairly recent; she hadn't tiptoed away in the middle of the night to her room. Maybe she had to go to the bathroom?

He rolled back around and leaned toward the open bathroom door. "Sue?" he called, and watched. The light was still on from last night, but Cal saw no movement from within, no shapely reflections in the large vanity mirror alerting him to her presence.

Where did she go? Maybe she was self-conscious about using his bathroom, and went to use hers, seeing as how it was already stocked with her girly stuff. Or, maybe she was fixing breakfast. Cal had forgotten neither one of them had much to eat last night.

He sat up in bed and inhaled. He didn't smell anything cooking or brewing. He checked the clock on his nightstand; it was just after seven. During the time he had stayed at the house, Sue rarely left before nine to open her studio, and he didn't know her to jog or do any morning exercises. Then again, *he* was always out on his bike at this time.

"Sue?" No answer. *Probably in her shower*, he thought with a wicked grin, and sidled out of bed. No point in putting on a robe, as he had nothing to hide anymore. Besides, he'd only take it off again when he slipped into her bathroom to return last night's favor...

But Sue wasn't in her room, either. The place was so neat, too, that Cal couldn't tell if she had been there recently, then dressed and left.

Surely she wouldn't have gone to work without at least waking him first? He would have understood if she didn't want sex first; although, considering her enthusiasm the night before, he would have been surprised if she hadn't.

He was halfway up the hall, heading toward the front door to check for her car, when he heard a muffled banging noise coming from the laundry room. It startled him enough to halt his steps, as washing machines rarely clattered and muttered four-letter words afterward. He was curious; what was so important about the laundry that Sue couldn't let it wait until later in the day.

"Sue?" he called, and open the door. He was greeted by a darkened room, lit by a dull, colored bulb, and Sue in her robe with a murderous expression marring her face.

"Close the door!" she shrieked, and Cal obliged quickly. The anger in her voice cut clear to the bone, and Cal was surprised to see the hand gripping the doorknob was now trembling.

"I'm sorry," he said meekly to the door. "I was just wondering where you were—"

"No, Cal, I'm sorry." Sue sounded calmer now, yet annoyed still. "I shouldn't have snapped at you, hang on."

More banging and shuffling of objects followed, and the door opened just a crack. Sue's form filled the cracked opening as she ushered Cal into the dark. "Hurry," she urged.

"What's going on?" The secrecy was intriguing, more so than the fact that Sue had yet to acknowledge Cal's nudity. She was definitely preoccupied with something, and it sure as hell wasn't laundry.

It probably wasn't sex, either, and for that Cal was somewhat disappointed.

Sue quickly shut the door, and it took several seconds for Cal's eyes to adjust to the dim light. Sue had turned the compact laundry area into a darkroom, he realized. Shallow pans, filled with fluid, rested atop the side-loading dryer, while overhead newly developed photos were pinned on the line on which the delicates were normally hung. What they were of Cal couldn't tell, as the photos faced the wall.

Sue's arms were folded across her chest, her hands tucked under her armpits. She resembled a schoolgirl caught cheating in that pose. "Sometime around six, my eyes popped open, I couldn't get back to sleep," she said. "It happens sometimes, so when I can't sleep I usually do some work. I've been in here the past hour working on ... uh, a project."

"You couldn't sleep?" Cal drew her closer. "You should've woke me up. We could've found something to do together."

"I know." Sue relaxed in Cal's embrace. "But I knew also I wouldn't get any work done if I did *that*."

Cal nipped the back of her neck, delighting in Sue's squealing as much as he did in her confession. "Don't you usually develop your photos in your studio?" he asked.

"Most times, but for certain projects I prefer to work at home. Or where I am, actually. Ellie didn't have a problem with me doing it here, and since the laundry room doesn't have windows I just set up shop last night. I figured I'd be done before one of us needed to wash clothes."

"Oh." Cal moved toward one of the pans where a photo was coming into color, but Sue quietly blocked him. "Working on something top secret then?" he asked, grinning.

"You could say that," Sue replied, her voice quivering.

"Can I see?"

"Actually, I'd rather you didn't." Sue mirrored Cal's every move toward the pan. "This is a rather important project. I got paid a lot of money to do this. You know, I probably shouldn't have let you in here—"

Sue's discomfort was intriguing, and amusing. What could she possibly be hiding? Who would be embarrassed to show pictures of some kid's bar mitzvah, or whatever it was for which people hired a photographer around here? "Come on," he cajoled. "It's not bad luck for a guy like me to see a picture of the bride in her wedding gown before the ceremony. *I'm* not the one who's marrying Sheila."

"Sharyn."

"Yeah, her." Cal made a move for the pan, then surprised Sue by whirling around and snatching a photo dangling by a wooden clothespin from the overhead line.

"Hey!" Sue cried. "Don't look at it." She bounced on the balls of her feet as Cal held the photo high above their heads and laughed. This juvenile moment of "keep-away" allowed him a flash of nipple from underneath the thick vee-shaped collar of her robe. The nub stood at attention, ready to be suckled.

Cal licked his lips. It would make a good substitute for breakfast, but he was having too much fun teasing Sue to make a move. He playfully batted away a limp-armed attack and turned, laughing as her soft-fisted blows glanced off his back. He cradled the photo in his hands. "Come on! What's so incriminating about this picture that I can't see it? You shouldn't be so modest. I've seen your work, it's good!"

"Give it back," Sue insisted. "It's not yours to look at."

"Why not? Is it porn?" Cal teased, tossing a look over his shoulder. In the dim, red light, Sue looked aflame with frustration. "You taking dirty pictures now?"

Then he glanced back at the photo in his hands, really looking at it for the first time.

Whoa.

Staring back at him was a lovely young woman wearing a big smile, and little else.

Sue *was* taking dirty pictures.

"Holy crap," Cal uttered. His lower half twitched, his cock showing signs of life again.

He heard Sue's labored sigh behind him, and the rain of blows ceased. "This chick's half-naked and touching her—"

"I know." Sue was weary. "I was there."

"Did you do anything else besides take the picture?"

"Don't be an ass."

"Do I know her?"

"You probably saw her at the concert. She helped set it up."

Cal felt Sue thread her hand underneath his arm, but he turned far enough so that the picture was still out of her reach.

"Cal, can have I that back, please?"

"She's gorgeous," Cal said, his gaze still fixed on the photo. He held it a few seconds more before finally surrendering it to Sue, who haughtily snatched it up and set it on a cleared table. Cal listened to her mutter about hoping the photo paper didn't curl.

He thought a moment, willing the night of the concert to the front burner of his memory, trying to remember the woman's name. "Laurie?"

"Lauren. She teaches at Ellie's old school, and I'll thank you not to gab it around town about these pictures."

Cal held up his hands in defeat. "Relax. Who am I going to tell around here? I don't know anybody." Damn, what had happened to the lusty woman who shared his bed last night, the woman who probably would have posed for such pictures? Of course, he probably didn't help matters by snooping around against her wishes.

But, she *did* let him inside the darkroom. The mixed signals confused him. What exactly was supposed to be developing here besides naughty photographs?

He tried to honor Sue's wishes and refrain from further browsing, but curiosity got the better of him and he dipped underneath the clothesline to inspect the rest of the developed roll. Each picture featured Lauren in a state of undress and increasing arousal. It resembled an X-rated flipbook in progress. Cal couldn't tell for certain for the lack of light, but he found the pictures beautiful, and said as much to the photographer.

Sue only shrugged and brushed past him to collect the photos. The collar of her robe pulled away slightly, exposing more breast. "Ninety percent of it is Lauren, if you ask me," she said. "She gorgeous, I didn't have to do much."

"They're good pictures because a good photographer took them," Cal insisted, and turned away as Sue shuffled the photos into order, sifting through each provocative pose as if she took pictures like this every day. They were easy on the eye, yes, but murder on his cock. If only the machines weren't covered in dishpans; he'd turn one on high, set Sue down, and slam his cock into her as the vibrations

intensified her orgasms.

Instead he asked, "Why is it so difficult for you to take a compliment?"

"I'm sorry," Sue said. Her shoulders sagged as she started breaking down her makeshift lab. "I'm just really antsy about these pictures, you know? Lauren paid me a lot of money to take them, she wants to use them to snag a potential beau..."

"Looks like she could snag five figures from *Playboy*," Cal murmured.

"...and I just don't want these photos to be circulated because of where she works, you know? I have this fear she'll end up being embarrassed by them." Sue shook her head. "I don't see why she thinks she needs to resort to something like this to get a man's attention."

"We're pigs. We like looking at naked women." Cal moved behind Sue and encircled her waist, tugging at the tightly cinched cloth belt. "I like looking at one naked woman in particular."

"Jake's not like that. He's a sweet man."

"You know for sure?" One hand slipped under the wide collar and caught that hardened nipple. Sue emitted a low-throated moan and, encouraged, Cal lightly rubbed the sensitive area in circular motion.

"I've known him practically all my life."

"Are you sure you don't want people to know about these photos because *you* don't want to be embarrassed by them?"

Sue twisted in Cal's grasp, forcing his hand from her breast. "What?"

Cal nodded to the stack of pictures she had set on the table. "I don't see many portraits like this framed in your studio windows."

"That's because I don't want to cause traffic accidents."

"I don't know, you're guaranteed some attention."

"Not the kind I'd want," Sue huffed. "I can see the dowagers of Dareville having a conniption over Lauren's bare bod smiling from a fancy frame next to Kevin Wantanbe's bar mitvah portrait."

She was then silent, and Cal held her close. Soon her body erupted with silent giggles, and the two laughed louder at the shared thought of two such photos hanging side by side.

"Did you rehearse that speech in your head first?"

"I'm not Hugh Hefner," she said. She gestured to the photos. "This just isn't my thing."

"I dare you to do it," Cal said. "Put up her picture."

"No," Sue shrieked, and laughed harder when Cal recaptured her nipple and gave it a light tweak. "I won't humiliate Lauren like that. She's one of my best friends."

"They are good pictures, though," Cal said.

"Thanks," Sue said, softly this time.

"You should be more adventurous in your work." Cal reached an arm toward the table and slid away one photo to look at the one underneath it. "Nothing wrong with taking pictures of nudes. If you make it artistic enough, even the mainstream mags will buy."

"I know that," Sue said, annoyed.

"I mean, do the babies and weddings if that's your bread and butter, but have you even considered

submitting your work to magazines?"

"A few times. I got rejected."

"Sounds ominous. How long ago was that?"

She shrugged. Cal had his answer.

"Well, one day you won't be. You won't know unless you keep trying."

Sue broke from his embrace and slipped the photos into a manila envelope. Cal sensed his words bothered her, and he wondered if there was more to her unease than the sporadic, form letter rejection received from a snooty New York magazine.

"There aren't many opportunities here to take the kinds of photos magazines want," Sue said, not looking at him.

"There aren't any, or you don't want to make any?" Cal challenged her. Sue was silent.

"You have any appointments today?"

"No, but I was going to the studio to do some work."

"Can it wait until after we've made a few opportunities?"

"We?" Sue slowly turned to face again, an amused smile glowing underneath the sole red bulb in the room.

Cal grinned back. "You have ideas, I know you do. I can see the steam coming out of your ears. Let me help you."

"Like you helped me last night?"

Her voice dripped honey, her body relaxed in kind as the belt he had loosened slowly fell to either side of her. The robe parted slightly; bare skin and pubic hair glowed under the light. She looked so smooth and beautiful, as if she would melt at the slightest touch.

"You can take my picture, any way you like," he said, closing in on her. He toyed with the edges of her robe and weighed one breast in his hand. "I don't have any pictures of myself. I wouldn't mind playing model for a day."

"The kind of pictures you're suggesting, I wouldn't show to your mama," Sue said warily, but she did nothing to stave off Cal's caresses.

"What Mama doesn't know won't hurt her. She doesn't read *Playgirl*."

Sue arched her neck as Cal planted a kiss there. "You sure? Women can be pigs, too. We just hide it better."

"Take my picture," Cal said. "Take all of me. Put me in the studio windows and watch the traffic screech to a halt."

"I don't know," Sue teased. With one deep shrug the robe slipped to the floor. "What if the ideas I'm entertaining are too wild for you?"

Cal shook his head and dipped low for a taste of her. "Dare me."

Thirteen

Several feet in, there was a clearing in the woodsy area behind the house, Sue knew, where the floor was carpeted with dried pine needles and errant strands of brown grass. Occasionally one might find hoof prints of any of the nearby deer that loped around the area for food. Sue recalled Ellie had mentioned once seeing a doe sniffing the perimeter of the Garriston/Shaw property line and that she had been tempted to leave food. Brady had put the kibash on that before Ellie could fill the first bowl of kibble; the cat was enough, they didn't need any more pets.

On days when the cottage seemed too stale and the walls closed in tightly, Sue would trudge through the woods, kicking pinecones and inhaling the crisp, early spring air for a natural high. On one such nature walk she happened upon the hollowed stump of what was once probably the largest tree in Virginia. Nearly three feet in diameter, it was nothing more than a circle of jagged edges forming a crater on the ground, with thick, knotted roots spidering out from its bottom. The wood was so blackened by time and termites that it looked as if it might crumble to dust at the slightest touch.

What a grand tree it must have been, Sue remembered thinking when she first saw the ruins. How high did it extend, and what eventually caused it to fall? Neither Brady nor Ellie could say; the stump was there first, and besides, neither saw the need to go traipsing through the woods to learn.

Sue planted her tripod in a clear patch a few feet from the crater and smiled. Oh, the opportunities those two had passed up! The area was remote enough that a couple could make love without disturbing anybody, save for the occasional woodland creature. Perhaps, though, the area was *too* secluded, Sue surmised. Knowing Brady and Ellie, they would likely want an audience.

She, however, wanted privacy today. The idea she had for a photo shoot with the stump had been brewing in her mind for weeks; she just couldn't muster enough courage to ask a friend to help her out, and she didn't want to go through the expense of hiring a model. Of course, she had thought of Lauren briefly following their photo shoot, but Sue figured her friend wouldn't go for something like this.

Cal, eager for anything, was a dream come true.

In more ways than one, Sue thought with a smile, remembering their tryst in the laundry room. Her pussy was still throbbing.

She was bent over the tripod, affixing her camera and adjusting the lens when she heard the unmistakable sound of dead leaves crunched underfoot, followed by an anguished "Fuck!"

"You doing all right there?" she called, checking her target through the eyepiece.

"Damn pine cone," Cal muttered.

Sue looked up just as Cal lifted one leg to inspect the sole of his foot for shards. He struck an odd figure: naked in the woods, posed like a tanned flamingo about to lose his balance, his manhood dangling between his thighs. She had suggested a robe for Cal to no avail, despite the slight chill in the air. He was only going to take it off, anyway, he said.

Sue appraised his body, admiring the planes and ridges of his chest, his strong shoulders, and those oh-so-nice thighs. Not an inch of fat to be seen as they tapered down to the lean, cut calves of a cyclist. Sue never fancied herself for a leg woman, but Cal had her thinking differently. What possibilities, or rather positions, could be enjoyed being supported by legs like that? Maybe he could pin her against a wall and elevate her body while he pounded into her...

Sue giggled and adjusted the hem of her T-shirt. She had plucked it from the hamper in the laundry room and thrown it on, along with a pair of ratty sweatpants and her canvas shoes, before setting out on the spontaneous photo shoot. She tried to ignore the disappointment on Cal's face, but she wasn't going

to be doing the modeling. Surely Annie Leibowitz didn't start this way.

"You could have at least put on some shoes yourself, I told you it was a fair walk out here," Sue scolded.

"I didn't want to look silly."

"Said the naked man in the middle of nowhere." Sue smirked, and pointed him to the stump. Cal didn't move, but beat his chest in a fair impersonation of Tarzan.

"I am the Lizard King," he bellowed to the sky. The loud flutter of several birds escaping the leafy branches overhead was his only response.

"Yeah? Come take your place on the throne, Your Highness." Sue gestured once again to the stump.

Cal peered uneasily at the pile of leaves and sludge collected within. "Ick. You want me to sit in that while I'm *nekkid*?"

"Uh, yeah. That's the whole idea. You suggested I be more daring in my work. This is a far cry from *bar mitzvah* portraits, you think?"

"I won't argue with that. When I sat for my *bar mitzvah* pictures I wasn't faced with the probability that tiny bugs were going to crawl up my ass." Cal winced.

Sue rolled her eyes. "Everybody turns into a diva when you point a camera at them. Hang on." She yanked off the T-shirt. Her nipples puckered at the first contact with the cool spring air; it was a nice contrast after the heat generated in the laundry room, and for a fleeting moment she wondered how good her clit would feel exposed to the breeze.

As she knelt down to lay the shirt inside the crater she noticed Cal watching her breasts wobble. "Take a picture, it'll last longer," she chided.

"I'd like to, but I'm not touching that equipment. I'd breathe wrong and it would collapse, I bet. I'd rather touch *your* equipment," he said, then added slyly, "You got a timer on that thing?"

"I do."

"So you could take a picture of yourself?"

Sue straightened her posture and inhaled. Her breasts lifted a few centimeters and she arched her back slightly to make them appear more pert. He was going to look regardless, might as well improve the presentation. "I could," she said, "but I won't."

Cal stuck out his tongue. "You're no fun."

"You weren't saying that twenty minutes ago, or twelve hours before that," she laughed, and pointed yet again. "Down."

"Right, right." With a dramatic sigh, Cal lowered himself into a sitting position inside the hollow stump. He let himself go limp and Sue positioned his limbs, draping them over the wood. Once or twice he groaned in discomfort as a shard of bark cut into his skin.

"Sorry." Sue wrung her hands, checked Cal's arm for a laceration, and repositioned it to her satisfaction. Standing back to admire the whole effect, she smiled. "Okay, now lean your head back as far as it will go and close your eyes. Perfect, don't move."

She lined up the shot, angling so that Cal's privates were concealed by the bark, and fired off a few pictures. The image was beautiful, and Cal easily projected the artistic image she had envisioned. His arms and legs drooping over the stump gave the impression that from the ruins of the mighty tree a new

life was about to rise. With the black and white film she was using, the end result would give the image a haunting look.

She moved the tripod to face Cal and took a few more pictures, taking note again of Cal's bare chest and throat, how smooth his skin looked in the filtered sunlight beaming down through the trees. He appeared to have adjusted to the cold, he no longer shivered.

The sight of him naked and vulnerable before her rekindled her desire for him; the heat pooled in her chest and spread up into her breasts and down to her pussy, teasing every erogenous point on her body. She twitched inwardly; her heart raced and her finger trembled as it brushed against the button.

Snap. The flash exploded. Cal's eyelids fluttered, then relaxed as Sue prepared for the next shot.

"I'm afraid to move," he said between tightened lips.

"You're doing fine," Sue said. "How're the bugs treating you?"

"Quiet, you."

Sue laughed and watched through the lens as his tongue darted slowly from between his lips, moving in and out in a nervous tic. She had seen him do that before, while they were making love. He had been braced against the mattress on his elbows while he plunged his cock into her, looking at her with this curious expression—a mixture of pleasure and disbelief, as if he were just realizing what he was doing. She had found it flattering at the time, and now, watching that tongue slip back between his lips and out again, she felt further aroused.

She adjusted the zoom for a close-up of his face and shot the photo. Cal looked very much in the throes of ecstasy, and she wondered what fantasies raged through his mind at the moment. Was he thinking about her ... or Ellie? Her heart sank at that possibility, but lifted again when she saw Cal's head raise and his eyes flit open. A small smile curled his lips.

"I don't hear any picture taking," Cal chided.

Sue pretended to fiddle with the camera. "You're supposed to be still."

"I'm stiff now, sweetheart. Come see for yourself." Cal closed his eyes again and resumed the tongue gesture.

Sue obliged. Cal's cock was practically airborne, and his face was now tense. He wanted release, and apparently the thoughts in his head weren't doing it for him.

She left the camera perched on its stand and let her hand slide up her abdomen to the swell of her breast. She captured an erect nipple and tugged hard while her other hand slipped underneath the rope cinching the waist of her sweatpants. She caught hold of her mound and slipped a finger in and out until she felt damp. It felt good, but it wasn't enough. She wanted that cock inside her.

But first, she was putting that tongue to work.

"Hold still, I want to get some candids real quick," she ordered, and hoped Cal would keep his eyes closed. Shedding her shoes and sweatpants, she managed to unlatch the camera without making any unnecessary noise. She wanted to surprise him, and gingerly stepped through a small minefield of twigs and pinecones until she made it safely to the crater, straddling Cal.

But the last step proved fateful as her heel ground into a dead leaf. Cal's eyes shot open at the crackling sound and he smiled up at her.

"You really get into your work, don't you?" he teased.

"I need you to get into me, starting with that tongue. Scoot down." She took an awkward step back as

Cal shifted further into the crater. His back lay flat against the T-shirt, now wrinkled with dirt and pine needles, with the top of his head pressed against a clump of bark. Still, there was plenty of room for Sue to pose. Kneeling wide on either side of Cal's head, she arched her back and aimed the camera down the length of her body as Cal pried apart her pussy lips and began licking her clit.

Steady, girl. She quivered over him, and took a deep breath before firing off a shot. Her heart raced into overdrive. *Good night!* She just took a picture of a man eating her pussy! And it looked as good as it felt.

Cal looked up briefly. "Was I supposed to smile? I'm sorry."

Sue brushed a thumb over her nipple and squeezed her breast. She wanted a whole portfolio of Cal loving her—pictures of him sucking her breasts, fingering her clit, penetrating her. If only somebody else could take the pictures, though, and leave her hand free to return his caresses. She wanted to record her own reaction to his touch, and her pleasure.

She looked down at Cal. He fingered her slit and looked at her, expecting an answer. Sue bent backward for a better angle at her pussy and took another picture.

"You're forgiven," she said.

Cal smiled and nuzzled the soft patch of hair covering her mound. "Trust me, I'm gonna be smiling for a long time," he said, and resumed licking her pussy.

Sue fought for balance. She managed three more shots when the sensation of Cal's tongue swirling over her nub and darting in and out of her slit got the best of her, and she had to steady her hands on the camera so she wouldn't drop it on Cal's head. She clutched it to her chest with whitened knuckles as the orgasm hit, and the echo of her cry rang in her ears and through the trees.

Cal kissed her gently on the thigh, turned his face to one side, and took a deep breath. "I changed my mind. Give me the camera." His voice was husky.

Before Sue could surrender it, though, he snatched it away and sat up, forcing Sue down on his legs. He wriggled free and knelt before her, cupping his scrotum and stroking his darkened shaft with his free hand. He turned the camera in his other hand, and studied it with a frown. "I don't have to wind this thing, do I?"

"No, it's automatic. Click and shoot."

Cal shot her an amused look. "Did you just say *clit* and shoot?"

"You got a one-track mind, boy."

"You're on my mind. I want *you* on my cock." He held the camera to his face and aimed it at Sue. "Take me in your mouth."

Sue rolled from her sitting position, dragging the T-shirt under her legs, until she too was kneeling. Simultaneously she fondled one breast and cuffed Cal's shaft at its base, then licked him from stem to stern before taking the tip in her mouth. The gentle whirring of her camera told her he was rapidly recording the moment.

"God, I hope these come out," he breathed. "I'll never get tired of looking at those lips around my cock. I'll make copies for my wallet, I'll make wallpaper for my laptop. Oh, yes!" he exclaimed as she tightened her hold.

Sue continued to suckle him, and tried not to read too much into his words. He'd never get tired of *looking*, but was there more he wasn't saying? Did he want pictures to remind him of their time together because he knew he would be leaving, and not planning to come back?

That's why you're taking pictures, right? In some way, was she really anticipating his departure? Did she think he wouldn't ask her to come to New York with him, after all he had said about her being more daring with her work. She could be more daring with her work in the Big Apple, though it would take quite a bit to top what she was doing right now.

Girl, stop overanalyzing! Just suck the man's cock.

So Sue sucked Cal's cock, looking up for only one shot before Cal eased her head away and gestured for her to get on all fours.

"Turn around," he urged, and she twisted inside the crater so that she faced away from him. She braced herself on the edge of the hollow stump only to have pieces fall away in her hands, so she pressed her palms to the ground and arched her hips backward, pressing her ass into Cal's touch.

He positioned his cock at the edge of her slit and took a picture, then another one as he slid inside her. "Oh, yeah." He sucked the air through his teeth as he filled her. "Sweet penetration. It never looked so good."

Sue let her head hang low and she closed her eyes, centering her entire concentration on that huge cock filling her, slamming into her so hard she could probably knock down the rest of the barrier surrounding them with the way her head was butting against the rotting wood.

That's when she realized Cal had plunged into her without protection. Fear seized her. This guy had fucked strangers in fast food drive-through lanes, and who knows where else? Even if he had been careful in his youth, what if she got pregnant?

"Cal," she moaned, and moved her backside up and down in a poor attempt to dislodge him. But Cal soon withdrew from her and straightened, stroking his shaft as he wrestled with the camera.

"Hold still," he said, his voice strained, and before Sue could ask why she heard his cry and felt his heat as he came on her back.

"Whoa!" he gasped, then Sue echoed as she watched the camera tumble to the ground and roll over her fingers. It flipped, lens side up, and rested on the dirt unscathed. She tried to sigh but Cal's weight on her back was a hindrance, though a pleasant distraction.

Cal rocked his hips against her ass and grasped her waist, then leaned forward so that he covered her back entirely. His hot cum spread across her skin and pasted them together.

"Don't you just love getting back to nature?" he sighed, and kissed her shoulder. "How long before we see those pics?"

Sue relaxed her shoulders, relishing how Cal kissed a trail from one end to the other. "Depends on what else develops before I can get to the darkroom," she said, and though she laughed in kind with Cal she gazed past her tired arms and drooping breasts to her abdominal bulge. She hoped nothing was developing deep within, at present.

That worry was quickly supplanted when Cal nuzzled her neck and helped her to an upright position.

"Getting cold," he said. "Shall we move this party indoors?"

"Okay."

Cal turned her chin toward him and grazed her lips. "This was wild. I've never done anything like this."

"What?" Sue sputtered her laughter. "You're kidding. All the stuff you've done, and you've *never* had sex in the woods or had nude pictures done?"

"Sex in the woods, yes. Nude pictures, yes. Though I couldn't tell you who took them and where they

are.” Together they stood and Cal helped brush away specks of dirt and leaves clinging to her body. Sue took notice of how his hands lingering on her bottom. “Pictures while having sex, though, I've never done.”

She had to smile at that. A first they were able to share. “Well, I'll have to get right to work on them,” she said, stepping into her shoes. No point in putting her clothes back on; she would need to shower. “It won't do for me to stall the production of your CD cover.”

She turned to Cal, expecting him to respond to the joke, and he did, just not in the way she anticipated. His face turned suddenly dark, and he bowed his head and idly scratched himself. Sue felt her body quiver from the inside. Had she said something wrong?

“Cal, is something the matter?”

“Hm?” Cal looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. The sudden cool in his eyes was unsettling, like he no longer found her attractive. Suddenly Sue didn't feel as confident in her skin as she did when Cal was making love to her.

“It's nothing.” He shook her head. “Just rang a few bells there.”

“What? Because I mentioned a CD cover? I was only kidding around, you know, because you're a musician...”

“I know. Don't worry about it.”

Not another word passed between them as they walked back to the house. Cal held out his hands in a silent offer to carry her equipment, and quick-stepped to the patio. Sue admired the tight ass in front of her, so much that she was almost distracted from Cal's sudden moodiness.

He set everything in the laundry room and brushed past Sue to his room, closing the door. She could only stare at the door, bewildered and wondering how Cal could turn so quickly. The temptation to knock and enter was strong, but she didn't want to incur Cal's wrath. They had been getting along so well, very well. Tears brimmed in her eyes at the thought that she might have jeopardized everything with an ill-timed comment.

With a heavy sigh she crept back into the laundry room and let the dark envelop her as she closed the door behind her. The dark cloud hanging over took the joy out their erotic photo session, to say nothing of her anticipation of the end product; just looking at her camera on the dryer gave her an uneasy feeling. She had half a mind to open the door again and expose the film. No sense in risking the humiliation of two Dareville women.

She sighed. No, she couldn't do that, she couldn't bring herself to destroy a roll of film, no matter what was waiting for her on it. Might as well see how good or how bad the roll turned out, she decided.

She turned on the red light, threw on a shirt, and set up the dishpans. Maybe Cal would snap out of whatever funk had settled in, she hoped. She didn't like this current development, not at all.

Fourteen

He was being petty, he knew, and hypocritical. For all his goading of Sue taking chances with her livelihood, he had to go and act all distant when reminded of the one time he had tried the same thing himself, and failed.

He snatched a pair of jogging shorts from his dresser and slid them over his hips, snapping the elastic band above his navel. He then slumped into the recliner by the bed and, leaning over to turn on his amplifier, reached for his bass guitar and placed it on his lap. In times of frustration and depression, music was Cal's only balm. It soothed nerves not even the most incredible sex could touch.

He positioned his left hand on the fret bar, and with his right he plucked away a deep melody that resonated throughout the room and vibrated the walls. Faster and faster his fingers danced over the strings and chased away the blues, and only halfway through the song did he realize Sue might be bothered by the racket.

He stopped abruptly and watched the door. The knob didn't turn, and he heard no soft knocking. Of course, the bass still rumbled in his ears though the playing had ceased, so he waited a few seconds more, tapping the guitar's shiny black body. If Sue were irritated by the music, would she bother to let him know? The way he had treated her earlier, who knew what she was thinking right now? Probably that he was still every bit the cad she had found in her shower, and no way in hell would she want to see him, even to confront him about the noise. She probably wouldn't believe him now if he told her he had changed since then, since that first day.

It could have been handled better, Cal knew. He should've just laughed off the joke when it was said, or else explained his sudden hurt. She had no idea that he had indeed recorded a solo album so many years ago, and that every major record label he approached turned it down.

Not even Brady's ringing endorsement of the music Cal had composed could secure interest, he remembered. As far as the industry bigwigs were concerned, Cal was too old and too established as a sideman for the investment needed. In the age of manufactured boy bands and pop tarts like Trish, people like Cal—people who could actually write and play music—were slowly becoming obsolete in the corporate eye, and Cal hadn't the savvy or the drive to produce and market the music himself, as Brady had once suggested. It wasn't like he was broke, but he was too old to sell records out of a suitcase. He learned instead to be content with his lot in life.

But how to explain all that without appearing childish? Maybe, if he let enough time pass, he wouldn't have to say anything. He could approach Sue from behind and take her into an embrace, kiss her and make her forget about the post-coital awkwardness. That is, if she hadn't taken off with the excuse to do some work at her studio.

Is that really why, some stupid album? His conscience nagged at him. The memory of dashed hope was certainly a flimsy explanation for his cooled behavior, and as Cal resumed playing he knew he had more to tell Sue, another, deeper meaning behind his aloofness.

He was in love with her, and this was a love he had never before felt.

They weren't the same feelings he'd had for Ellie. While the simplest look from Ellie could inspire instant arousal, what he felt for Ellie seemed to only scratch the surface of his soul compared to what Sue could do. Sue assaulted his every sense and consumed his every thought. Her musk would linger in every room she left, and her touch left heated impressions on his skin long after they would break contact. As often as Cal had thought and fantasized about Ellie, his experiences with her never had the pleasant residual effect Sue impressed upon him.

Even in the beginning, Cal thrived on their shared animosity. Like Kate and Petruchio they were ... Cal

chuckled and shook his head. No, more like Cybill and Bruce in *Moonlighting*, sans the rhyming secretary.

Was he really afraid of admitting his love, afraid of telling her? Afraid of how she would react? How *would* she react?

She's probably pissed. Thinking that he was using her for sex, but wasn't she doing that with *him* last night when she offered her assistance in the shower? He didn't know.

He sighed and shook his head again, looking down at his bass. His hands seemed detached from the rest of him; they carried on gaily, plucking away an impromptu tune, never mind that the musician felt less joyful and more muddled. He loved Sue, at least he was able to admit it to himself. If by some miracle she returned his feelings, it wouldn't work out, he decided sadly. She had an established business, was trying to secure accounts, and was buying a house. He couldn't stay here, either. Dareville was a diversion, nothing more.

Is it really? It couldn't be home?

Cal's head lolled back on the chair. Well, how would he be able to work if he lived in the middle of nowhere?

Brady made it work.

He sped up his playing. The voice in his head supplanted the rhythm, and chanted its argument over and over in time to the music. Yes, Brady made it work, because *Ellie* made the necessary sacrifice. She willingly left her job to follow Brady anywhere he wanted to go. Sue, of course, could take pictures anywhere as well, but Cal wasn't about to ask her to just give up her life, especially not after hearing how she had struggled to establish herself here.

What if...

Enough with the what ifs! The war within boiled and threatened to combust. Cal could feel his bones cracking from the pressure; it was difficult to breathe. His fingers stilled on the strings.

"Shut up!" he shouted to himself, his eyes pinched shut.

"I didn't say anything."

"Wha?" Cal's eyes shot open to see his bedroom door was ajar, and Sue was peering inside with a bewildered look. She had changed into jeans and a red T-shirt, and one knuckle was poised to rap on the door.

"I was knocking but I guess you didn't hear," she said warily. "I guess because of the music."

"Hm? Oh, God." Cal placed his guitar on the bed, then stood and stretched. "No, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking, and I wasn't yelling at you, either. I'm just ... going insane."

"Join the club." Sue laughed nervously and eased further into the bedroom. Cal didn't like her expression; she looked about the room as if it were a strange, uncomfortable place. Never mind that they had spent the better part of last night here, making love.

He should say something, he knew, to relax her, to make it known that what they had shared was special and that she wasn't just another notch on his fret bar. Before he could open his mouth to speak Sue was talking.

"What you were playing was nice, though." She nodded to his bass. Cal could feel her restraining the heat in her gaze as she appeared to take in his bare chest and legs. "What's it called?"

"Hm? Oh." He looked down at the guitar and set it on the carpet next to him. "I don't know, actually. I

was just noodling around, came off the top of my head."

"Ah." Sue nodded and twisted in place. She looked like she wanted to get the hell out of there, and it broke Cal's heart to think it. He really had hurt her.

"I'm sorry I wiggled out earlier," he said before she could make an excuse. And before he realized it the whole story spilled forth about the album and the numerous rejections and how her offhand remark had spurred the memory of it. "It's nothing you did, you didn't know," he finished. "I can't believe after all these years I'm still sensitive about it."

To his relief Sue warmed to him. She took a seat on the edge of the bed and folded her hands in her lap. "There's no reason to be sorry, I've been there myself," she said. "But you knew that already."

"I know, and I also know better to have behaved like a jackass."

"We're all entitled ... at least once." Sue grinned, and Cal's spirits lifted.

"All the same, though, that song was good," Sue continued. "And that came off the top of your head?" When Cal nodded, she added, "Well, record companies are more interested in selling image, anyway. I bet you could do well if you went independent and sold records off the Internet."

"You're not the first to suggest it, but I'm just not good at that sort of thing. Besides, I don't know if I want to set myself up for that kind of failure again."

"You won't know unless you try. I seem to recall hearing something along those lines earlier."

They looked at each other for a silent moment, and Cal smiled. Sue was so radiant and encouraging, and at that moment appeared even more beautiful.

"I'll keep that in mind, and I'll hold you to your offer for a CD cover," he said, and nudged Sue's bottom with his foot. "And speaking of photography, are those pictures ready?"

"No, I haven't started yet. I'm out of developing fluid. I'm heading out now to the studio to get some." She sighed and patted his foot. "Need anything while I'm out?"

Cal's foot nudged her again and crossed her thigh into her crotch. Sue obliged him by spreading her legs slightly, allowing Cal to rub the rough seam of her jeans. His cock stirred to life again as Sue swallowed audibly and moaned with the pressure.

"I got everything I need right here," he said. "You know, those pictures can wait..."

But Sue giggled and, to his disappointment, pushed him away and stood. "Now," she chided, "I'm not the one on vacation. Maybe later."

"Maybe?" Cal pushed out his lower lip in mock hurt. Sue leaned over and brushed her lips against his, then lingered as his tongue encouraged a deeper kiss.

"I won't be long," she said once she could break free. "Stay naked." And with that, she hurried out of the room before the pull of incredible sex became too great to resist. Cal could only sigh and gaze down at his tented jogging shorts, shifting in place to ease the ache of his erection.

"Well," he sighed as he slipped a hand under his shorts and took hold of his shaft, "looks like I have to play another solo."

* * * *

Two minutes in, after fantasizing of Sue in a myriad of erotic poses, Cal gave up and opted for a cold shower. It wasn't that thoughts of Sue didn't arouse him, he didn't want to risk not being able to perform when she got back, and he had no idea when to expect her. He hoped sooner than later.

Dried and robed, he picked up the bass again and resumed his impromptu song from earlier. The notes were clearer in his head now, and while Sue continued to occupy his mind, the music was a grand complement. He closed his eyes and imagined a guitar and percussion accompaniment, imagined Sue with her luscious hips swaying to the beat. When he next opened his eyes he happened to glance at the clock by his bed and saw that nearly thirty minutes had passed.

Shit. Why wasn't he writing this down? Even during what he thought had been his most creative period, when writing all the instrumental pieces for the album that never was, he had never been able to come up with music so quickly. Cal could understand now how Brady's affection for Ellie transcended just sex. Ellie inspired Brady, just as Sue inspired him.

Well, even if the music never ended up on an album of his own, perhaps Brady could match lyrics to it for his next CD. Cal smiled at the thought, but quickly frowned when he realized he didn't have the proper lined paper on which to write the notes.

"Damn." He leaped from the chair and made quick reconnaissance of the cottage, hoping Brady might have left some paper behind for him to borrow. He found nothing. He couldn't think of anywhere in Dareville where he could buy such paper, either, and he didn't feel like driving all over Virginia Beach, either. The few sheets of standard notebook paper he found in Brady's desk would have to suffice for now.

Halfway through filling in the black circles indicating half and quarter notes, his hand cramped and he cursed. It had been a while, he realized, since he had done this, since he had done any actual handwriting beyond a short note or signing a credit slip. As soon as the ache subsided he resumed until he finished the page.

As he studied the beginning of the bass line still running through his head, he remembered all the extra music composition paper sitting on a bookshelf in his apartment and checked his watch. It wasn't yet two, and Brady's daughter Melissa was staying at the singer's apartment. He had tons of composition paper lying around the house.

Cal found the cordless phone, flopped on the living room sofa, and punched in Brady's home number. If Melissa got a package to him express mail within the next hour, it might make it to Dareville by tomorrow. He would just pay Brady back what he had taken, certain his friend would understand.

Cal listened to the digital chirping in the receiver as he hummed, picturing the notes he would write down when a tired female voice answered. His heart numbed; it wasn't Melissa.

"Ellie?"

Fifteen

An angry blast from the car idling behind her alerted Sue to the green light. "Sorry," she mumbled aloud as she jerked her car into gear and made the left turn onto Lauren's street. She shook her head; even in such a small town with scant traffic, she knew better than to let her mind wander while behind the wheel. It wouldn't take much for a small child to dart into the street for a stray ball while she daydreamed with her foot on the pedal.

She was daydreaming about bottles of developing fluid, particularly the two bottles in the laundry room that would more have sufficed for developing the film from her photo session with Cal. Her excuse had been flimsy and she knew it. She just wanted to get out of the house, and away from Cal for a while, to reflect upon everything that had happened between them. Plus, the time alone would allow her to drop off Lauren's photos without having to answer further questions.

Naked pictures. Lauren in her underwear. Sue in her altogether, sucking Cal's cock. Sue delivering naughty photos in the undercover of daylight, sunglasses perched on her nose and shifting glances to see if she had been followed. Things were moving way too fast for her.

She felt like a smuggler, too, with these photos; yet, in a way, it was sort of exciting, and having taken sensual pictures of herself helped to see Lauren's in a different light. Before leaving the house, she had sat in the car and shuffled through the pack to make sure she had them all.

Cal was right, they *were* good. She was a good photographer, and now she wouldn't feel so embarrassed to keep some of the tamer shots for her portfolio. Of course, sharing such an example with the Dareville Primary Academy board wouldn't do, but maybe in a portfolio for a New York magazine...

She sighed. She was going to have to say something to Cal when she got back, but what?

She slowed the car, passing uniform mailboxes and neatly trimmed lawns. Yes, she could admit to herself that she was a good photographer, but was she New York good? And why was she even thinking about going to New York? Cal hadn't said one word about her going back with him, and she was hardly in a position to move on her own. She was about to buy to house, and she barely had the money to make the payments on that! How much more was a dingy little apartment in Manhattan going to set her back?

No, she would have to stay in Dareville, and move into her new, big house and take pictures of schoolchildren for the rest of her life. She would probably live to be a hundred, too, in a big, lonely house surrounded by a myriad of Typhoid's descendents.

Sigh.

She pulled alongside the curb in front of Lauren's house. Lauren's Jeep was in the driveway and its owner was leaning against the open mailbox, something crumpled in her fist, her head bent over the black, plastic box.

"Lauren, sweetie?" Sue had barely killed the engine when she leaped out of her car and jogged to her friend. Lauren lifted her head; askew brown frizz haloed a face raw with tears. Sue took the limp woman into her arms. "Sweetie, what is it?"

"B-bastard," Lauren sobbed, digging her running nose into Sue's shoulder.

"Who? Not Jake?"

Lauren pulled back and shook her head. She pressed the crumpled object to Sue's chest. Sue smoothed out the colorful postcard depicting sunny Hawaii.

"That bastard just had to rub it in my face, about his wife and her new tits," spat Lauren as Sue read the snide missive from Lauren's ex. "I can't get an alimony check in full, paid on time, but he can go gallivanting off to some tropical island."

"Lauren, you're better off without him. Just let it go." It sounded harsh, but Sue couldn't think of anything else to say. Brad McKenna was an asshole, always had been, and Lauren's friends had been baffled when the two eloped after college. Lauren should never have married him, thereby saving herself many years of pain and anticipation of future pain, but Sue wasn't going to say that. Lauren no doubt had heard it before, and there was no sense in deepening this wound.

Sue leaned close. "I got something that'll make you feel better. Hang on." She dashed to the car and back, returning with the manila package. "Say hello to Miss March, April, May..."

Trembling fingers lifted the flap and slid out the pictures one by one. Sue delighted in the growing smile on Lauren's face as she inspected each photo. "Wow," Lauren said, sniffing. "I look *good*, I mean really good." Her eyes shone with unshed tears, but with her smile the effect was not so sad. "Sue, these are fantastic. You're a genius."

"I had a great model, don't forget that," Sue said. "Jake is going to love those pictures, and Brad is a loser. I ought to make copies and send them to Hawaii so he can see what he's missing."

That brought a genuine laugh. "Better yet, send them to Brad's brother Jim. See how Brad reacts to that."

Sue nodded, and they fell into comfortable silence. Lauren flipped through the pictures again and gingerly replaced them. "Thanks, Sue, for everything," she said. "And I'm sorry for blubbering like this. It just pisses me off."

"I know," Sue said, but in truth she didn't. She never had a serious relationship, and never really had strong feelings for a man ... until Cal. As she watched Lauren rub her tears away on her jacket sleeve she shook her head. Though divorced for two years now, Lauren's pain was still evident, and might remain so if Brad chose to continue taunting, and if Jake ultimately refused Lauren. Sue had to wonder if she was looking at her future when she looked at her friend.

"But you know what?" Lauren's mouth twitched into a wistful smile and she tapped the package on her palm. "Two years ago I would have given up on men entirely, if not for Jake. He always had a smile for me, a kind word, still does. And now that he's free, I want him to set me free."

"I know the feeling," Sue said. Oh, to be free of her doubts. "I should get going, but I don't want to leave you if you're—"

"Oh, no, sweetie. I'll be fine. I really needed this today," Lauren said, holding up the photos. "Wish me luck?"

"You don't need it." Sue hugged her friend and retreated to her car. Inside, her cell phone was ringing. Sue plucked it from her purse and pressed it to her ear.

No, she thought, greeting the caller, I'm the one who needs luck.

Sixteen

What was Ellie doing home? She didn't sound too happy, had something happened with her and Brady?

"Cal?" she ventured. "How are you?" A long snuffle ripped through the receiver and Cal cringed.

"I'm fine, but it's obvious you're not. Is something wrong?" His heart beat a steady, rapid tattoo against his ribcage, threatening to crack. Breakup scenarios blinked through his mind in rapid succession.

Brady and Ellie fighting, shouting, Ellie at the apartment packing her things.

"Hm? Oh, this stupid cold," Ellie complained. "We're not a week into the tour and my allergies had to explode on me. Brady sent me home until I'm well enough to travel again. Melissa is here playing nurse." Over the receiver Cal heard a second female voice nagging at Ellie. "So, how's my cat doing?"

"Who?" Good question. Where *was* the cat? For all the hot sex happening, Typhoid was forgotten. Cal hoped the cat hadn't starved due to neglect or, worse yet, escaped when they went into the woods.

He craned his neck upward, looking about the room, and relaxed when he saw the little furball resting in a corner, licking himself in a spot where cats particularly like to lick. Cal knew he wouldn't mind being licked in a similar place himself. "Oh, the cat?" he said innocently. "Great. He was delicious."

"Very funny. Alright," Ellie huffed to the distance. Then, to Cal, "I can't stay long. *Mom* says I gotta finish my soup."

Cal closed his eyes and smiled. "Mmm, is it that matzo ball soup from the deli around the corner?"

A spoon clattered. "What else? I swear, that place has ruined me for other food, but don't tell Jake Marbury that," Ellie joked through a stuffed nose. Cal had to laugh at the distortion of her voice, though it pained him to know Ellie was ill. Funny, too, to think that a few months ago he might have convinced Ellie to hook up with him if there was the slightest hint of tension in her relationship with Brady. Hearing her today, his first thought had been of Brady, and what he could have said to mend the couple.

Quickly he explained what he wanted, and Ellie squealed. "Yeah, we have paper. I'll get Melissa to send it now. Hey, you're writing music again? That's great! I always wondered what was taking so long."

"I didn't have the inspiration until now," Cal said.

"Inspiration, huh?" Ellie teased. "Anybody I know?"

"You know damn well who. I still want to throttle you for what you did, setting up us like that," Cal laughed. "And after I do, I'm going to buy you the most expensive dinner in Vegas when we get there, to say thank you."

"Goody. I'll be ready for lobster buffet by then." Ellie giggled. "So, you two are getting along?"

"Getting along, getting it on, here, there, and everywhere. You want details?"

"And pictures."

"Careful what you wish for." Cal hardly disguised the innuendo in his voice.

"Ooh, tell me more in Vegas. Better yet, show me. I love reenactments, too."

Cal laughed, and in the back of his mind pondered whether or not she was serious. But just as quickly the mirth faded, replaced by a crackling pause.

"Okay there, sweetie?" Ellie asked.

"Yeah," Cal answered softly. "I was just thinking of Sue, about the future..."

"You should sound happier about it. My nose is clogged, not my ears, and I can hear things you're not saying. So spill."

And Cal sighed, then spilled. All of his doubts and fears, his praise of Sue and savored memories of his time with her streamed into the phone's receiver, so rapidly and so concentrated that Cal could no longer tell if Ellie was listening; he couldn't even hear her stovepipe breathing scratch his ear.

He finished, then waited. Ellie's response was the opposite of his, slow and direct. "You love her."

"I love her, Ellie." He stilled, focusing on the gentle warmth stirring above it heart, smiling as it spiraled through his body and coursed through his blood. He loved her, he loved Sue. "That's the first time I've said it out loud," he said, and nothing short of thrusting his cock into Sue's pussy had ever felt as good as this admission.

"You haven't told Sue yet?" Ellie asked. "Why are you on the phone with me? Tell her now."

"I don't know why, maybe in the back of my mind I'm thinking it's better she doesn't know. She has a career—"

"She has love, that's more important. She needs to know it, too," Ellie chided him rather strongly despite the weakness of her voice. "You insist you're thinking of her, but you're really acting very selfish, keeping this from her."

"This is new for me, you know. Fifty years go by, I don't fall in love until now." Twice in the same year, he wanted to add, but that point was moot. Brady loved Ellie, and vice versa. He loved Sue, and she ... ?

"Hang up. Talk to her now," Ellie said. "Here, let me help you." And before Cal could say anything more, the line went dead as Ellie hung up on her end.

"Nice talking to you, too," he muttered, and depressed the flash button. When the dial tone hummed in his ear, he held the receiver away to punch in Sue's cell number, but realized he didn't know it.

"Huh," he said, and glanced at the clock. Almost two hours had passed since Sue left. Maybe she had to go to Virginia Beach for supplies? Maybe, too, she got distracted there and decided to have lunch. He hoped not. It was best he talk to her as soon as possible; he feared if he waited, he would never tell her.

"What is her cell number?" he asked himself.

"Got a pen?"

"Sure. Hold on..." He rolled to the edge of the couch and was reaching for his pen and makeshift music sheet when his head jerked upward.

Huh?

Sue was leaning against the back wall by the front door, cell in hand. "Got a second?" she asked. "We need to talk."

"I know." Cal didn't like the look on her face, a hybrid of melancholy and unease. "I'd like to go first?"

"Please, let me," she insisted, and touched the doorknob. "But first, I need to show you something."

* * * *

She drove him down a narrow residential street on the other side of town—not a long drive, but the silence between them seemed to lengthen the actual miles traveled. Cal slumped in the passenger seat and tried to distract himself with the passing scenery and waving pedestrians. Every time he had tried to say something Sue's pleading frown extinguished his thoughts. He felt as if he might burst, and the

way things were going he felt as if he were being driven to prison. Or maybe Sue was going to let him out into a field to chase butterflies and leave him there, as one would with an unwanted dog.

Instead she turned a corner into a new housing development and motored down a freshly paved road. Cal saw houses in various stages of construction dotting the lane. Some were mere two-by-four skeletons, others nothing more than concrete pads and PVC piping, but the further they drove the more complete the new neighborhood appeared. Sue slowed at the cul de sac and pulled into the driveway of one of the three completed houses.

She yanked the parking brake and killed the engine. "What do you think?"

"It's beautiful." Cal tried not to look at the baby blue vinyl siding with white shutters or the small, square patch of lawn to his right. It was a domestic postcard with the white picket fence. This had to be Sue's new house, Sue's future. Hers and her alone.

Sue nudged him and crawled out of the car. "Come inside, I want to give you the tour."

What was worth seeing about an empty house, Cal didn't know. On the inside it was large and spacious, and yet there wasn't any room for him. Grudgingly he followed Sue through bedrooms and walk-in closets, offering niceties about the fixtures and carpet when prompted.

She then brought him to a closed door at the end of the main hallway, which revealed a carpeted staircase. She flipped a switch and illuminated the path. "Saving the best for last," she said with a wink and beckoned Cal to follow her into the attic.

And what an attic it was. The walls were nothing more than exposed beams and fiberglass insulation, but the entire area spanned the length and width of the top floor and was nearly all useable space. Cal didn't have to stoop over, either, to move around. Plenty of room for the Christmas decorations ... for all of Dareville.

Sue stood tall and looked about her new purchase with a wide grin. "Lots of possibilities here," she said.

"You could house a second family just in here." Cal's footsteps thundered over the floor as he walked the perimeter.

"I was thinking it would make a great home studio."

"That, too." Cal nodded. "Much easier to move around here than in that laundry room."

"No," Sue faltered, and stepped closer as Cal whirled around to face her. "I was thinking a recording studio."

He said nothing, and Sue walked past him, gesturing to the beams. "I wouldn't quite know how to build it, but I figure I'd let you and Brady handle the details."

"You'd let me and—"

"Ellie mentioned at one time that Brady wanted his own studio so he wouldn't have to drive into Virginia Beach. But building one off the cottage seemed like too much of an extravagance, and they don't seem to want to sell the cottage and buy a bigger place." Sue looked up at him through her lashes. "That place holds a lot of memories for them, I guess. I don't blame them for not wanting to let go."

"I know. I have many fond memories, too. Particularly of the backyard woods."

Sue giggled. "My realtor called today. I'm supposed to meet her this afternoon to sign the papers, and this place will officially be mine."

"So, it's not bought yet?" Cal felt nervous. "We're trespassing?"

"I borrowed her key. I told her I wanted one last look before I did the deed, and got the deed." She smiled wryly. "Also, I wanted to gauge your reaction." She stepped forward and took his hands. The heat of her touch sent his pulse racing. "When I first met you ... actually, when I found you in the shower, I was so shocked. And for days after that, I wanted to strangle you."

Cal grinned.

"Now, I'd strangle you only if I thought you might go back to New York without offering me the chance to join you." Her touch trailed up and down his arms; he sighed and reciprocated, pulling her close so that her hip rubbed against his crotch. His cock strained against the seam of his jeans and he delighted in her reaction.

"See what you do to me with the slightest touch?" he growled.

"I can *feel* it, yes."

He snaked a hand across her throat and down to one breast, feeling her nipple harden underneath the thin fabric of her T-shirt. "Woman, I love you."

There, the bullet was bit. The ceiling didn't collapse; no lightning struck him dead. He watched her face, the serenity of her smile remained.

"I know, I heard you tell Ellie," she said. "Do you really mean it? I mean, I know how you felt about her..."

"What I feel for Ellie now is nothing more than friendship. I'm sure she's told you about my, uh, *participation* in her and Brady's activities..."

Sue bit her lip and cast him a coy smile. "Can't say as I approve, but that was before my time."

"And it's my past now. This," he undulated his hips and ground his erection between her thighs, making Sue gasp, "is my present, and my future, I hope."

"Cal," Sue cried quietly. The spacious attic seemed to shrink around them as Cal lowered his mouth onto hers for a searing kiss. She heaved against his chest and pressed her fingers against his back, tracing his spine. Cal moaned his approval as he gently plundered her mouth, cupped her bottom and drew her even closer.

"Say my name again," he gasped when he broke free.

"Cal," Sue whispered. "I love you. I love that you thought enough of my work to worry about what I'd want. But don't think I wouldn't give up this house or my studio here to—"

"Shh." Cal silenced her with a fleeting kiss on her open lips, then kissed her chin, her throat, and one breast through her shirt. "I think we've worried long enough about what we want. I *know* what I want right now."

He eyed the only window. Being overcast outside, no sun filtered through the glass to blind them. He shed his T-shirt and used it to wipe away some sawdust residue from the sill as Sue quickly removed her clothes. Cal then lined her shirt across the wood before guiding her to sit.

He knelt before her and spread her knees so far apart that they nearly touched either side of the window. Her pussy was warm and wet, aching for him. "This," he said, teasing her with a lick, "is what I want." He parted her lips and lapped at her clit, unfazed when Sue clutched at his head for balance.

Her labored breathing and pleased mewling was music to his ears, beautiful music. He couldn't think of a better place to make love and beautiful music as this than in a new studio. Yes, he would build a home studio here, he decided. Even if he never cut another solo album, he'd have a place to come and

compose what Sue inspired and record it, for her ears only.

As for New York, well, they'd worry later. They would work it out. Brady and Ellie did.

But he tried not to think of the distant future at the moment; the only thing that mattered now was Sue's pleasure, and when she came he lapped at her pussy in one last upward stroke. Then he rocked back on his heels and slid a finger into her slick core, twirling it inside her as she writhed on the ledge.

"Mmm." Her ecstasy rumbled low her throat and she gaze dreamily at Cal. "Why don't get undressed the rest of the way, and we can christen your new studio? Would you like that?"

"I would," said Cal. "For starters."

It *was* a big house, after all.

Seventeen

The bride wore sequins, as she had threatened. Cal, as best man, opted for more sober attire, choosing an outfit similar to the groom's—black slacks and matching jacket, long-sleeved white shirt, no tie. Brady had joked earlier that he didn't want anything binding him ... the wedding ceremony would take care of that.

Ellie had been checking the hem of her sleeveless white minidress as he said that, and punished Brady with a jab to the shoulder, her miniature bouquet clutched in the tight fist. "I'll show you *bound*," she warned, her anger betrayed by the wide grin on her face.

"You better," Brady growled back, and winked at Cal. In their suits, they might have resembled morticians on call if not for the silly grins on their faces. Their dark colors stood out among the gaudy, neon exterior décor of the 24-hour wedding chapel sandwiched on the Strip between two casinos. The wedding party, fueled with a few pre-nuptial martinis, had laughed uproariously at the chapel's neon sign depicting two flamingos wearing a top hat and veil respectively, their necks coiled into the shape of a heart.

"There's a picture for Mom's scrapbook," Ellie said wryly, and a touch of sadness darkened her face. Cal wondered if she was thinking of her mother, or her cousin Claire, both of whom declined to come to the wedding. He understood Claire's reasoning, but was irritated that Ellie's mother would boycott just because the couple wasn't marrying in a church. Brady loved Ellie and always would; his vows were valid regardless of where he said them.

Regardless, Cal hoped the family would eventually resolve their differences, if only to see Ellie happy. Looking at her now, he knew Brady would well make up for that.

He smiled as his best friend drew Ellie into a light embrace and guided her into the building. To think, a few months ago his stomach had turned at the thought of witnessing this event, watching his only chance with Ellie disappear with the exchange of vows and rings. Now he wished only the best for his friends.

He turned toward the parking lot, eyeing appreciatively the shapely approaching figure, the woman who now held his heart in her hands. "You coming?"

Sue wobbled toward him on an unsteady heel, bathed in the bright pink light from the chapel's sign. She was tugging on the faulty shoe, trying to right her gait, but looking straight at him with a devilish grin. "You realize that's a loaded question," she said. One last awkward step had her tumbling into his arms with a wild cackle, and Cal responded in kind.

"Well, are you?" he asked, his voice husky.

"Soon, I hope." Sue winked.

"You have *got* to stop drinking," he teased. "When are you going to learn that you can't hold your liquor?"

"I can so hold my liquor," Sue giggled. "By your ears."

"Funny. Save it for Amateur Night at the Tropicana Lounge, eh?" Cal kissed the tip of her nose and walked backwards into the chapel, Sue wrapped around him. He was about ready to come himself with the way her body was pressed against his, and looking down at those sumptuous breasts about to spill from her scoop-necked dress did little to assuage his desires.

He patted his jacket pocket for the ring boxes. "Hold that thought," he told her.

Sue brushed a hand against his hardening cock. "You know, you're right. I'd rather hold this than hold

my liquor,” she said. Cal groaned at the contact and was sorely tempted to let Sue continue. But it wouldn't do for the best man to have a huge cum stain soiling his pants; never mind that photo-editing software might take out the mark in the official wedding portrait, it wouldn't erase his embarrassment. Not only that, Ellie would never let him hear the end of it, and she would crow forever about how right she was about setting up the two of them in the first place.

Let her gloat, Cal thought with a more intense kiss on Sue's parted lips. Ellie had been right, after all.

The bride and groom were waiting in the main sanctuary before a podium draped in white and pink bunting. The room was compact and painted in bright pastels, with a few empty folding chairs offered for witnesses. A calmer environment than the outside sign advertised, Cal noticed, but as long as everything was legal he doubted Brady and Ellie would care. Ellie didn't even seem disappointed when the presiding official emerged from his office in horn-rimmed glasses and a dark blue Seersucker suit, looking absolutely nothing like Elvis. More like Elvis's accountant, perhaps. Ellie's attention was elsewhere to care.

The best man and maid of honor reluctantly separated and took their places and, after a mercifully short ceremony, Brady and Ellie were pronounced man and wife. The minister had barely congratulated them when a jubilant Brady scooped up his wife and devoured her in a searing kiss.

"Yes, you may now kiss the bride," quipped the staid little man as he pushed his glasses to the bridge of his nose and watched Brady slip his hand under the neck of the dress and palm Ellie's breast as if stuff like that happened in his chapel all the time.

When the two finally came up for air, they gathered Cal and Sue in a group hug. Ellie was bubbling over with joy. "Thank you so much for being here, you guys." She took Sue into a tighter embrace, crushing the bouquet between them. "You don't know how much it means to me to have you here."

Cal pumped Brady's hand. "Thank you for having us," he said, "and for paying our way."

Brady chuckled. "No, you don't get off that easy. You'll be working off all those buffets and room service charges this winter in the studio." He draped an arm around Ellie and pulled her closer. "I've got a batch of new songs ready to go."

Of course he did. With inspiration like Ellie, there would be no end to Brady's creativity. "Just as well," Cal said. "I should be free by then."

"Oh?" Ellie raised an eyebrow. "What're you doing that's so important."

Cal stood taller and drew his own bright-eyed woman beside him. "I'll be on my honeymoon. Of course, I have to get married first."

Brady and Ellie looked at each other, then at the smiling couple intertwined before them. Sue's grin nearly touched her ears.

"And wouldn't you know, we have a minister right here. All we need now are a couple of witnesses," she said, snatching Ellie's bouquet.

* * * *

Lauren McKenna drummed her fingernails on her desk, sighing as her Internet connection plugged along at a snail's pace. One of these days a cable Internet provider was going to have to offer high-speed services to Dareville. She had enough of the World Wide Wait.

A benign blip pinging from tiny speakers alerted her to her mail program. "Finally," she muttered, and pointed her mouse to open the loaded message in a larger window. The screen immediately filled with gigantic photos of smiling friends among neon backdrops. Lauren snickered as she scrolled up and

down, then left and right to see every corner of each picture.

"Sue," she sighed. A great photographer, her friend was, but Sue had much to learn about sending her work via e-mail. Otherwise she would know to pare down the size of the scanned photos before sending them in e-mail so they wouldn't gum up what little memory Lauren had available on her computer.

At least they were good pictures, free of red eyes and those grainy, mysterious white strands that usually marred the photos Lauren took with her endless supply of disposable cameras. She was touched that Sue thought to share pictures of Brady and Ellie's wedding, as well as hers to Cal. Lauren clicked on the mouse button to save the photos to a floppy disk. The other teachers at DPA would definitely want to see them as well, and fume with jealousy. Lauren snickered.

She grabbed the tote bag hanging on the back of her chair and slipped the unlabeled disk into a side pocket. The glint of a key caught her eye, and Lauren remembered she needed to stop by Sue and Cal's to water the plants and feed Typhoid, who was staying there for the duration of Brady's tour. She sighed, glad the newlyweds would be returning in a few days. How nice it would be for somebody to check on her stuff one day while *she* was on some fancy vacation!

Or, better yet, her honeymoon. All she had to do was snag the groom.

Before zipping the compartment shut, she pulled out an identical disk already there and turned it in her palm before sliding it into the proper port on her tower unit.

Opening a photo viewing program, she browsed through the files on the disk—the *budoir* photos Sue had taken of her, that Cal had kindly scanned onto the disk before they left for Vegas. Every night she looked at them, and still could hardly believe this had been her pouting and preening before Sue's lens. The pictures were wonderful, and Sue was wonderful for making her look so good. She had said as much at least a hundred times when Sue handed her the envelope containing the glossies.

"No," Sue had retorted, "*you* already looked good. I didn't have to do anything." And Lauren was amazed. She was hardly one to consider herself a prude, and anybody taking a tour of her modest efficiency apartment would realize that upon seeing her impressive collection of adult toys and films, but until now she never thought of herself as sexy. She was comfortable enough with her looks and figure, yes, and thought perhaps the pictures would at the very least serve to titillate Jake Marbury and spur him to accept a date with her. Skin was skin, and the more exposed the better, she believed when trying to secure somebody's interest. She hadn't expected to look like a glamorous porn star.

But *wow*, she thought, clicking through picture after picture tiled across her screen. She was *hot*!

Her mouse came to rest on the photo of her spread-eagled on the bed, fingering her clit with her eyes closed, her mouth pursed into a tight O. The detail was excellent; Sue had produced a picture worthy of *Penthouse*, and Lauren smiled at the thought. She wondered whether or not her friend would take that as a compliment.

My, but that girl looks like she's having fun. Lauren leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. Her hand slid beneath the band of her sweatpants and stopped at her pussy. She pried her lips apart and took hold of her clit, mimicking the photo, tugging the hard nub in rapid circles.

She wondered how Cal had reacted on seeing the photos. Had he been turned on? Surprised? Sue never said. But that didn't really concern her now. Would *Jake* be turned on? She hoped so.

A clear image of Jake surfaced in her mind, and she further quickened her pace. The handsome, silver fox with skin browned from hours of gardening, muscles toned from lifting heavy carts of produce, an ample bulge in his work jeans. He was a beautiful man, inside and out, and it seemed such a waste for

him to not have a companion. Yes, he was sixty, but he was virile. Easily he had a good twenty years left, why not spend them with her? They certainly wouldn't be boring years, she'd see to that.

"Mmm." Her pussy lips swelled and contracted as her orgasm hit. Lauren moved her middle finger to tease her slick opening while her forefinger stayed on her clit. Oh, it felt good, but Lauren needed more than just this. She needed a cock inside her. Jake's cock. She knew it was good to go, too, despite his age. She had socialized with his wife Cynthia over the years; Cynthia liked to brag.

She opened her eyes as her orgasm faded and the room slowly turned back to normal. She still had a month before the first year anniversary of Cindy Marbury's death, and she had decided to wait a month after that before approaching Jake so she wouldn't appear like a vulture. Two more months without a man ... she could do it standing on her head. The drought thus far was already at the year mark, what was another sixty days?

Lauren rose and plodded to the foot of her bed, kneeling before the cedar hope chest given to her by her grandmother. Really it was nothing more than an antique toy box, storing Lauren's supply of dildos and vibrating aids. The only hope Lauren expected of this box was that of a better and longer orgasm every time she opened it.

"I'm thinking pink tonight," she said aloud and plucked a thick, realistic dildo from its plastic casing. She stroked the soft silicone and tested its weight in her hand briefly before leaping into bed. Shedding her sweatpants, she lay back and teased her slit with the bulbous pink head before easing it inside her.

She gasped softly and clamped her pussy around the flexible shaft. Soon Jake would be doing this to her, and she would be clamped around him. She'd have no need to masturbate or use toys, because Jake would be pleasing her, loving her clit, making her come.

He had to. He had to fall in love with her, and she had to see to it by any means necessary. If she could show him that he was still a desirable man, and that she desired him, she knew she would win his heart. She needed this, she deserved this. She'd had enough shit relationships in her life; she wanted somebody good.

Jake was good, and he would be hers. She had to keep *that* hope alive.

Watch for the third Dareville novel, *Daring Young Man*, in late 2006.

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About the Author

Leigh Ellwood is the pen name of a writer of mysteries; the name she has chosen for the purpose of writing romance (be it chaste, sensual, or spicy) is derived from the names of two favorite entertainers (close to it, anyway—she doesn't want to give away too many secrets). She lives and writes in the sweltering South and seeks inspiration in the many people she has met and loved over the years.

Having found moderate success in writing mystery and suspense, Ellwood decided in 2004 to try her hand (and pen) at romance.

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