

DARING YOUNG *Man*

A novel of erotic romance by

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Daring Young Man

Also by Leigh Ellwood

Truth or Dare

Dare Me

Double Dare

Dulce

Jack of Hearts

Jack of Diamonds

Voyeur

Muse

Prologue

Lauren McKenna drummed her fingernails on her desk, sighing as she watched her Internet connection plug along at a snail's pace. One of these days a wifi or cable provider was going to have to offer its services to Dareville. She had had enough of the World Wide Wait.

A benign blip finally pinged from tiny speakers and alerted her to the arrival of new e-mail. "Finally," she muttered, and pointed her mouse to open the first downloaded message in a larger window. The screen immediately filled with gigantic photos of smiling friends waving before blinding, 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 Carmichael had much to learn about sending her work via electronic mail. Otherwise she would know to pare down the size of the scanned photos before attaching them to an outgoing message, so they wouldn't gum up what little memory Lauren had available on her computer.

Briscoe, Lauren reminded herself. Sue was married to Cal Briscoe now. The images rolling slowly down her screen attested to that.

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 Garriston and Ellie Shaw's Vegas chapel 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 Dareville Primary Academy, where Lauren taught and where Ellie used to work before quitting to marry the famous rock singer and enjoy a life of leisure, would definitely want to see them as well. And fume with jealousy, Lauren snickered to herself.

She grabbed the tote bag hanging from 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 new house to water the plants and feed Ellie's cat 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 one day check on her stuff one day while *she* was on some fancy, exciting vacation!

Or, better yet, her honeymoon. All she had to do was snag the groom.

Before zipping the bag compartment shut, she pulled out an identical disk already there, turning 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 a few months ago, 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 one-bedroom 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 at best spur him to pursue a relationship 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. *I am hot!*

Her mouse pointer came to rest on the photo of her spread-eagled on the bed, eyes closed and fingering her clit, her mouth pursed into a tight O. The detail was excellent; Sue had produced a picture worthy of *Penthouse*, and Lauren smiled at the notion. 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 let her eyes flutter shut. Her hand slid underneath 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 Briscoe had reacted upon seeing the photos for the first time. Had he been turned on? Surprised? Interested, even? Sue never said. But that didn't really concern her now. Would *Jake* be turned on? Surprised? Interested? She hoped so.

A clear image of Jake surfaced in her mind, and she further quickened her pace. The handsome, silver fox was always a delight to see: his 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 now that his wife was gone a year.

Yes, he was sixty and almost twice her age, but he was virile, Lauren could tell. Easily he had a good twenty years left, if not more, so why not spend them with her? They certainly wouldn't be boring years, she'd see to that.

"Mmm." Her pussy lips swelled and throbbed 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 his wife Cynthia over the years at school functions and town festivals; 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? She had plenty to keep her somewhat satisfied until the rainy season.

Lauren rose and plodded to the foot of her bed, then knelt before the cedar hope chest given to her by her grandmother. Really it was nothing more than an antique adult toy box, storing Lauren's supply of dildos, lotions, 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, tracing the raised veins, 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, sliding his cock into her pussy, 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 had had enough shit relationships in her life; she wanted somebody good. She would good for him.

Jake was good, and he would be hers. She had to keep *that* hope alive.

One

Any longtime resident would readily agree that summers in Dareville were traditionally and notoriously merciless. St. Francis Cemetery, for its lack of tree cover, should particularly have been designated the town's boiling point in mid-August. Sardonic jokes of frying eggs on granite headstones might certainly have been shared by visitors come to acknowledge and remember their respective dead on a typical Dareville summer afternoon.

Today, however, the few who solemnly strolled the grounds were granted a reprieve in a cool breeze that tickled the branches of the few trees dotting the landscape. This was weather reserved for a later day, perhaps October, but it was assuredly welcome now.

Jake Marbury lifted his face to the sun and smiled, taking the respite as a sign of good faith from his Creator. Having come from work in his denim coveralls, he didn't feel at all uncomfortable. Sad, yes, but that was to be expected, considering...

He lowered his gaze and fixed on the simple granite slab that marked his wife's grave. *Beloved wife and mother* read the caption below Cindy's full name and dates of life. There were no ornate designs or borders etched into the stone, nothing more to indicate that Cindy's final destination caused her widower any great expense. Of course, Jake had once expressed to Cindy his desire to offer her a memorial more suitable to her. Cindy, always the pragmatic one, had jokingly threatened to divorce him first before dying.

"Don't spend money on the dead, the dead never appreciate it," she had croaked, and touched a withered hand to her throat. "Spend it on the grandchildren. Better yet, spoil your next wife with something nice."

Jake's knees wobbled and he kneeled at Cindy's grave, recalling how those words had numbed him. "There won't be another wife," he had averred. "How can you even joke about something like that when you're dying?"

And, despite the ravages of cancer evident on her body and in her voice, Jake saw that sparkle in her green eyes, the same point of light and life that had attracted him to Miss Cynthia Redding so many years ago. "You'll love again," she said with a firm smile. "It may take a few years, but it will happen. It had better happen, too. You have too much love in you to let go to waste."

"It won't be wasted on our family."

"That's not the kind of love I meant."

That kind of love doesn't exist for me anymore. Jake sat back on his haunches; his shoulders slumped as he leaned forward to touch the stone. That love was in the ground now, resting in peace in a cold, steel box with his wife of forty-one years. It would never be resurrected.

His fingers brushed along the indented date of her death. Exactly one year and one month ago his wife, while lying in his arms, breathed her last, and nothing since had been able to replace the warmth of her body against his. Try as he might to fill the void left by that final embrace, be it with carts of produce from the grocery store or a wriggling hug from one of his granddaughters, he still felt as if a part of his own body had been removed. He smiled, but inside he ached for that loss.

"Sorry I'm late, darlin'," he whispered. He had meant to come on the exact anniversary, say a few prayers, and lay some fresh flowers instead of the tacky, vinyl bouquet left by cemetery maintenance as part of their "perpetual care" plan. His sons had prevented that visit, reasoning that Cindy would not have wanted their father to spend the day blubbering over his loss while he still had good breath in his lungs. The day was spent instead at Cindy's favorite restaurant, toasting her memory with champagne while the grandchildren dueled with their drinking straws. The store and other distractions had kept him away, until this afternoon.

"You would have loved it, the dinner," Jake told her as his gaze panned the overgrowth leading away from the stone. He could feel the sadness projected forward as his face pinched with sadness. Seemed only yesterday the grave had been freshly dug; now, new grass blurred the borders, making it appear as if Cindy had been dead much longer.

"It was a typical, noisy Marbury outing. Charlie pouted because Arlene got more fried shrimp on her plate, so Red had to sit between them to keep them from tearing up the place." Jake chuckled at the memory of the two little girls hissing juvenile insults at each other. "Counting shrimp, out loud, at the table!" he exclaimed.

"But, Granddaddy made it all better with hot fudge sundaes for dessert. Of course, I had to instruct the waitress to make sure the ice cream scoops were the same size." Jake laughed. "You know, when she came back she said she even counted all the nuts to make sure they got the same amount! Oh, Cindy," he said, "we had such a good time...you should have been there."

But the laughter gave away to a shuddering, sad sigh. Jake felt the tears sting the corners of his eyes. He had had such a good time, he had almost forgotten what the day was about, was what he was going to say. He had almost forgotten that was the day Cindy died...the day a part of him died, too.

Without a thought for the grass and dirt staining his coveralls, he leaned further forward and rolled on his back so that the top of his silver-crowned head barely brushed the granite slab next to Cindy's. This space was to be his grave, though the stone was unmarked—not even with his name. Jake left it blank at the behest of his two sons, as neither wanted to see his father's name etched there while Jake still lived. Jake thought it odd, but complied. Perhaps seeing his name on a grave marker would cement his mortality to them, he guessed, and his family had suffered enough with Cindy's death.

He closed his eyes, rested his twined fingers at his breastbone, and lay perfectly still. He would come here, to rest next to his wife for all eternity, and he wondered if the time would come soon. He wouldn't mind so much if it did. As much as he loved his family and the grocery—the business he owned and fostered with Cindy for nearly a decade—he found no true joy in life without her, and every day he found it increasingly difficult to stay upbeat. Minor interruptions of his misery, like last month's dinner, were just that, and hardly dented the shell that preserved his grief.

He wondered if his regular customers and employees were aware of the pain he masked daily when he greeted them, if they knew how badly he wanted it to end so he could lie here, underground, forever.

I miss you so damn much. Tears slid down his temples. Orange sunlight burned the insides of his eyelids as Jake sought to form Cindy's image in his mind. He longed to see her smile again, that lively spark illuminating her face. He ached for her soft, gliding touch across his bare chest when they lay together in bed, for her sweet kiss, her soft lips brushing the coarse stubble on his cheek.

He willed the memory of her form molded against his as they made love, her soft sighs and quirky movements every time he kissed a sensitive spot, every time he entered her. How, too, could he forget that mischievous gleam in her eye that accompanied the

gentle brush of her hand across his aching groin? Those touches she swore were "accidental"?

He chuckled. What he wouldn't give for one of Cindy's accidents, just once more. How could she expect him to become aroused by another woman? How could she suggest he find love again?

The breeze tickled a few strands of silver hair crossing his forehead and he felt a shadow cross his face. Jake thought at first the sun had ducked behind a cloud, but it didn't explain the soft breathing sound overhead. He opened his eyes to a near mirror image of himself, if that mirror were also a portal into time.

His son, Jake, Junior had his hands plunged into his charcoal slacks, and he was frowning down at him. "Taking a nap?"

"Resting," Jake, Senior mumbled and sat up straight.

"You look ridiculous, Dad. What if somebody else had come this way? They might have thought you had a heart attack." J.J. scanned the breadth of the cemetery; they were the only two people there right now. The others mourners were now gone. "You might have had one, too, if somebody scared you trying to 'revive' you."

"I'm fine. I'm healthier than most men half my age," Jake insisted, standing. He brushed the grass and dirt from his coveralls and arms.

I'm healthier, damn it. Healthier than his wife was. He was probably indestructible. Let him have a heart attack, he really wanted to say, and let it be a massive coronary with no hope of resuscitation. The sooner he escaped the surly bonds of earth, the sooner he could spend eternity with Cindy.

"I hope," he added instead, "that this visit was intended more for your mother than it was for checking up on your old man."

J.J. said nothing, and Jake sighed. He could only assume his son, having failed to find him at work and at the house, came here on a hunch. "You could have at least brought flowers, son," he said. "Made it look like you actually wanted to pay your respects."

"I do pay my respects to Mom, I was here last Sunday," J.J. said, sounding hurt. "Just because I don't advertise it like Red does, it doesn't mean I haven't forgotten about her."

Jake immediately felt bad. He patted his son's shoulder. "I'm sorry, son. I didn't mean it like—"

"And you know how Mom felt about us spending money unnecessarily, even for flowers," J.J. continued, sniffing. "She wouldn't want flowers on a grave where nobody else could enjoy them. She'd want to know why I wasn't buying anything for my nieces." J.J. looked down at the grass. "Or for a girlfriend."

Jake snorted at that. Up until the day she died, Cindy had harangued her eldest to go forth and multiply as his brother Redding had done. Jake wondered now if J.J. was feeling guilty for not having respected that final wish. Though he dated, he still wasn't actively looking.

"True," Jake conceded. He looked at the twin long stem roses he had laid by the stone. Not an extravagance, as he picked them from the store, but he could hear Cindy clucking all the same. Her frugality and shrewd mind for business had kept the family financially comfortable, yes, but Jake had often distressed over the fact that Cindy had not received the luxuries she so deserved in life.

She wouldn't have wanted them, Jake reminded himself. *Save for the grandchildren, always the children and grandchildren.* He knew, though, that Cindy was not entirely stingy or didn't like nice things; she was just very practical.

But still...just once, to have surprised her with a diamond necklace or earrings would have made him happy. He'd never have that chance now. J.J. would never be able to present a grandchild to his mother...too much guilt.

Shaking off the *would haves* and *should haves*, Jake turned to his son. "What was so important that couldn't wait until I got back to the store?" he asked.

"A son needs a reason to see his father?" J.J.'s smile was crooked.

"Most sons don't, but you're unlike most sons."

"I don't quite know how to take that," J.J. said.

Jake chuckled. "Don't take it as an insult, son. I certainly didn't mean it that way." With one last sad nod to Cindy's grave, he turned and started back for his truck, parked in front of J.J.'s Mercedes on the narrow gravel road splitting the cemetery. "What's on your mind?"

He heard paper crinkling as J.J. fell into step beside him, and cringed. J.J. had been showing him lots of paper lately, and obviously couldn't take a hint.

"I got an e-mail today," J.J. began.

"Was it one of those jokes that's been forwarded around the world a thousand times? Because if it isn't, I'm not interested in the next words about to come out of your mouth. In fact, I don't even want to hear the joke."

"Come on, Dad," J.J. whined. "At least give it some thought."

Jake stopped short of the truck and let his shoulders sag. He had given it plenty of thought, every day since Red and J.J. had first broached the subject of Jake selling the store and retiring. As often as Jake thought about being called home, though, the notion of retiring and sitting around his house and waiting to die had less appeal. Jake's Organic Market had been a dream in his youth, one that Cindy helped him realize, and in his eyes giving it up would be akin to selling off a piece of his soul. True, he didn't like living without Cindy, but working at the store—keeping his mind on business—had made living less painful.

J.J. waved the printout in front of his father's face. "It's a great offer," he was saying. "A good twenty percent more than what the store is worth."

"I'm not selling." Jake was firm. "I've accepted that you and Red don't want to take over the business, and there's no reason for me to sell. Not while I'm still capable of working."

"Don't you want the time to rest now, Dad? You've worked long enough, you've earned it."

"The work is restful, son. I wish you boys could see that. I don't play golf. I have no desire to buy an RV and see the country, and I hate bingo. I would rather work at the store." Jake resumed his path to the truck and rounded the front grill. "The people are wonderful, and I get plenty of exercise, unlike you, who sits in a cardboard cubicle under a fluorescent light all day..."

J.J. came up behind his father and cut off his path. "I do not," he said, annoyed. "I'm on the road a lot, showing houses and commercial properties."

Jake pointed a finger, pressing a divot into the paper. "I don't want to hear that you've been showing *my* property around. Jake's is not for sale. I'm not retiring and I'm not selling, I don't care how much money is being thrown at me." What was the point in retiring and sitting at home, where nobody waited for him?

"It's a lot of money," J.J. sang. "You could buy a second house at the beach, be closer to me and Red and the girls..."

"I already have a nice house. You're going to make me sell that, too?"

J.J. crumpled the paper in his fist and punched it into his free palm. "It appears I can't make you do anything. I'm just giving you an easier alternative to working yourself to death."

Jake gently brushed past his son. He hoisted himself into the truck cab, slammed the door, and cranked the engine. He rested his forearm on the edge of the opened window and smiled at J.J. "Work is not death for me, son. Right now it's the only thing keeping me alive, aside from my family. No amount of money is going to tempt me into giving it up. Besides," he added, gunning the engine, "money won't bring your mother back, so what's the point in having so much of it if you can't buy what you really want?"

The truck rumbled away, and Jake watched the image of his first born standing in the middle of the road shrink in his rear view mirror. He knew J.J. meant well, and tried not to dwell too much on their conversation. J.J. just couldn't understand his father's attachment to the store and his desire to keep working, Jake decided. Unlike his younger son, J.J. wasn't married, nor had he enjoyed a lasting relationship with a woman. How could he possibly sympathize? Big money offers for the store were not going to ease the pain.

Jake wondered if anything short of death would.

Two

With a dramatic sigh, Lauren dropped the bulky cardboard box to the floor beside her sofa; its contents rattled and clanked as Lauren straightened her form and waved to the box with a flourish. "My friends," she addressed the two lovely blonde women before her, "let the ceremonial rites begin."

Ellie Garriston and Sue Briscoe were curled around either end of the sofa, their feet tucked under cushions and pillows as they sat. Each sipped from a wineglass. Presently Ellie, closest to the box, unfolded one leg and curiously toed the box.

"You sure this stuff will burn?" she asked, suspicion coloring her voice. "I can just imagine the looks on the faces of the firemen when they root through the charred remains of your house to find the only thing intact is a box of sex toys."

"Not necessarily," Sue chimed in. "That box is cardboard. It'll burn."

"Say, you think the firemenn would stick around to party?" Ellie laughed.

"Ha ha." Lauren crossed her ankles and plopped down on the carpet, extending her arms for balance and nearly spilling her own wine. "I mean it. A new era begins tonight. Say goodbye to the old Lauren."

"Goodbye, Old Lauren," Sue sang.

"I've readjusted my halo." Lauren puffed up her chest. "Getting rid of the toys, the dirty movies, anything that might make Jake uncomfortable when I've succeeded in my plan of making him fall hopelessly in love with me."

"Everything but the sexy pictures Sue took of you that you're planning to show Jake, right?" Ellie cast Sue a wicked smile, then leaned over the box. "I can't believe you're actually going to *burn* this stuff. Think of how much money you've spent over the years. This stuff isn't cheap, and I'd know."

Ellie plucked a translucent pink rabbit vibrator from the box, holding it upright and turning it in her hand. "Look at that craftsmanship. Note the detail of the tiny bunny's ears."

"I'm familiar with the tiny bunny's ears, thank you," Lauren said. Yes, she was especially familiar with the way those tiny rubber bunny ears hummed against her exposed clit as the vibrator's rotating shaft twisted in her pussy, driving her to multiple orgasms every time she used it. No more, though. The only cock she wanted inside her was attached to the man of her dreams, not something mass produced in Taiwan.

Sue snorted. "What do you suggest, El? We call the Goodwill and donate everything? Vibrators for the underprivileged?"

Ellie shrugged. "Poor people need lovin', too, you know. Besides, some people who aren't poor can't afford some of this stuff. Like that thing. What the hell is *this*?"

Now Sue was bent over the box, sifting through its contents until she found the item in question. "Good night, Lauren!" Sue held up a dildo thicker than the blunt end of a baseball bat. "How...?"

"That was a gag gift, from my bachelorette party. You remember." Lauren frowned, recalling briefly the failed marriage that had ensued. She had never used the enormous phallus, and imagined it was likely not meant for human consumption. As a conversation piece, though, it did the trick.

Sue dropped it back into the box when something else caught her eye. "Ooh, you're not going to throw this out, are you?" she asked, holding a jar of flavored cream. "You might actually want to use this with Jake."

Lauren shrugged. She didn't like the tone of Sue's voice, which to her suggested that her plan to win Jake was nothing more than a pipe dream. Sue had cautioned her about it more than once, and it had taken a good amount of wheedling from Lauren to get Sue to take the *budoir* photos. Though Sue was pleased with the end result, Lauren could tell Sue was still pessimistic about the plan.

Well, she would show Sue. She would show the whole town. She would win Jake, but in order to do that she had to show Jake a side of her he could find attractive and available exclusively to him. That would have to entail getting rid of the jar in Sue's hand...for now.

"Truth be told," Lauren said finally, "I don't know how Jake would react on seeing a jar with a label marked 'Cummings' Clit Cream.'"

"As opposed to seeing the actual clit itself in a photograph?" Ellie screwed her face into a wry smile.

"He's not going to see *all* the pictures, El. Just the tamer ones at first," Lauren insisted. It hadn't been Lauren's intention for Sue to take *Penthouse*-style photos, but Lauren had gotten so carried away with the photo session that Sue ended up taking more intimate pictures than originally planned. Lauren first thought to have Sue destroy the racier pictures, but the quality was so good she couldn't bear to do it.

Assuming the plan worked, Lauren felt she could gradually introduce the steamier pictures into their relationship at a later time. And she could always buy more cream; this stuff would just congeal if left unused.

"Just peel the label off, he won't know it from face lotion." Sue unscrewed the lid and dipped her pinky into the thick, pink goo, then tasted. "Mmm." She licked her lips. "Strawberry."

She dipped a second finger deeper into the cream and beckoned Ellie closer. Ellie obliged and sucked the dollop into her mouth with a wicked grin. "That's good, isn't it?" Sue cajoled.

Ellie concurred with a throaty moan. "Can I have it if you don't want it?" she asked Lauren.

"Take anything you want. I don't care anymore." Lauren waved the box away, and the two women giggled with juvenile delight as they rummaged for spoils. Ellie extracted dildo after dildo—they seemed to get larger as she emptied the box, and she appraised each one with an amused look.

"Don't know if I could take a used dildo," she laughed, arranging them on the carpet according to height. "Besides, with Brady around I don't really need one anymore."

Lauren reached for the wine bottle on the coffee table and refilled her glass. "Oh, really? What do you do when you're in the mood for double penetration now?" She looked archly at Sue as she asked. Lauren knew quite a bit about Ellie's sex life; at least, she knew as much as Ellie was willing to share, which was practically everything. She knew in the days before Sue hooked up with Cal Briscoe that Cal had occasionally participated in three-way sex with Brady and Ellie Garriston. Given the couple's strong sexual appetite, Lauren had to wonder what the couple was doing now for fun.

Ellie looked at Sue, who offered only a coy smile as an answer. Lauren sipped her wine. Surely Cal wasn't...*no*. Where did that leave Sue?

"You're not saying..." Lauren's voice faded.

"We have an understanding," Ellie said, and winked.

"We have an understanding," Sue echoed, and pocketed a squeeze tube half-filled with anal lubricant.

O-kay. Maybe she'd get the goods after a few more glasses of wine. Loosen a few tongues if they didn't start licking certain places. "Well, while you two are sifting through that stuff, you might be interested in what used to be my prize possession. It's yours if you want it. Otherwise I'll just bury it in the backyard and hope my neighbors aren't spying on me. They'll think I've committed a crime," she said, giggling, as she sprang to her feet.

When she returned from her bedroom Ellie and Sue were still debating the true meaning of Lauren's cryptic statement. Both women then gasped with surprise as a heavy body fell to the floor in front of them.

"Oh, my," Ellie said.

Sue pointed her drink at the floor, her arm wavering over the crooked lines of the splayed limbs. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Ladies, meet Bob." Lauren puffed her chest and slowly knelt to the floor beside the figure's torso. "Or, should I say, Bodacious BOB 9000."

"Bodacious BOB," Ellie whispered, awed. "The gold standard in battery-operated boyfriends. How did you ever get your hands on one on a teacher's salary? What, did you finance this thing?"

"Worth his weight in gold," sang Lauren as she stretched out the corded waistband of the black sweatpants covering the lower half of the sex doll. A very thick, very realistic vibrator rested between its thighs.

Lauren didn't wait for her friends' awed gasps to completely fade. "And check this out." She reached behind Bob's neck and flipped an unseen switch; instantly the dummy's pouty lips parted slightly to reveal a plastic pink tongue, swirling in circular motion.

Ellie whistled. Lauren couldn't help but notice her friend shifting to press her thighs together. Ellie definitely yearned for a ride.

"Instant three-way," Ellie said instead. "Nice."

Sue frowned and leaned on the couch arm to look down the hallway. "Don't tell me you kept *that* stuffed in your toy chest, too?"

"No." Lauren feigned annoyance. "Hall closet. Though when I first got him I sat him on the couch. It's a good safety device for single women. Anybody looking through the picture window will see the back of a guy's head and think you have company."

Lauren sighed at the image of Bodacious BOB perched on her sofa while she laid her head in his lap and watched television. Unlike her ex, Bob was thoughtful enough not to interrupt her during her favorite shows. Or fuck another woman in their bed while she was at work.

"Good luck trying to give that away." Sue sank to the floor and followed the hypnotic movement of Bob's tongue, then rolled her eyes. "I mean, I'd take him, if I thought he had other talents."

"What's left that Cal won't do?" Lauren arched an eyebrow.

"Cleaning gutters. Speaking of the devil..." A muffled chirping drew Sue closer to her handbag, from which she produced her cell. Sue checked the number and nodded before answering, moving away from the other two.

Ellie stroked the University of Virginia emblem on Bob's sweatshirt, smirking as Lauren wheedled. "Come on," Lauren urged. "He slices, he dices, he vibrates up to seven speeds. Fun for the whole family."

"I already have one of those, thanks." Ellie continued to shift. Lauren could only imagine her friend was getting wetter at the thought of settling her pussy on such a rapid tongue. Judging by how quickly Sue was gathering their things, it only meant Ellie was about to get her wish, and then some.

God, how she wanted some. This plan had to work.

"Early night?" she asked Sue, and pointed to the corner where Sue had earlier shucked her shoes. Their husbands, one of them had mentioned earlier, were holed up in Cal's home studio laying down tracks for Brady's next album. This after just finishing a tour. Where did they get the energy?

Lauren sighed. She had an idea.

Sue stepped into her low heels and urged Ellie on with rapid arm movements. "And they've started without us. Ellie!" she snapped, and the other woman literally sprang into the air and caught her purse in mid-stride. She was out the door with a hasty farewell, but Sue lingered with an expression Lauren thought rather odd.

"Join us," she said.

Lauren had her glass raised and missed her mouth, dribbling wine down her blouse. "What?"

"You want to be fucked, I can see it clearly. You come with us, you will be, any way you want it." Sue rifled through her purse, not looking at Lauren. "I feel kinda guilty if you're going to be here alone."

"I'm used to it. And anyway, what would Brady and Cal say if you brought home a fifth wheel?"

Sue smiled. "Actually, it was their idea."

O-kay! The image of her nude body sandwiched between two handsome musicians, whose physiques and libidos well betrayed their ages, crossed her line of vision and blocked her friend from view. Yeah, it would be nice for once to have a real live cock throbbing in her pussy, to have two strong, callused hands kneading her breasts or ass as that cock pumped into her and filled her with searing hot cum. To have another cock to suck on or, heaven forbid, fucking her ass while this was going on was too much for her imagination.

Her friend was insane. Too much sex had gone to her brain.

"You would let your husband fuck another woman?" she asked, incredulous. She hoped Sue wouldn't say anything about recording something like this!

To her continued shock, Sue shrugged. "It's sex, Lauren. It's a beautiful thing to do and share. I've been prudish about it in the past, but, you know, being with Cal has set my inhibitions free. We love each other and nobody is going to threaten that. We also love sex, and agree that it isn't something we have to keep to ourselves."

"So...you guys are swingers then?" Lauren couldn't believe she was having this conversation with the same woman who, only months earlier, had cringed at Ellie's explicit stories of life with Brady, *and* had been so reluctant to take Lauren's candid photos.

"I wouldn't say that. We don't actively look for other people. We do, though, have very good friends," Sue said, and Lauren knew she was talking about the Garristons. "We'd like you to be our friend, too."

"I am your friend." Lauren had to wonder where Sue and Ellie would figure into this new overture of friendship. Lauren liked sex, too. No, she *loved* it, but only with men.

Only with Jake, she would see to that.

"Go." Lauren waved her friend away just as an impatient car horn sounded. "Have an extra orgasm for me, and don't use any complicated safety words you might forget. I'll be fine."

"Okay." Sue didn't sound convinced of Lauren's content, but backed slowly away all the same. "Call if you change your mind, or just come on by and jump in. Oh, before I forget, I have an extra CD-ROM with your pictures."

Lauren's attention was on Bob now. She heard Sue digging through her purse. "Just put it in my bag, on the chair by the door. Thanks!" she called. When the door clicked

shut, Lauren let out a ragged sigh and gathered up the sex toys strewn on the carpet. She resisted the temptation to use any or all of them. Water water, everywhere...

"I am such an idiot." She couldn't believe she had actually turned down sex. She couldn't believe Cal and Brady would dare to suggest that Lauren join the couples in their reindeer games.

Of course, this was Brady and Cal...why be surprised?

She could have spent the evening being kissed, licked, fondled, and fucked by as many as four people at once, but instead would be sprawled on her living room floor wondering how well silicone would burn and should she use lighter fluid for the bonfire.

"I must really be in love," she told Bob. Bob wisely offered no comment.

"Exactly," Lauren said, and unbuttoned her blouse. The stain had set, the blouse was ruined. Into the box it went with the other discards, then Lauren poured another glass of wine.

She drained it in two swallows, and swore Bob had winked at her.

Another glass later, Bob was licking his lips and smiling. By the next glass, he was making kissy noises and beckoning Lauren closer.

Lauren shook her head. The entire room moved and blurred before her, but Bob stayed in focus, and *his* focus appeared to be the valley between her ample breasts, which heaved in her black lace bra. Lauren felt her nipples spring to attention.

Bob pursed his plastic mouth. "Sit on my face," he demanded.

Lauren snorted. Why did he sound like a *mafioso*? No more watching *Sopranos* reruns before bed. "No," she said.

"Come on, let me lick that gorgeous pink clit of yours. Press your thighs against me and grind that sweet pussy into my face until I suffocate."

"No! What do you mean, suffocate? You can't breathe anyway, you're not real!" Could he move his arms now? Lauren scooted away, just in case, and hoped she hadn't had enough wine to render him mobile. Horny as she felt, she wasn't in the mood to fuck in the Twilight Zone. Let Ellie and Sue engage in the sexually bizarre.

"Let me taste me you again, Lauren," Bob begged. "I want to run my tongue up and down your pussy lips and drain you dry. I want to make you come, just like the good old days."

"You want to go back into the closet?" Lauren warned, her voice slurred.

"What's the matter, Lauren? Don't we have fun? Don't you like riding my cock, feeling me vibrate inside you?" Bob sounded like a pained *mafioso* now. "Why do you want to bury me in the backyard, after all I've done for you, and to you?"

"You're not real, Bob," Laura said, and rose on legs of gelatin. She waved her arms for balance, forgetting she still had one last swallow in her glass. Liquid red rained on the carpet and Lauren cursed.

"Ugh, Merlot," Bob groaned. "That's not coming out."

"Doesn't matter. The landlord will have new carpet put in when I give up the lease to this damn place."

"Why you doing that?"

Lauren looked pointedly at her plastic playmate. "No point in keeping this apartment when Jake has a big house."

"What? Oh, come on, Lauren. You're not really going through your stupid plan to seduce that old geezer, are you?" Bob laughed. "I didn't think you were into soft serve."

"Good night, Bob. You can sleep out here with the box of dildos. Make some new friends." Lauren stumbled away, looking for the hallway and failing. Who had changed the structural integrity of her apartment?

"I bet he's never eaten a pussy in his life," Bob called behind her. "Eating pussy probably wasn't invented when he was young."

"Yeah, well he's gonna eat this one, and he'll be the only one who does." She could have sworn she had a bedroom.

Bob's voice faded. "It's not gonna happen, Lauren. Jake's mooning over his dead wife."

"Dead being the operative word, Bob. She's not coming back."

"Long as he remembers her, though, she'll never really go away," Bob teased her. "Fuck somebody your own age. Better yet, fuck me."

"Go to hell, Bob." Where *was* her bedroom?

"*Sit on my fa—!*"

Lauren found the right door and slammed it, effectively silencing Bob. She hoped the insecurities voiced through the sex doll wouldn't follow her as she dreamed tonight.

She crawled headfirst into bed without bothering to undress the rest of the way, fisting the sheets in a poor attempt to center herself as her inebriation threatened to make her sick. Her pussy ached, but she fought the urge to crawl back to the living room and straddle Bob's big mouth. Not that she could if she wanted to; too much wine had turned her body to lead. She hadn't the strength to even palm her pussy and stroke herself to orgasm.

She wanted Jake to do that to her.

Man. She really loved the guy.

She really wanted him to love her back.

Three

Hey, Kenny, who's that girl over there? The one in the blue dress, walking with Marcy?

She's new in town, then?

Oh, no reason, I'm gonna marry her, is all...

A bleating car horn tore through Jake's memory, and the sepia-toned Dareville of old shifted back to present day. Jake ground the clutch and jarred the stick shaft back into drive, then urged the truck through the intersection Cindy Redding crossed with her cousin Marcy forty-three years ago. Dareville had changed quite a bit since the day he first laid eyes on his beloved, and Jake took care to note everything as he passed into the gravel lot of the market, parking in his designated spot.

He leaned back in his seat and sighed, looking askance at the road. Every detail remained vivid, every move ingrained in a timeline Jake often relived. That day had been the first of the senior year, with Cindy and Marcy headed to first period English class at Dareville High. After the final bell of the day, both girls snacked on French fries and Strawberry Nehi at the Shake 'N Stop, then walked it off with a few leisurely laps around Dareville Memorial Park before heading home. Jake couldn't join them due to his after school job at Doc Anson's drugstore, but the grand picture window in front allowed him a perfect view of Cindy's activities.

He could only watch her from a distance, Cindy swinging his heart in circles the way she swung her clutch purse around on its string-thin strap as she and Marcy joked amongst themselves.

He remembered how, the next day, he introduced himself to her. A few days after that, she and Marcy had forgone the Shake 'N Stop for the snack counter at Doc Anson's, and its handsome young soda jerk.

Jake slid out of the truck cab and surveyed his immediate surroundings. Small as Dareville was, it had changed drastically since that time. Dareville High was now a private elementary school undergoing a massive renovation, names from the Vietnam and Desert Storm eras had been added to the granite memorials in the park, Doc Anson had long since died, and Jake's Organic Market now stood where the Shake 'N Stop had been.

And Cindy Redding no longer crossed the street in a pretty blue dress. She wouldn't cross from the town square to the parking lot to greet Jake with a kiss, no matter how hard he envisioned it. He shook his head, forced to be content with going back to work instead.

The concern of his employees and regular customers, however veiled by strained smiles and surreptitious glances, was overwhelming and easy to detect once the automatic doors of his store slid open. Jake took it all in stride, nodding to every person who acknowledged him, hoping nobody would stop him for conversation. Small towns yielded big news, and Jake didn't doubt everybody present knew he had gone to the cemetery yesterday. He didn't want to bother with any more condolences.

Sad, welcoming murmurs were drowned out by the soft rustle of paper grocery sacks and the chirping of barcode scanners. Jake nodded again to those he knew and hoofed quickly to his office, only to immediately confront another soft frown.

Marlene Robeson sat behind his desk, poring over green-lined spreadsheets scribbled in pencil. She snapped to attention at his near quiet footfall. "Jake, honestly, you need to join the twenty-first century," was her greeting.

"I'm well, Marlene, dear, and yourself?" Jake snatched a tissue from the box on his desk and mopped his brow. Ninety degrees in the shade, and Marlene had the AC turned off in his office. It had been on full blast when he left to run his errands; only she and his assistant manager had permission to be here in his absence, and Danielle always made herself scarce when Marlene was around.

Marlene was either a penny-pincher of the highest order or the world's oldest masochist, Jake decided. One long stride had him in front of the dial. He ignored the look of disapproval on Marlene's face and smoothed a wrinkle from one covered leg.

"Besides," he said, "what's wrong with the way I look? From what I understand, coveralls never went out of style. Sure, I could sew some rock band emblems on the pockets—"

"I'm talking about this, Jake." Marlene slapped a chubby hand on the tattered ledgers stacked before her. The force caused a clump of graying dark hair to fall between her eyes, and Marlene wearily blew away the errant strands. "How do you expect me to figure everything out if you've got numbers written all over the place? They're even in the margins, and written in faded ink. I don't know how you're still in business."

Jake nodded to the coffee machine at Marlene's right. "Is that fresh?" It was the least combative remark he felt he could make. Marlene's complaints were nothing new, and Jake thought it highly amusing that a retired accountant of Marlene's skill couldn't decipher the market's records, seeing as how often she talked of working for less organized clients. No, this was a dialogue practiced once too often between them. Marlene complains of lack of organization, he insists Cindy never had a problem doing the books...

...which would be Marlene's cue to remind Jake that Cindy was dead. Jake didn't need to be reminded, and he didn't feel like continuing with the school play. He hoped Marlene would take the hint, get the books done, and go home.

Unfortunately, she stuck to the script. "You need more help, Jake," she said, her brown eyes soft and pleading. She pressed both palms to the desk and idly picked at the blotter. "You need to get a computer in here, with accounting and inventory software, and you need to hire a regular assistant to use it because I know you don't have the patience for it."

"I don't, you're right. I'd rather get my hands dirty," he said. He would rather, too, not continue the age-old discussion of buying a computer. Wasn't it enough that he conceded to the electronic scanners at the cash registers five years ago? The constant beeping aggravated him; it sounded so impersonal, as if prompting customers to get their groceries and get the hell out of the store. The last thing Jake had intended with the market was to make shopping seem more like the hurried chore it didn't have to be. People hurried enough as it was, rushing from place to place, gobbling down dinner before soccer practice, ballet lessons, and twelve hours of godawful reality television. Jake wanted the store to be a place where people could slow down, and enjoy browsing what he had to offer.

He missed the days of old, the melodic *ka-ching* of a cash register, and the pleasantries exchanged with customers as he rang up and bagged their items. Such stories he had shared with people in the forty years he had worked and/or owned markets...customers became friends, they would bring their children to shop, and their children would grow to become customers. He longed for those days again, that way of business might be the tonic he needed to get on with life.

But, he didn't want a computer, of that he was certain; technology for him didn't make life easier, it made life move faster. He wanted to pace himself.

He had wanted that for Cindy, too. She left too soon.

"Look," Marlene was saying, "it's not like I'm asking you to get HAL..."

Jake looked at her, frowning. "Who's Hal?"

"HAL. You know, HAL, from *2001*...forget it." Marlene sighed. "Just get a small computer. A laptop, it won't take up any space. You can have all your business files in one folder, and you can get rid of all this paper crap lying around waiting to catch on fire."

"What if there's a power outage?" Jake asked. "All my records will be lost."

Marlene tapped her temple and smiled. "No, Jake. It's all stored in the memory banks."

"I have a good memory."

"You have a good stubborn streak, is what." With one final slap on the desk, Marlene stood, granting Jake a better view of her. He took note of her nice floral print dress—cinched at her thick waist and scooped wide at the neck to accentuate her full bosom, hemmed at the knees to show off her shapely calves. Too nice a dress to wear for one hour's work in a sweltering office, he decided. Perhaps the sixtyish divorcee had a late lunch date.

If that was so, then it was all the more reason Marlene should be going. All Jake wanted to do was work and, when time permitted, maybe sit at his desk and think of Cindy. "I'll keep the computer in mind, Marlene, if you really think it will help," he said. He hoped, rather, his words would encourage her to leave, but Marlene frustrated him by reclaiming the chair.

"Phone rang while you were out. A Miss Jenkins from Wilson Realty," she said archly.

Damn. Marlene knew better to answer the private line in his office.

Marlene held up a slip a paper and squinted. Jake saw the slanting cursive through the paper, punctuated by dark pen point impressions. "She wanted you to know that the Drydens have accepted your offer, and that you should call her back to schedule an appointment for closing." The paper fluttered to the desk and Marlene frowned. "Now why would you make a land purchase through a realtor who isn't your own son?"

"For the same reason I expressly instruct people to let the voice mailbox pick up my private line when I'm not around," Jake said calmly, pouring a mug. *Because it's none of your damn business. It's nobody's business.* Not yet, anyway.

Eventually, though, everybody in town would know that Jake planned to open a second store in Suffolk. Business was strong at Jake's, so much that the purchase of a vacant storefront in the heart of Suffolk was doable, if not necessary. More customers were coming to Dareville from that area, so why not save them the trouble of driving? A second Jake's, too, would reach customers even farther away.

A second Jake's would give him more work to do, more opportunity to push away the pain of his loss. Work work work...he wouldn't heal, but the activity would help.

"All the more reason why you need an assistant," Marlene insisted when Jake grudgingly revealed his plans in the wake of her wheedling. "You can't manage two stores with this system, Jake. You'll lose more money than you'll take in."

"Danielle will run the Suffolk store full-time. It makes perfect sense, since she lives out that way," Jake said. "She knows the business inside and out, too. I don't doubt her abilities and I trust her completely."

"So do I, Jake, that's not what I meant. I know Danny does a great job here, but who's going to help *you* here when she's gone?"

"I'll hire another assistant manager, Marlene, more than likely I'll promote from within. I'm already thinking of a few people."

"Well, of course, but they'll be doing Danny's old job, and not taking on these financial responsibilities. If you're serious about opening a second store, it would be better to have somebody handle the books for both to keep everything organized. Really, Jake..." Marlene rounded the desk and came up beside Jake, touching his arm. Jake flinched; this was not the comforting touch of friend, a gesture of camaraderie.

He watched, frozen, as Marlene's smooth, manicured hand cuffed him at the bend of his elbow and slid up toward his shoulder. This was a caress, a silent, passing innuendo that Jake didn't want to encourage, and it prompted him to reconsider why Marlene was dressed so nicely in the middle of the day with nowhere in particular to go.

"Marlene..."

"You get somebody to come in every day for about four hours, instead of once a week like I do," she interrupted. "She could work here since you seldom use the office."

"I hadn't budgeted for an office manager," Jake said. "Just a boost in Danny's pay and hourly wages for about eight employees. It's not going to be a big store."

"Pay a minimum wage. It'd be a good job for somebody who is retired and knows money." There was no mistaking the hint in her voice. *She*. Who else could *she* be?

Jake sighed. He liked Marlene, but wasn't sure he wanted her around more than she already was. Why, too, was she hinting about a paying job when she had been perfectly happy to offer her services for no charge after Cindy died?

"Marlene," he tried again, "are you having money troubles yourself?" Yes, it seemed odd for somebody like Marlene to be in a bad way financially. Jake imagined she could balance the national budget if given the chance. She was fishing for something.

"Oh, no." Marlene stepped back and released Jake as if she had been burned. "I just think with your business growing you should consider something a little less volunteer."

"Why pay somebody when you're doing my books for free, though?" Jake teased. He had to admit, he didn't come to work in the best of moods, but Marlene's squirrel-like expressions and fidgeting gestures were fun to watch. *Just come out and say it, girl*, he wanted to add.

"Unless you're thinking," he said instead, "that you would rather have the time for yourself. I certainly wouldn't blame you, I'm sure you have better things to do..."

"No, of course not. I don't mean it like that." And the soft, suggestive grip returned; Jake felt her hand tighten this time around his bicep. It felt almost possessive, and it unnerved him. Where a simple touch like this from Cindy would have quickly encouraged an erection, Marlene's touch did nothing for him sexually.

"I enjoy being here, Jake. I love the work, it's given me a sense of purpose since I retired, and since Chet and I split," she continued, her voice bitter at the mention of her ex-husband. "But the workload will grow as Jake's grows, and with this new place you'll need somebody to be here for more hours to help."

"You do have a point there, Marlene." Jake shifted nervously in place and fiddled with his coffee mug. It was enough to negotiate freedom from Marlene's grasp, and he rounded the desk to his chair to avoid further contact. "I probably could use another employee."

Another lover, though, was out of the question, and as Jake looked into Marlene's eyes it was becoming all the more clearer to him. Marlene didn't want to just replace Cindy in the office, but Jake didn't want to think about another woman in his bed. He couldn't.

"Tell you what," he said finally. "I'll call Red and have him place an ad in the *Shopper* for a new position. Maybe start interviewing next week." He cast his eyes down to avoid the look of obvious disappointment on Marlene's face.

"Oh, okay," she said. "But don't you think—"

He tapped the ledgers and cut in quickly. "Are we good for the week?"

Marlene opened her mouth again to answer, but it was the scream coming from deep within the store that caught Jake's attention. The distant clatter of falling boxes and muffled curses urged him out of the office, past a bewildered Marlene, to see what was ruckus had erupted in his store.

Four

"Miss McKenna, a word, please?"

Lauren looked toward her open classroom door and her smile instantly faded. While it wasn't unusual for Principal Yost to call teachers into the hall for a quick consultation during class periods, Lauren recalled the tone of the middle-aged, balding man's voice was never so grim. She didn't like the straight line of Yost's thin-lipped expression, nor the white of his knuckles as he stood in the threshold, gripping the doorknob. This was bad.

She felt her heart skip, but swallowed back the unsettling feelings so as not to worry her class. She hoped this wasn't about a student's illness or death; there were two absences in her class today.

"Certainly, Mr. Yost," she said, then turned to the redhead in the front row of desks. "Nellie, why don't you continue reading aloud through page forty-two, then Darryl will take the next page, and on down the row. I'll be right back."

As Lauren approached the hall, however, she noticed a thin figure wavering behind the portly principal. She recognized the waifish Emily Steele, a regular substitute teacher at Dareville Primary Academy.

"What's going on?" she asked, flustered, as Emily brushed past her with an apologetic smile into the classroom. Emily took her place behind Lauren's desk, and when Lauren moved back inside the classroom to protest a cold touch to her shoulder silenced her.

"Lauren," said Mr. Yost. "Let's go into my office."

Lauren didn't feel her heels echoing against the tile, couldn't hear her principal's labored nasal whistle as he walked along side of her. This was about her, and it wasn't good. A simple "word" with the principal wouldn't necessitate a replacement, and a replacement wasn't required for good news.

As she followed Mr. Yost's guiding arm into his office she prepared herself for the worst possible scenario that might have instigated this meeting. Her mother was dead, her father was dead, her sister or brother...any combination of the four. She wanted to scream, and cry, and found she could do nothing but twist her face in surprise when Mr. Yost took one of the chairs in front of his desk rather than his imposing Levenger catalog bought throne behind it.

Mr. Yost folded his hands into his lap and fixed on a spherical marble paperweight. He nodded forward. "Lauren, there's something I'd like for you to look at on my computer. Could you move the mouse and erase the screen saver for me?"

"Uh, sure." Lauren carefully walked crab-like around the desk and took the fancy swivel chair. When no alarm sounded, she placed a trembling hand on the computer mouse. She didn't have to move it far, her hand shook just enough to trigger the sensor, and illuminate the screen with a large photograph of an exposed, pink pussy.

"Oh, God!" Lauren turned away.

"Not quite," Mr. Yost sighed. "Lauren, Miss Churchland found a number of your yearbook students in the computer lab not thirty minutes ago," he began, referring to the school's media specialist, "crowded around one of the monitors looking at this. Would you like to explain how they ended up there?"

Lauren blinked. "I-I know some of the students on my staff share a study period. I wrote them a pass granting them access to the library so they could—"

"I mean the pictures, Lauren. Take the CD out of the tower unit, would you? It's by your right foot."

"Hm?" Lauren leaned to one side to see the unit underneath the desk. She depressed the proper tab and out slid the CD-ROM, along with what little reserve Lauren had left. The handwriting on the disc's label was unmistakably Sue's.

Lauren squeezed her eyes shut to keep away tears. The room seemed to swirl move around her. Mr. Yost's voice was hollow.

"One of the students we talked to told us that you gave him some CD-ROMs to work with during his free period," he said.

"Mr. Yost, I can explain everything..."

"Lauren, it's not my place to comment on your personal life. When you walk out those front doors, it's not my concern what you do, what you watch, and with whom you watch and do it," Mr. Yost kept his voice even, "*unless* there's a chance it will reflect badly on the school, and especially if you bring it here."

Lauren didn't dare open her eyes. She knew that chubby face with the whistling nose was staring right at her, appraising her, maybe shaming her. Yost probably thought she was some kind of pervert. Her fondness for adult entertainment had always been something she kept quiet—even Ellie and Sue hadn't known about her entire toy and video collections until the other night.

How many pictures had her students seen before the disc was confiscated? How many had Yost seen? The picture onscreen showed no evidence of her face...God forbid, had anybody seen that she was the owner of that dripping, pink pussy? Lauren hadn't the chance to inspect the disc herself; she didn't know what pictures were there, if she could be identified.

How did it get into the school, anyway? Everything she had from Sue was at her home desk...

Except for the CD-ROM Sue dropped off, the one Lauren asked to have placed in her bag. Sue must have slipped it into her school bag instead of the other tote she had hanging from the chair by the front door.

Damn it. Lauren knew she couldn't blame Sue for this. Thinking everything in her school bag was benign, she had a student fish out the discs before leaving for the lab. Lauren hadn't bothered to look herself. She had nobody else to blame. She should have taken the disc from Sue's hand rather than get drunk and argue with a talking sex doll.

"This is very serious, Lauren."

No shit. "I realize that, sir."

"Contributing to the delinquency of a minor," Yost added. "Lauren, you could wind up on the state sex offenders list for this."

"I-I—" *What?* This opened her eyes. Lauren's heart fell to the floor. "Mr. Yost, it was an accident!" She held up the disc. "This wasn't supposed to leave my house, and I didn't intentionally give it to my students."

How Mr. Yost managed to contain his anger, if he felt any, was impressive. His voice was calm, as if discussing the weather or his favorite football team. "Nonetheless, they got it. Some people won't care how."

"Do some people have to know about it at all? I get on that list, I'll never be able to teach again."

"That would be the least of your worries, you could be facing jail time." Yost's expression was emotionless.

No. "You would let that happen to me? One dumb mistake and you want to send me to prison?" Panic set her voice up an octave.

"Lauren, I don't want to—"

"It's a picture of a naked woman, Clay!" Lauren ignored the wince as she addressed the principal by his first name. To hell with protocol. "These kids see them all the time in the *National Geographics* kept in the same damn media center."

"Tribal women seldom spreadeagle for *National Geographic* and..." he looked uncomfortable away, "touch themselves, Lauren."

Lauren swallowed. *Please, God, don't let my face be seen in any of those pictures. Just let them think I'm into lesbo porn.*

"Now, if you'll keep quite for two seconds, I'd like to tell you that you need not worry about criminal charges," Yost was saying. "We want to make this go away as quickly as you do."

"Well," Lauren wheezed, coming down, "that's better." She pressed a hand to her breastbone to still the pounding.

"We will, however, have to ask for your resignation."

"That's not." What else could she expect, though? Such a breach in morals couldn't be swept completely under the rug. And pictures like these wouldn't be quickly forgotten, or kept quiet among her students.

"Effective immediately," Yost added. "Miss Steele will teach the remainder of your classes."

"What?" There were only two weeks left to the school year, and the yearbook had to go to press. Would a substitute with no knowledge of the publication process see to that, too? Why not just let her finish the year?

That question went unasked, for the look on Mr. Yost's face told Lauren that all loose ends would soon be tied.

She sighed, resigned to her fate. Better, she supposed, she be removed entirely than have to endure clandestine glances and whispers in her direction for those two weeks, like Ellie had to deal with for the time she was with Brady before she finally quit. Removing her would stifle gossip, she believed the DPA board had decided.

Numbers scrolled endlessly in her mind as a quick survival plan formulated. She had only so much in savings, and so much in monthly alimony coming to her. It was cheap to live in Dareville, but she would still need an income. Perhaps if she reverted to her maiden name she could get a few resumes out to Virginia Beach...would Yost even give her a recommendation?

"Lauren?"

"Hm?"

One brow raised and wrinkled the principal's high forehead. "My chair?"

* * *

Just like that, fifteen years of her life were negated, brushed to one side with not so much as a thank-you. Mr. Yost simply helped her to stand, escorted her out of his office, and sent her home for the day with the request for a letter of resignation, *effective immediately*. Her things would be delivered to her by somebody in maintenance, he'd said as the heavy front doors closed on her tears and her career.

Lauren had shivered at that cold remark. It hadn't mattered that she spearheaded the annual yearbook project, or that she had helped organize the benefit concert with Brady Garriston that brought in the funds to refurbish the whole damn building. One computer disc, meant only for one pair of adult eyes, engaged a virus that caused everybody to forget everything good Lauren had done for that school.

Her things would be sent to her by the freaking janitor. They didn't even want her in the building anymore, fearing the children would be infected with some strain of immoral leprosy.

Lauren slumped behind the wheel of her sedan, glassy vision blurring the red light hovering above her, and snorted at the recent memory. To think, too, her downfall came about in the computer lab, the very one *she* had set up in the media center! She would laugh at the irony if she weren't so upset.

"Let's move it! Today!" Another driver's anger easily surpassed his chirping car horn, sounding behind her. Her limbs shaking, Lauren clutched the wheel and plowed her car through the stale green light, unsure of where to go. She was in the town square, passing shops she would likely never patronize again...because she was broke...because people would see her and whisper...because she was a whore...

No. She wasn't that. A tad daft, perhaps, for having thought up the picture scheme in the first place. Sue had been right when Lauren initially proposed it; she had warned Lauren that something like this could happen. Why hadn't she listened to her friend?

As Lauren rolled past Sue's studio storefront, fresh tears slid down her cheeks. Maybe if she plowed straight through, the glass would slice her to ribbons, then she would be deaf to future taunts and downcast eyes.

"Don't think like that," she then grumbled to herself. They *were* just pictures. She would weather this storm. Hopefully in a few months one of the local ministers would get caught with a parishioner and the town would move onto to juicier topics. Why was she getting ahead of herself, anyway? Yost said he would make the situation go away, if only to keep the school free of scandal. The kids were still in school, so who would know now what they had seen?

She had to go somewhere, but not home. Going home would only bring a sad finality to the day. She was fired today, any letter of resignation coming from her was mere dressing. This wasn't quitting, it hadn't come on her own terms. She wasn't wanted at Dareville Primary anymore, and the last thing Lauren wanted to do was go home and lick her wounds, or drink and be taunted silently by Blowjob Bob.

Good night, she had left that thing lying in the middle of the living room floor! Lauren remember stepping over him on the way out the door this morning. How careless...and fitting.

A brief glance in her rearview mirror told her the chirping car behind her was gaining, its driver not amused. Who needed to blast through Dareville at this time of day? She didn't need anymore aggravation. She executed a sharp turn with no thought to where she might go...

...and whirled right into the parking lot of Jake's Organic Market.

Jake!

Would he learn of this mess? Of course he would—everybody who worked at DPA shopped at Jake's, and Jake knew everybody who shopped. Yost could only do so much in keeping a scandal from breaching school property. Lauren had to wonder if she would soon see Jake's grim smile of disapproval greeting her from now on. It was a small comfort to know that nobody could link the pictures to her crumbling plan to win Jake.

Still, if word did indeed get out, Lauren doubted she could concoct a Plan B. Not that she cared that the whole town might think her a tramp, only Jake's opinion mattered. Lauren doubted he'd go for a so-called porn peddler.

Well, hopefully she still had time. She would stock up on chocolate milk and those mint crème sandwich cookies she loved, destroy every bit of evidence that she had dirty pictures taken of her, then gorge herself into a diabetic coma.

Jake's truck was in its usual spot...she would go inside for one last look at that handsome, silver-framed face and try not to make a spectacle of herself. Amazing how the most innocent of smiles brightening that man's face could make her pussy ache and throb with want.

In the cookie aisle, she found no love. Every flavored crème sandwich cookie was shelved, except for mint. In the space reserved for those packages stood only a discarded paper cup containing a crumpled napkin, trash from a previous shopper left for somebody else to clean.

Lauren nudged the nearest stock boy, a wiry boy nearing twenty with one ear studded like a dog's collar, a bit too roughly at that. "Do you have any more Mint Crème Delights?" she demanded.

The stock boy stretched lazily to one side to glance at the gap in the cookie aisle. "We're out," he said.

"Thank you, Sam Spade. Do you have any in the back that you haven't shelved yet?"

The boy gave her an odd look, as if to say his name was not Sam but something else. He wasn't wearing a tag, but Lauren was past caring at this point. The boy instead shrugged and returned to his cart. "Nope. What you see is what you get. New shipment of stuff's Wednesday, but I don't know what's gonna be on the truck, lady. I just unload the food."

Lauren didn't feel her hand grab the scruff of his neck, didn't feel her feet planted on the linoleum floor as she swiveled the surprised young man away from his cart and headfirst into the gap where the mint crème cookies should have been. Her body and her mind were no longer her own, usurped by her anger and frustration.

"You see this hole, bucko?" she hissed. "I got quite a few holes that need to be filled, but I really, *really* want this one taken care of first. Now, I don't want to wait for Wednesday, I don't want to wait for some fucking truck..." Her voice rose with each word, darting glances in her peripheral vision told Lauren that an audience was growing, but she didn't care.

"...all I want is one fucking bag of Mint Crème Delights, which I will take home," she continued. "Then I will eat every single one and jump on top of my life-size sex doll and masturbate with it until I pass out, but I *can't do that without the cookies*."

She pressed the stock boy into the shelf; his face turned red from the pressure and he gasped for breath. Her arms were numb from the elbows down as she slowly banged the boy against the shelf. Boxes rattled and shrink-wrap bags crinkled in the surrounding, shocked silence.

"Who. Do. I. Have. To. Fuck. To. Get. Some. Fuck. Ing. *Mint. Crème. DELIGHTS?*"

The last, high-pitched word had the stock boy reeling backwards into a display of cheese crackers. The bright pyramid of red and orange toppled before at least a dozen agog spectators. Lauren's enraged state allowed her to watch the scene unfold in slow motion, and it wasn't until she truly focused on the dazed young man slumped on the floor, clutching a box of crackers to his chest, that sanity returned and she realized what she had done.

"Oh, God," she whispered, and reached out to the boy. "I-I am so sorry..."

The stock boy flinched and scrambled to his feet. "Lady, you are really fucked up," he said, holding the box as a shield.

"Jimmy, you know I don't like that kind of talk here, especially to our customers."

A soft touch to Lauren's shoulder accompanied that stern, deep voice. Lauren felt the dam break on contact—tears spilled down her cheeks, her pussy flooded and soaked her panties. Even scolding an employee, Jake's words easily seduced her.

Jake's firm hand now gripped her waist to keep her standing straight, but all she really wanted to do was fall back into his arms and savor the heat of his body and let his scent wrap around her. Let the people around them fade into a blurred background while she willed his hands south to caress her thighs and cup her pussy, stroking it to orgasm.

"Lauren," he asked, concerned, "is everything okay here?"

"Oh, yes," she purred, now smiling. She tilted her head back to look at Jake, he looked so cute with his brows furrowed and his lips twisted in wry confusion.

"Right. Why don't we go sit down somewhere and figure out what we can do to help." He steered her from the aisle, nonchalantly through the small throng of onlookers. "Jimmy, could you clean up this display, then meet me in my office in about fifteen minutes?"

"Mr. Marbury—"

"Please, Jimmy?" Jake winked, then nodded to his patronage. "Hope everybody is finding what they need."

With that, they were away. Lauren glided on air beside him to his office, past a surprised Marlene Robeson, and settled into the chair behind his desk at his insistence.

"What's all this, then?" Marlene demanded. Lauren stifled a laugh; the older woman sounded like a mother hen clucking about a security breach at the Old MacDonald Farm. She looked just as hen-like, leaning forward and casting Lauren a pointed, disapproving glare.

"Just a little customer dissatisfaction, nothing that can't be swiftly resolved," Jake said. His back was turned to both of them as he poured coffee into a paper cup. "Marlene, if you're done here, I need a word with Lauren."

"Jake..."

Jake turned slowly, the look on his face strongly requesting Marlene's exit, regardless of whether or not she was finished with whatever she did here. Marlene's dark gaze stabbed once more at Lauren before she marched out of the office without another word.

"How do you take your coffee, dear?" Jake carried on, calm as ever. Lauren's heart leaped at the endearment and took the cup as was. The warmth of the liquid as it slid down her throat was welcome, but did little to quell the burning want she kept pressed between her thighs.

"Jake, it's all my fault..." she began when she came up for air. "I didn't mean to...I mean, I was just..."

Jake was at her side, gently shushing her and rubbing her shoulder. His concern was comforting, and as Lauren followed his gaze she finally noticed how badly her hands shook. Coffee erupted within the cup, licking the rim and spilling down one side, staining her fingers. The heat didn't faze her at all. She carefully set down the cup and twined her fingers on her lap.

"Lauren," Jake said, "I have a feeling your outburst didn't have anything to do with a shortage of mint cookies, good as they are. I mean, I'd certainly be upset if I couldn't find my favorite treat..." He chuckled softly, and that further dissolved the tension in the office. Lauren rocked forward in the chair, looking away. How ghastly she must look to him right now, she mused. She wished for a mirror to see exactly how much damage the tears had wreaked on her makeup.

"I know," she said. "It's not worth turning one of your boys into a bocce ball. But, Jake, he didn't do anything wrong. If I hadn't provoked him—"

"I'm not going to fire Jimmy, if that's what you're thinking," Jake said. "I am going to talk to him about his language, though. It doesn't matter who is at fault for what, my employees do not talk to my customers the way he did to you."

"Of course." He sounded so protective of her, loving. Lauren let words caress her; her skin prickled and her nipples tightened with the hope that his hands would follow.

"A bit early for you to be out shopping," Jake said. Lauren met his quizzical grin with a sadder one. "Want to talk about it?"

She sighed. "Might as well. I'd rather you hear it from me than as twisted, third-hand gossip." How to tell him, though? Aside from Ellie, Sue, and Cal, nobody knew the

pictures were intended for Jake's attention. How could she explain that she had been fired for unwittingly passing off photos of herself to her students?

She chose her words carefully, explaining that she had been asked to resign due to circumstances caused by her own carelessness. "Let's just say that what the children found, should not have left my home," she said finally. "Rather than mire the school in some kind of scandal, it was decided that I leave DPA."

"Well, that's ludicrous," Jake exclaimed, and Lauren sighed. Of course, he'd think that way. He didn't know for certain that the entire computer lab had access to photos of her swollen clit.

"Can't you work it out with the school somehow?" he asked. "A suspension without pay, or some kind of compensation? Seems ridiculous to just can you over one little mistake."

"It was a doozy, though," Lauren said. "And I really don't want to talk about it anymore."

"Of course, dear. I understand."

Lauren wanted to cringe. This was not the kind of conversation she wanted to have with Jake, and this was definitely not the way she wanted Jake to talk to her. They had gone back in time twenty years, back to the old drugstore where Lauren and Sue had spent their allowances on Cokes and candy bars, Jake ringing them up at the register. How Jake had addressed her then was no different from his current voice.

His tone was fatherly, she wanted it to be passionate. She wanted to hear him say how badly he wanted to pull her onto his lap and straddle him, grinding his hardening cock into her, soaking her panties. No, she actually wanted him to just *do* it, and tell her how much he enjoyed it.

She wanted to unbutton her blouse and undo the front clasp of her bra, let her breasts spill forth and invite Jake to pop a nipple in his mouth, and flick his tongue across her skin until it pebbled. *Um...* her pussy throbbed just thinking about it. Anywhere else, any other time, her hand would be cupped over her pussy lips, rubbing the ache to orgasm.

Fuck me, she wanted to say. *I love you, please love me back*.

Instead, she rose and reluctantly eased away from Jake's sympathetic touch. "I should go," she said.

"You okay to drive?" Jake sounded convinced that she was not. "I could drop you off—"

"No, thanks," she broke in quickly. Inside, butterflies flapped in unison, creating a swirling maelstrom of emotion. How she had wanted for Jake to say those words, but his timing was terrible. She knew she looked like hell, felt like hell, and knowing Jake he would want to see her inside the house. No way was Jake going to escort her into a living room strewn with sex toys...and Blowjob Bob stretched across her carpet.

"I'll be fine," she assured Jake. "I just need some time to myself, to wallow in self-pity." She offered a sad smile which Jake returned.

"Wish we had some Mint Creme Delights with which to wallow. If it helps any, a bag or two of peanut butter sandwich cookies has helped me in the past. Take some on the house."

"Thanks." Lauren let out a choked laugh between snuffles. It wasn't an invitation to bed, but a good start nonetheless...if she could dare show her face in the store again. "They'll come in handy, give me something to munch on while I'm updating my resume."

"It's going to take two bags of cookies to update a resume?"

"Why not? I have all the time in the world now."

"What will you do?" Jake asked. "Where do you think you would like to work?"

"It's not like I can write my own ticket." Lauren shook her head. *Unless Penthouse is hiring.*

"You shouldn't sell yourself short, dear."

"I don't know what I'll do, Jake." Lauren moved toward the door. "Teaching is all I know. I could go to Virginia Beach and find work, if there's any. Of course, if I am lucky to find work it probably won't be until September, so I'll then have to find something to tide me over until then. Luckily my rent is covered, and I have some savings and alimony, I could live off that and work part-time somewhere." As she spoke the image of her miserable self in a Burger King uniform surfaced. Enough years of that and she'd be working alongside her own students one day, or working *for* them. *Ugh*.

Jake stroked the stubble on his chin. "Driving all the way to Virginia Beach for a part-time job doesn't sound logical, Lauren. You'd basically be working to pay for gas. It'd make more sense to find something here."

"Not much to do around here."

"Not necessarily. I'm sure you have more skills than you realize," he said warmly. "All those lesson plans you do, and grading papers, you must know something about keeping records and being organized, right?"

"Yeah."

"How are you with money?"

"I haven't robbed any banks lately." Lauren cast a wry smile and looked around the office. What was Jake getting at? "And I can balance my checkbook, if that means anything." Her eyes misted over. There would be no more grading papers at DPA, and it occurred to her that Mr. Yost might not be so inclined to recommend her for future jobs. What school would hire her?

"Means plenty to me. Lauren, what would you say to a job here, at Jake's?"

"Would you like fries with that?"

"What?" Jake laughed.

Lauren wanted to melt and seep into the floor. "Huh? Did I say that out loud? I didn't mean to, I was thinking about something...Jake, I wasn't trying to belittle your offer...

Offer? Of a job, working for Jake?

With Jake? Under Jake? *Underneath*...

Lauren blinked and shook the erotic thoughts from her head so she wouldn't be tempted to speak out of turn again.

"Well, I must say, Lauren, that would be a good sales pitch for my cashiers to use, if I sold fries. Don't think it would work with the potato dishes and organic hash browns in the frozen foods section, though."

"Heh, guess not," Lauren said with an uneasy laugh.

"No, Lauren, I'm thinking of something more clerical."

Lauren tried to concentrate as Jake explained his planned expansion of Jake's, and the need for office help. With the room suddenly brighter and cozier, with Jake now standing and edging closer to her, she could only think of his arms around her, drawing her into a loving embrace. She swore the birds pictured in mid-chirp on the wall calendar behind Jake's desk came to life and echoed the joy bubbling inside her.

*Me and Jake, confined in close quarters...*she could feast daily on his handsome smile and lean, tanned arms, flawless silver hair she desperately wanted to see between her thighs as he ate her pussy.

She turned her head and saw Jake was still talking, and snapped to attention in time to answer his question. "Of course I can start Monday," she said. "No sense in sitting around the house waiting for something to happen."

"Of course." Jake laughed uneasily, it seemed, at that, but his voice pitched back to a jovial tone. "Well, then, why don't you come by around seven? We open at eight, you know that, and I can give you the fifty cent tour and orientation. As much as you shop here, we might whittle that down to a quarter."

She laughed in reponse to Jake's chuckling, then let out a surprised yelp at the nearby *thwack* just outside Jake's office door. Jake seemed not to notice—maybe these sounds were common in the store—but it was enough to lure Lauren partway out of the door to see the ample form of Marlene Robeson retreating, slouching past shoppers and staff toward the exit. A dark cloud seemed to follow the older woman.

Marlene had been eavesdropping...for the entire time? Lauren's eyes narrowed. Thoughts of her disgraced dismissal faded as she realized a new conflict on the horizon. Marlene had to be upset with Jake hiring on Lauren for a job for which Marlene was better qualified, and what would upset Marlene about being passed over for part-time work unless she were after Jake, too?

Lauren realized, too, as she bid Jake goodbye and started for the exit herself, that she had the advantage. This thought weighed heavily on her mind, yet lightened her spirits so much that she practically floated out of the store, her head held high. Never mind that she had forgotten Jake's offer of free cookies, or that in a matter of minutes the Dareville grapevine would report Lauren's indiscretions to the entire town...

She stopped short of her car. Jake would hear, too, about the pictures. Would he rescind his job offer? He couldn't, he wasn't the sort of man to renege like that.

Was he?

No. Lauren wiped the sweat from her hands before taking the wheel. She wouldn't bring up the pictures herself, she decided. Maybe Jake would hear the gossip and dismiss it. He wasn't the gossiping sort, he was a wonderful man who saw the best in everybody, even an old fuddy-duddy like Marlene Robeson. If he happened to make mention of pictures, she would think of an explanation.

Tomorrow. Like Scarlett, she would worry about it tomorrow. Today, she had to clean up her living room, and think of something to do with those pictures.

There didn't seem to be any reason to show them Jake anymore. She drove home smiling, believing in some indirect way they had already done the trick.

Five

*Jacob Earl Marbury, you are certifiably insane.
Insanely in love with you, Cynthia Louise Redding.
Come down from there before you break your neck!
I don't want to, I feel like I could fly. Do you think I should, Cindy? Do you think I
should flap my wings and fly to the moon?
I think you should come down and kiss me.
Yes, I think one kiss would send me to the moon quicker.
I'll bet. Now get down from that blasted tree! You're not the daring young man in the
flying trapeze, you know.*

No, he wasn't. He wasn't then, he wasn't now. Daring didn't seem to come as easily as it did when he was eighteen and swinging from trees.

That night, so long ago, Jake felt he could have leaped from that gnarled magnolia tree in the middle of Dareville Memorial Park and hung in mid-air, suspended only by his beloved's smile, fueled by the knowledge that she had said yes. *Yes*. They had been walking home from graduation rehearsal, and Cindy Redding had said yes, she would marry him.

Those memories wafted before him, veiling the scene at the house across from his, moving in perfect time to the present. He was watching a neighbor's teenaged son negotiate thick tree limbs with precarious balance in an obvious attempt to impress the girl standing below. They were so focused on each other, Jake was certain neither one was aware of the voyeur rocking on his front porch with a glass of iced tea.

A lovely scene it was, young love in blossom.

His free hand raked the chipped paint of the chair's arm, crossing to that of the empty chair beside him. It would be a *perfect* scene, he decided, with Cindy sitting there, sharing it with him. He could see her now, rocking in unison with him, their chairs creaking a gentle twilight rhythm.

He would have to settle instead for being alone, assuming J.J. would not stay long.
J.J.?

Lord, what now? The rocking chair stilled as his son's Mercedes cut into the scene and shattered the serenity with one slam of the driver side door. J.J. wasted no time crunching up the gravel path to the porch steps, yet more papers clenched in his fists. Internet jokes they were not, Jake knew.

"Have you *completely* lost your mind?" was his son's greeting.

Jake chose to remain nonchalant. "Not completely, no," he said. "The *medulla oblongata* is still intact. I can walk from here to the bathroom without tripping, and at my age that's all I can hope for. Did you want some tea?" He held up his tumbler; the sharp edges of melting ice scratched at the plastic.

"What I want is an explanation." The paper crinkled in J.J.'s grasp as he waved them in Jake's face. "What's all this about you buying property for a second store in Suffolk, and why did I have to hear it from Annette Jenkins? Why did you even *buy* through Annette, and go outside the family?"

"Would *somebody* within the family have let me make such a purchase without argument, son?" Jake said. "I'm an adult, and as such I reserve the right to spend your inheritance any way I wish while I'm still breathing."

J.J. slumped into the chair beside Jake; Jake cringed as Cindy's ghost dissolved in the brief gust blown upward to move J.J.'s bangs from his face. "You should be taking it easy while you're still breathing," he grumbled. "You keep working and you won't be breathing much longer. They'll find you dead in aisle six surrounded by athletes smiling down at you from Wheaties boxes."

And that would be a bad thing? The sun was setting before them; it was too late for this argument, and if it wasn't he didn't want to have it again. Rather than say anything, he elected to rock back and watch his son stew.

"And why did you have to go to Annette, of all people?" J.J. whined.

"What's wrong with..." That's when it occurred to Jake that his son had dated Annette Jenkins, and that it had ended badly, as had a number of J.J.'s relationships with women. A pang of regret washed over Jake. No doubt the young woman had crowed about the sale the first chance she got.

"Did you think it wouldn't get back to me, Dad? You *know* I have access to all real estate records and transactions in the area, and you know what? I probably could've gotten you a better deal on the land, as much as the idea of you expanding the business unnerves me." J.J. looked bothered, red in the face. He eyed Jake's tea with longing and Jake, without a second thought, surrendered the tumbler.

"I'm sorry, son. I suppose I was thinking more of myself than of your reaction. I know how you and Red feel about my working, and I didn't want to aggravate matters by getting you further involved. The deal's not done yet, I could still bring you in to consult—"

"No, no. Don't listen to me, Dad. I'm just ranting. Annette's a good agent, she'll do right by you, regardless of what I ever did or didn't do to her." J.J. downed the tea with a vigor that sent two rivulets streaming down either side of his jaw. Then, with a leering sideways glance, "You're not going to work double shifts, are you? That commute is hell."

"No. Danny will run the Suffolk store, and I'll stay here. Though I'll be up there a lot in the beginning, getting things ready."

J.J. grunted. It wasn't the answer he really wanted, Jake knew, but J.J. had no choice but to accept that he would not spend the rest of his life sitting around the house doing nothing. Waiting only made death's approach seem a longer time in coming. The more he worked, the quicker time passed.

"And if it makes you feel any better," Jake added, "I've hired on more help at the store. Office work, so I don't have to do it."

"I heard." J.J.'s tone was sour. "Though I have to wonder if much work will get done."

"Excuse me?" Jake asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Lauren McKenna. You hired on Lauren McKenna to work at the store." J.J.'s head lolled back against the rocking chair, the whites of his eyes large and glowing under the now illuminated porch light. "Between that move and the new store, I can't believe that I haven't tried to muscle you into my car to have you checked for dementia."

Jake snatched back the tumbler with a force that sent watered-down tea sprinkling down on his knuckles and J.J.'s pleated slacks. He ignored his son's curses and half-hearted hand swipes against the wet fabric. "Have *you* lost *your* manners, son? What in blazes do you mean by that?"

"You hired *Lauren* to work for you."

"She's in a bad way, I'm just trying to help her out before the next school year when she can find something permanent. And what's your problem with Lauren McKenna? She's good people."

"She's a whore."

That word floated in the air like a bad stench. Jake wrinkled his nose and steeled his jaw. Never in his life had he raised a hand to his sons. To be certain, the temptation had come and gone over the years, but until now the desire was never so strong.

"Young man," he addressed his son as though he were a child, "you do not come to my house and say such things."

"What? I shouldn't speak the truth?"

"You shouldn't pass judgment when you are not qualified to do so," Jake said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Last I read, only Jesus could do that." Truth, indeed. Where his son obtained the notion that a sweet woman like Lauren McKenna could be branded a...he sighed, he couldn't bear to *think* the word.

J.J. snorted. "What would Jesus do? Would He hire a...woman of loose morals...to cook his books?"

"If you had paid attention during Bible school you'd know the answer to that. What's your beef with Lauren McKenna, anyway?" Far as Jake knew, Lauren was one of the few women in town his son hadn't dated. "And how did you know I hired her as my new office manager? I haven't even told Danny yet."

"Ran into Marlene Robeson at the store earlier, while I was looking for you."

"Marlene?" Jake frowned. Had the older woman been spying on his conversation with Lauren? He tried to shake away the discomfort, but then wondered what else Marlene had been saying about him.

"If you needed an assistant, Dad, why didn't you just hire on her? She knows the system, even gave her free time to help you out, and she has more experience than Lauren."

Jake sighed, he had his answer, indirectly anyway. "I don't tell you how to sell houses, son. You didn't answer my question about your poor opinion towards Lauren."

"You know I'm on the DPA Board of Advisors," J.J. said.

"I do."

J.J. slouched in the rocker and lifted a foot to rest on the porch railing, but his leg wasn't long enough to reach. "Clay Yost called an emergency meeting. Informed us that a computer disc containing explicit nude photos of your new office manager was discovered in the possession of a minor."

Jake said nothing, but stopping rocking and fixed his gaze on the activity across the street. His young neighbor had executed a landing worthy of an Olympic gymnast and was now swinging his girl by the waist, dancing in circles as she whooped with delight. Yes, that pretty much happened with him and Cindy all those years ago.

"You hear me, Dad?" J.J. prodded.

"I did," Jake said coldly. "You have seen these pictures to know it was Lauren?"

"Oh, yeah." The words were drawn out and punctuated with suggestive laughter. "You know, if this office job thing doesn't work, she can always fall back on—"

"That's enough." Jake rose and stretched, searching his memory for yesterday's conversation with Lauren. She had mentioned an indiscretion, something that shouldn't have been brought to school...but suggestive pictures of herself? This girl who used to buy penny candy and ice cream sodas from him? He couldn't see it himself, and didn't think he wanted to see, but continue to know Lauren for the sweet young girl he had known all her life. Why she would consent to have nude photos taken was a mystery.

Also, it was none of his business, and as such it had no bearing on her employment at Jake's. It couldn't, she needed work, and how could he take back the hiring after

yesterday's tearful scene? Jake was certain there was a logical explanation behind such photos. An old gift for her former husband, perhaps? An old disc that got mixed up with some new ones? That had to be it.

"You know she's got the hots for you, right?" J.J. said when Jake voiced his sentiment.

"What?" Hots? Getting the hots was for matinee idol worship and teenagers. "Did Marlene Robeson tell you *that*, too?"

"She didn't have to. Lauren did."

"That's ridiculous. Lauren's your age. She can have any man in town and doesn't need to look my way. And why would she tell you anything?" Flattering it might have been, but a woman of such beauty and youth wouldn't look twice at an old, mourning geezer in coveralls. And J.J. thought *he* had lost his mind!

"She didn't say it with words, Dad. You don't see how google-eyed she gets when you talk to her in the store? I swear, I saw her watching you from the produce section once...what she did with the bag of carrots she was holding could be considered a misdemeanor in some states."

"I have had enough of this conversation, son. It would nice for once to sit down with one of my sons on a nice night like this, and drink iced tea and talk about baseball or the weather, or even argue about the war, but I guess as long I'm intent on working and hiring undesirables that isn't going to happen. I'm going to bed."

Jake started for the front door, but J.J. didn't budge. "It's just after seven," he told his father.

"I'm tired, son. Sick and tired." The outer screen door creaked, setting Jake's teeth on edge.

"Okay," J.J. said, "we can talk about something else if you like. Have you given any thought to dating again?"

Jake closed the door, ignoring the louder creak that followed. Slowly he turned back to his son, interested to see that the young man appeared dead serious.

"Come again?"

"It's been over a year, Dad," J.J. said. "Don't you think it's time to jump back into the scene?"

The scene? "Junior, I was never in the scene to begin with. Your mother was the only woman I ever dated, ever wanted to date, and ever will. I have no desire to jump into any 'scenes.' That part of my life is over."

"Is it?" J.J. asked. "You're not too old to work, apparently. Who is to say some parts shouldn't stop working either?"

"Junior..." Jake felt his embarrassment surface to his skin; he could swear the remaining liquid in the tumbler he held might start boiling from the transfer of heat. Just like his youngest to take the liberty of speaking so frankly to his father. J.J. had always been the blunt one, making his point whenever he chose, however he chose. A good quality to have as a real estate agent, maybe, but as a son...

"You're only sixty, Dad."

"That's right, I'm sixty."

"Paul McCartney is in his sixties, Dad, and he still tours."

"True, but I'm not Paul McCartney. You gonna bug him to retire, too?"

J.J. sighed. "My point is, Dad, is that you're not old, and as you've said before you're not dead. I'd rather you enjoy what you've earned and not work so hard, but if you're going to work, why not spend what little leisure time you have left with somebody?"

"I have you, Red, and the girls. That's enough."

"We won't always be around, Dad," J.J. said. "We have lives, too. You should live yours with somebody who cares about you. Mom would want that."

"Well, I wanted your Mom. *Want* your Mom, I don't want anybody else," Jake said, adamant. "And Paul McCartney might not have a problem remarrying, but I believe *I'm* too old to think about walking down the aisle again, even if that's what I wanted. Next time I walk down the aisle, it will be at your wedding."

J.J.'s eye roll implied to Jake that both would be waiting a while for that event. "I didn't say *remarry*, Dad. Get a girlfriend, someone to have over for dinner or to a movie."

"Overnight?" Jake raised an eyebrow, surprised to see his son didn't blush.

"Why not, Dad?"

"Who wants to be the girlfriend of a sixty-year-old man who isn't a handsome, millionaire rock and roll star?" As the words slipped past his lips, though, he knew J.J.'s answer. Marlene Robeson, overdressed for a few hours of accounting work. Lauren McKenna, fondling produce in time to her fantasies. Fine and good for them, but fantasies they would remain. Marlene and Lauren were great ladies, and they would find great men to take care of them. He would go to bed. Alone.

And he did. With a curt goodnight and a promise to talk more in the morning, Jake crossed the threshold and locked the door behind him. Tomorrow, he decided. He would think about everything tomorrow, think of a way to discourage any overtures from any ladies who wanted to be in his life beyond the professional realm.

He was a one-woman man, and that woman wouldn't be found in the produce section, or stalking around his office.

Damn it all.

* * *

Sleep didn't come as easily as it did in the past, particularly when Cindy was still alive. Even during her lowest points of the illness, all Jake had to do was curl her frail body into his and close his eyes to instant dreams. He never worried about Cindy dying in the night, believing his touch and the beat of his heart transferred to hers, and could sustain her.

Now, night magnified the loneliness, and morning enhanced the disappointment Jake felt every time he woke to find Cindy's side of the bed untouched. Well-meant suggestions were heeded and quickly discarded; hugging a body pillow and/or sleeping on Cindy's side offered only variety to his insomnia.

Tonight, Jake eschewed variety for his favorite summer pajamas, the glass of seltzer by his bed, and the novel he had been half-heartedly reading. Eventually, he would drift off and wake what would seem like five minutes later, forced to live another day.

Tonight, that sliver of rest would prove more difficult to come, if the noises outside his bedroom window were any indication. Jake liked to keep the window open when the weather was pleasant enough to permit it. Tonight's breeze had cooled to a comfortable temperature that betrayed the earlier humidity, and as Jake set down the dog-eared paperback and twisted in bed to see the commotion, he saw he wasn't the only one enjoying the respite.

The teenaged lovers from across the street had yet to retire. Strike that, they *had* retired, right underneath the loping tree in the neighbor's front lawn. A full moon provided enough light to cast down on the tangle of denim limbs and breeze-blown hair as Jake maneuvered to a kneeling position against his headboard. He shouldn't watch, he knew, but the view granted him at the very least offered some distraction from insomnia.

It certainly wouldn't *cure* it, however. The scene was too fascinating, Jake couldn't pull away. The illuminated torchieres on either end of the distant porch provided enough backlight to see the loving scene unfold. Though he couldn't quite make out words or facial expressions, he could imagine the ecstasy flitting across their faces as they coupled.

The young man reclined his head and shoulders against the trunk of the tree, stretching long legs before him as the young women straddled his hips and rocked back

on her sandaled feet. She seemed to be grinding her hips in a circular motion, as though urging an erection to tent the boy's sagging blue jeans. Slowly she thrashed and pumped, arching her back and neck in response to two curious hands disappearing underneath her tight T-shirt. She moved in a quiet, erotic rhythm, and seemed lost in her own pleasure.

Jack watched as that rhythm paused long enough for her to lean forward and capture her lover in a kiss. His hip remained pinned to the headboard, his pajamas feeling suddenly tight.

He looked down to find his cock standing at attention, its head peeking from underneath the loose elastic band of the cotton shorts, looking upward like it had good enough sense. This was incredible. How long had it been since he got a hard-on?

It had been the last time he made love with Cindy, he knew. What was he going to do with this one? Jack off while spying on some teenaged tryst? The thought may as well have encouraged him to go limp. He wasn't a pervert; he had never even seen an X-rated movie or looked at a girlie magazine. He had Cindy, he never had to do those things.

He had, of course, masturbated before, but to find relief in doing that he'd have to maintain the erection and think of something to keep him going. Since thinking of Cindy lately only saddened more than aroused him, it appeared he would have to ride out the discomfort.

If only he could turn away. The distant light dimmed briefly as a discarded T-shirt flew from its owner's hands. The girl was now unencumbered, the boy eager to pull himself from under her weight to take a nipple into his mouth. Her soft sigh of approval was carried over the breeze right to Jake's window, causing his cock to twitch.

Abruptly he slammed down the sash. He now saw the reflection of his shocked face superimposed over the couple.

And in the background, silhouetted against the doorway, a woman.

"What are you looking at?"

He twisted back around in bed, and time reversed forty years. The mattress bubbled hard underneath him, and springs screeched for oil as he shifted in place. Tiny flowers now dotted the surrounding wallpaper, becoming the room in which Jake and Cindy spent their wedding night.

Cindy's long, auburn hair curled over her bare shoulders, hiding the thin straps of her full-length, satin gown. Crowned by the dim light from the bathroom, she looked positively angelic with her lips in full pout. Jake could only stare, amazed that the night he had dreamed of since the day they met finally arrived.

She canted her head to one side, frowning. "What were you looking at outside?"

"N-nothing. Just thought I heard a dog barking, is all." Jake slipped his hands under the sheets and gripped his bare thighs. He didn't want Cindy to see how badly they shook.

He wore only his boxers. The room was cool for summer despite the weakening window unit opposite the bed. He felt his nipples tighten just looking at his new bride, detecting landmarks he would soon explore, barely visible underneath the sheer fabric.

"Well," Cindy offered a playful grin as one strap, then the other, peeled away to allow the gown to cascade to the floor. "Why not look at me instead? I'm sure I'm more interesting."

Oh, yeah. That, Cindy certainly was. Jake stared appreciatively at her nude form—long, shapely legs, small, pert breasts tipped with red nipples, and that beautiful, light band of freckles scattered across her collarbone. He had made it a goal tonight to kiss each one individually, and as Cindy glided toward him he wondered how far he would get before something else distracted him.

The fluid, nonchalant way she wiped away the bed sheet, then straddled his shorts-clad erection was a good start. *Whoa.* Cindy was quite forward. She seemed to know

what she was doing, and that startled him. They were both virgins, and he only knew so much to get past this hurdle. What did Cindy know?

More than him, clearly. He stared now at the triangular thatch of curls between her thighs. Heaven on Earth.

Cindy took his hands and placed one on each breast, urging him to knead and pinch. Her skin was smooth and pliable, but her nipples hardened instantly. He ached to lean forward and kiss one. He had to know that sensation before the heat below exploded and rocked them both from the bed.

"Jake," she whispered. She guided one of his hands down the valley between her breasts, past her belly to the trove. Jake gasped at first contact; he had never touched a pussy, and didn't know what to expect despite having heard detailed reports from his buddies. This sensation was nice, Cindy was soft and pliable underneath, and she clearly enjoyed each experimental move. He wagged his fingers over and between her pussy lips, imprinting in his memory each response. Whatever it took to give her pleasure, he would learn the right way.

Then one finger found and probed her core, already slick and warm. Cindy twitched but her smile encouraged him, so Jake pressed one, then another finger deeper inside her. This was the place, this was where he was going to slide his now purpling cock. This was where he would make Cindy his own, every day for as long as they lived, if she'd let him.

Cindy bent low and toyed with his nipples, then rubbed his shoulders and neck. She, too, seemed to study his body in search of erogenous zones. "Jake, I'm too excited," she said, her voice timid. "Make me your wife now. I need to know what it feels like. We have the rest of the night to take it slower."

"Actually..." Jake removed his fingers and grasped Cindy's waist, "we have the rest of our lives for that." He flipped her onto her back as if she were weightless. Jake didn't know how his shorts had come to be removed—maybe Cindy eased them away during her ministrations, maybe he ripped them off in a fit of passion, but who cared? They were naked and young and in love caught up in tempestuous passion.

His mouth claimed hers as his cock claimed her pussy; their initial cries of surprise were muffled in that scorching kiss. Jake had heard it hurt for some women the first time, but he had not expected to experience a flash of pain himself. The shock ran the length of his shaft and tightened his balls. Of course, such discomfort could be expected while easing a thick, eight-inch rod into a vice. Cindy's pussy was wet, and her juices helped a bit as he pumped in and out of her, but she was so tight...and so wonderful.

He broke the kiss and drew in a ragged breath. Cindy panted underneath him, scratching at his back and ass. "Oh, God." Her voice sounded far away. "This is so good."

"You like that?" He grinned. "You like that, Mrs. Marbury?"

"I love it."

"I love you." He loved her weary smile and the sweat beading on her forehead. He loved the way her hair snaked in every direction across her pillow as it sank deeper into the mattress. He loved the rapid rise and fall of her breasts, and the sheen of his kiss that lingered on the one nipple he had suckled. He loved those freckles, and he loved Cindy's sharp giggle every time he bent low to kiss one and failed due to his overzealous lovemaking.

He loved her pussy, he loved being inside her pussy and the feel of her slick labial folds as they rubbed against his shaft with his every thrust. He loved the eruption that quickly followed, the way her channel tightened further as his seed shot into her womb, and their simultaneous cries of joy.

Most of all, he loved the look in his darling wife's eyes in the afterglow, a satisfied glaze he hoped to see every time they made love.

Daring Young Man

This was the look floating in the dream that took a sleeping, sixty-year-old Jake into morning, his hand curled over the dampened crotch of his pajama shorts.

Six

"Guh!"

What had possessed Jake to believe that she could do this job? Yes, she was good at keeping grades and lesson plans, but one mistake there and the worst that could happen would be a student missing a point or two on his report card. Something like that could be remedied with a keystroke. One slip-up here, and the power company might pull the plug overnight, thinking the store was delinquent in making a payment. Jake would open the store the next morning to a flood of melted ice cream and rotten produce, assuming he would be able to open the automated doors at all.

She had told Jake she could balance her checkbook, what a lie that was. She could balance it on one finger, maybe, and spin it like a Harlem Globetrotter could with a basketball. Her checkbook wallet was currently stuffed with a month's backlog of debit card receipts not yet recorded, and she was currently down to her last booklet of sad-eyed shar-peis peering from a wicker basket. Thank goodness Dareville Power allowed customers to pay at the office with cash, else they'd be pulling *her* plug.

Her battery-operated buddies might have seen her through a drought without television and lights, had she not thrown them all away when she started the new job two weeks ago. Damn, she needed an orgasm badly to get through another day of working at the store and trying to decipher the notebooks and handwritten ledgers Jake left for her. She hadn't even resorted to manual relief. Her pussy felt shriveled and ready to atrophy.

She leaned forward in her chair and peered out into the store. It wasn't very busy now; maybe she could slip into the employee restroom and finger her clit until she came. Just five minutes was all she needed.

No. She wasn't going to risk getting caught doing something like that here. She needed Jake to touch her that way, somewhere far from here. She needed Jake, period.

That was the worst part of the job thus far, that Jake had barely been around to help her. The brief training she received, which basically amounted to a hand gesture toward the file cabinets and a short tour of the employee lounge, came from Danielle. All her fantasies of Jake hovering low behind her and moving his arm along with hers as they studied page after page of accounting records were just that—delicious fantasy. There were no opportunities to accidentally brush against his chest as she left her chair, no reasons to wear low-cut blouses when Jake wouldn't be around to appreciate the view. Weekdays saw Jake in his element, either working in the store or in Suffolk getting the other one ready, while Lauren did the best she could with what she had, searching her memory for the words to the Our Father so she could pray for a miracle.

Today was payday, and rather than go through a payroll service like most businesses, Jake insisted on keeping it in-house. So now it fell to Lauren to make sure everybody got his check before noon. Elbows on the desk, head in her hands, Lauren bent over an open book full of numbers and prayed she hadn't overpaid any invoices to allow everyone his appointed share of the till.

This was a mistake, this was a mistake...

There hadn't been any mistaking the amused expressions shot in her direction from Jake's other employees. Everybody knew Jake gave her the job out of pity, and that she

took the job to be closer to him. Everybody knew about the pictures, too, she could tell by how some male gazes lingered, no doubt undressing and inspecting her.

Everybody knew she was also a lousy office manager, and Jake had to know it, too. Maybe he felt too sorry for her to let her go, and that made Lauren feel worse. She wanted his love, not pity.

She slapped one ledger shut and shuffled the stack of blank paychecks before her. Each one had to be rolled into the ancient typewriter on the corner table for "processing." Lauren couldn't remember the last time she had used an actual typewriter. Who was in the White House then? Could he balance *his* checkbook?

"Lord, send me an angel," she muttered.

"You rang?"

Lauren's head shot up and her face contorted with puzzlement. That familiar feminine voice definitely didn't belong to the burly man in the brown uniform hefting a large package onto Jake's desk. She relaxed when she noticed Sue taking up the rear with a smaller box.

"You've given up photography for blue-collar work?" Lauren asked as she signed for both.

"Brown collar, actually," Sue quipped, nodded to the man's taut backside. "You know me, a sucker for a guy in uniform. I've been a good helper today, haven't I?"

The delivery man's crooked smile was agreement enough, and Lauren had to laugh as she bid him good day and watched Sue's gaze follow him out the door. "Lady, you're as subtle as Mack truck crashing into a brick wall," she told Sue. "Helping with his package, indeed."

Sue set the smaller box next to the larger one. "I need to do more online shopping. Wouldn't mind a special delivery like that once in a while." She licked her lips with an exaggerated smack, clearly for Lauren's benefit.

"Would Cal mind?"

"Of course not. We've learned to share."

Lauren covered her ears. The last thing she wanted to envision was a sweating, naked Cal pumping his cock into a delivery man's tight ass, and vice versa. That sort of thing was not a turn-on for her.

"TMI, lady, too much information." Sue's laughter was muffled until Lauren released her hands to scrape at the thick packing tape holding the computer box together. "What did I just sign for, anyway? Jake never said anything about buying a computer."

"Maybe it's a surprise," Sue suggested. "Something to make your job easier."

"You know what would make my job easier? A matchbook and a lengthy lapse of conscience. Look at this." Lauren thumbed rapidly through one ledger. "Yeah, my eyes crossed like that the first time I saw it, too. I have to get paychecks out to these people today, I don't know what to do."

"Well." Sue proved to have less restraint than Lauren. She ripped open the smaller package with gusto and waded through a pool of Styrofoam peanuts to find a sealed package of blank checks, three to each perforated sheet. "Looks like your problem is solved," she said. "These checks are for the printer in this box. All you have to do is push a button."

"Is it red with the word DESTRICT marked on it? I'll push it."

Sue laughed and slapped the checks back in the box. "It's not so bad. Look, there's software here, too. I'm sure it's just a template where you plug in the names and numbers and the computer does the rest."

"Even so, there's no way I'm going to get this thing hooked up and running before noon. I don't even know this is for me, this thing could be going to the Suffolk store," Lauren said, and as she said the words panic seized her. Surely Jake would have

mentioned a computer delivery...perhaps he didn't bother telling her because he wasn't planning on keeping her much longer? Given the marginal job she had done, she wouldn't blame him. Jake needed competent help in the office, and Deep Blue couldn't help her become a better office manager. Maybe he planned to have Danny fire her in his stead?

"Will you relax, I'm sure you're doing fine." Sue waved away Lauren's voiced doubts. "It takes time to adapt to a new job, and besides, Jake would've said something earlier if you were in trouble, right?"

"I suppose," Lauren grumbled. Not that Jake had been around to say hello to her in the last week, much less fire her. "Anyway, I'll stick with the typewriter and the checks Danielle gave me for now until I hear otherwise about the computer." She looked at the stack of checks she had to use and scowled. "Assuming I don't throw the damn thing through the window."

Sue rolled her eyes and edged around the desk, jostling Lauren from the chair. "I think you'll find, *lady*, that you're better at this job than you realize. How did you get through the last two weeks if you can't use the typewriter? You know what, don't answer that. Watch and learn."

Lauren discovered herself ousted from her position as Sue wheeled the chair to the typewriter and barked for a few blanks checks. Lauren found the proper ledger and checked the numbers, relieved to know she hadn't screwed up the pay accounts. As she called out each employee's name and amount to be paid, Sue typed up a corresponding paycheck free of smudges. They worked in a rhythm that relaxed Lauren, and for the first time in two weeks she didn't mind so much being in the small office, nor did Jake cross her mind.

Halfway through the stack, Sue's fingers slowed on the typewriter. "I'm sorry about the pictures," she said quietly. "I know it's been rough on you."

"Thanks." Lauren turned a page in the pay ledger and marked her place with a ragged nail. "And thank *you* for not saying 'I told you so' right off the bat. You were right, this whole thing did come to bite me in the ass."

"I wouldn't say that. Jake hired you to work here, didn't he? You wanted to get close to him."

"That wasn't how I wanted it to happen, you know that. I don't want to be his employee, Sue." Lauren took a corner of the desk and arched her back, staring dreamily at the ceiling. "I'll admit, I thought it would be nice to work *with* him, not *for* him." The fantasy, of course, looked better. They would fall in love and marry, Lauren would teach a few more years to qualify for early retirement, then take her place at Jake's side helping him run the store. Her duties, of course, would mainly consist of agreeing with his every decision and finding a more competent office manager to wrestle with the typewriter...and making sure Jake didn't get to bed without experiencing at least three orgasms.

"Ah, fringe benefits." Sue finished the present check with a flourish and held out her hand for another one. "Well, office work will come quickly to you. Here, take this next check and I'll read the ledger."

Lauren complied, and was pleased to see how well she created the paycheck. Before she realized it, the stack was complete. Sue took the spare chair and the two women set to work stuffing envelopes.

"Have you considered," Sue began, "maybe putting some of your creativity to good use around here?"

"Meaning?" Lauren asked.

"I don't know, finding ways to increase business. Build up the cafe, bring in new products..."

"Organic sex toys?"

Sue was licking an envelope and winced. "Thanks, I cut my tongue."

Lauren giggled at her friend's exaggerated pain. "It's a good thought, but even if I were proactive around here I doubt Jake would notice. He's seems to be focused on other things, you know?"

"Well, try it anyway. Put the focus on you." Sue pushed her completed stack next to Lauren's, then drummed her nails on the desk. "You know, maybe if you got Jake out of the store you might have a chance getting some focus."

"Accost him in the parking lot at closing?"

"Ask him out."

"I'm not ready to do that," Lauren said, unprepared for the slap to the shoulder that nearly sent her to the floor.

"You were ready to give him explicit photos of yourself a few weeks ago. You were ready to trash a toy collection that would have required you to buy stock in Duracell to maintain, and yet you're not ready to *ask him out* on a simple date?"

"A few weeks ago he wasn't my boss," Lauren said, righting herself. "It's different now."

"Well. Let's call this more of a community evening for support. That's really why I came here in the first place." Sue twisted in her chair for her purse and extracted some flyers. "I told you that Cal finished his album, right?"

"No!" This was great news. She had known Cal Briscoe had planned another solo effort, and that with Brady's help he was going to produce and market it through his own label, using what he had in his home studio. She hadn't realized how quickly one could cut an album these days. "This is so exciting, Sue! Congratulations."

"Thanks. Cal's doing a show in Virginia Beach with his new group to launch it." Colored paper spilled over the desk; each flyer bore a flattering portrait of Cal towering over two other men and one woman. "We're trying to get as many locals over there as we can for moral support. Tell Jake and Danny and everybody here."

"Definitely." Lauren grabbed some flyers for the store's community bulletin board. "I'm due for a break anyway. Wanna grab some lunch?"

"Grab all you want, I'll buy. Consider it a congratulations on your new job lunch." Sue grinned and bounced out of the office. Her effervescent attitude was infectious, a perfect contrast to Lauren's earlier mood, and Lauren welcomed it.

Once outside the office, however, there returned a familiar sense of foreboding, a paranoia that seemed to claw at her back and taunt her. Lauren rubbed the sudden chill from her arms and turned toward the back of the store in time to see a flash of floral dress whip around a corner. Its owner definitely moved around too quickly to be grocery shopping.

* * *

"Danny, what's all this?"

Jake stood before his desk, scowling as his assistant sauntered next to him and flashed him a sloping grin.

"What's all what?" Danielle asked.

"Don't be cute." Jake gestured to the computer setup on his desk. The bland hum of the monitor's small motor filled the brief silence. "I don't recall ordering a computer, much less setting one up to use. I don't think I could if I tried. Whose doing is this?"

Danielle's smile twisted, and she produced a small white envelope from her apron pocket. "This was given to me while you were out," she said. "It should explain everything."

Jake read the loopy cursive on the card. *Merry Christmas for the next five years, from your loving grandchildren*, read the message. Jake sighed. He doubted Arlene and

Charlie were his benefactors. More than likely Red and J.J. were using the two young girls as pawns to get Jake to accept a gift he didn't want.

No, Jake thought. If either of his sons didn't want him working at all, why buy him a computer for work? Marlene? Would she know enough about computers to buy him one? Why buy him one in the first place? Surely she had to know he would never accept such an expensive gift.

Did Lauren buy it? No, money was tight for her, else she wouldn't be working the store.

Danielle, when Jake asked, remained tight-lipped. "Sorry, boss," she crooned, "I was sworn to secrecy. Just enjoy the computer. It's here to help."

Jake snorted. About the only help a computer could offer him would be to keep papers from blowing off his desk. He sent Danielle back to work and slumped into his chair. Why didn't anybody listen to him? Everything he didn't want, every technology and annoyance, was thrust upon him without a thought for his feelings. He didn't want electronic registers, yet he had them now, and had to listen to them beeping in the distance. He didn't want a computer...

He liked Marlene Robeson, but didn't want her around twenty-four seven to nag him, or seduce him. He hired Lauren McKenna to keep the older woman at bay, but if J.J. was correct in his assessment of the former teacher, Jake had merely crawled from one hole to fall into a deeper one. It was the thought of Lauren harboring feelings for him that had preyed upon Jake's thoughts when he entered the office. Surely his son had to be mistaken. What could a beautiful young woman like Lauren find to desire in a grizzled old grocer weathered by a year of mourning?

He could think of no answer to that question. Sitting at his desk, watching a waving computer platform logo float from one corner of the screen to the other, he doubted he would be able to concentrate on anything important.

How to make that image go away? Jake tapped at the keyboard but nothing happened. Spying the mouse to his right, he grabbed it and held it in his palm. The sudden movement caused the screen saver to immediately dissolve...

...and reveal a large photograph of a nude woman tangled in an explicit pose.

Jake didn't hear the *clunk* of the mouse as it hit the floor.

Lauren. Naked. Lying in bed with her knees spread wide, showing everything that a woman owned.

Everything.

The photograph was pure sex, and a glorious train wreck. Jake couldn't look away. He reached down to retrieve the mouse, his eyes still fixed on Lauren's full, bare breasts, tipped with stiffened nipples that looked aching to be sucked.

Oh, my. Jake shifted suddenly in place and looked down at his lap. He was moving, not of his own volition. Rather, his cock stirred, in the office, and the door was wide open! Anybody could walk in and see this.

Frantically, Jake searched the screen for a tiny exit icon to close the picture window, but the pull of sexual stimulation was too strong, ultimately his gaze returned to Lauren's bare, pink pussy lips, parted in invitation. Next to the anticipation of lying gently on top of Cynthia and easing his cock in and out of her pussy, no other image or sensation had encouraged Jake to an erection this quickly, and it bothered Jake. He wasn't attracted to Lauren, or any other woman, so why was so damn hard right now?

Erotic imagery didn't stimulate him. At least, he was under the impression it didn't. He had never thought to experiment to find out if it did. He had never bought a dirty magazine or watched an X-rated film. Provocative dress, favorite actresses in revealing costumes, might have stirred feelings of arousal once in a while, but never to this degree.

Perhaps he had been wrong all these years? Was it the image of a naked woman in general, or naked Lauren?

"What do you think?"

Jake's gaze was finally torn away...by Lauren's voice. She leaned against the doorjamb, arms folded over her purse and smiling. Jake bit back the gasp of surprise that threatened to escape and crossed his legs. His erection ached all the more.

"Uh, beg pardon?" The mouse pointer zig-zagged all over the monitor in a futile attempt to close the window. Jake finally reached over and turned off the monitor, hopefully in a way that didn't look panicked or conspicuous.

"The biscotti. What do you think of them?" Lauren nodded to Jake's elbow, and he looked down at the elongated biscuits wrapped in yellow cellophane, resting on the edge of the desk. Where had they come from, he wondered. Of course, a bleeding, squawking pigeon could have been flapping on the desk and he wouldn't have seen it for the screenshot of Lauren.

"I brought them back from Sister Jo's Tea Room. Sue Briscoe and I had lunch there." Lauren stepped into the office and set her bag on a vacant chair. "Jo has a great selection of homemade biscotti and drink mixes for sale there, and I brought some of everything back for you."

"Really? Well, that was very thoughtful, Lauren." Jake forced a smile and studied the cookies, thankful for the distraction. "I was about to put on another pot of coffee, too, so I might have one."

Lauren giggled. "You do realize I had an ulterior motive for bringing you biscuits."

"Raises come at the end of the year, Lauren, but if you want to keep sending me bribes, go right ahead." Jake winked, surprised with himself. How could he be so casual, borderline flirting, after what he'd just seen? More than anything he wanted Lauren out of the office so he could lock the door behind her and find relief. As it was, there would be no coffee to enjoy until he could stand up without looking like a tree with a low hanging branch. Lauren's continued presence seemed only to intensify the ache, and the need.

"Cute." She wouldn't stop laughing. Her light, tinkerbell voice tickled his insides, and the sudden image of naked Lauren giggling to orgasm burned behind Jake's eyes. The vision didn't shake away so easily, either. He shouldn't be thinking like this, he knew. He only just lost Cindy...

A year ago, taunted his conscience. It's time to move on.

"No," he blurted, and slapped the desk a little too hard for his liking. He looked up and his heart sank at the astonishment on Lauren's face.

"Well, don't you want to hear my idea before you reject it?" she asked, sounding hurt.

"What? No, Lauren, I'm sorry. I was just thinking of...something I forgot." *Like my libido.* "You were saying?"

Lauren approached cautiously; the atmosphere seemed heavy now. "Jo was telling me how she can't keep these biscotti and drink mixes on her shelves, and she has such limited space at the cafe that I thought, why not shelve some here? You have the coffee bar." Lauren gestured toward the store, "and since Jo's open only for breakfast and lunch, people can come here after work if they want. I don't know how you'd want to work it financially, putting her stuff on consignment or whatever..."

"No," Jake said quickly, "no. I would rather buy Jo's goods outright and sell them here. I just need to figure out how much to pay so I don't mark up too much here. That's a good idea, Lauren," he said, reaching for a notepad on the other side of the desk. Definitely, it was nice to have something to think about beside Lauren's private parts. "I'm sure Jo's biscotti won't cost as much as the ones we're ordering, and since Jo's local

shoppers know her reputation. Her stuff might move faster than the other brands. I'll give her a call later."

"Great." Lauren sounded relieved, and Jake smiled. He wanted to apologize, but wasn't sure how. Somewhere along the line mention of his new computer wallpaper would be broached. It would have to, anyway, he realized. He had to know if this was Lauren's doing, or an attempt to humiliate her.

Being tactful about it, though, there was the rub.

Jake pinched his eyes shut and opened them quickly. The ache stung him. Speaking of rubbing...

"Lauren," Jake began, but Lauren's enthusiasm bubbled over and muted him.

"Another idea I had," she said, "if you're interested in local products, or rather local *transplants*. Did you know Cal Briscoe has a new album coming out?"

"I didn't know Cal was pursuing a solo career," Jake said. "How is this related to the grocery business?" He hoped the suggestion of carrying Cal's album wouldn't come. Jake didn't want to run a department store. Food was enough.

"It's not, really, but since the cafe is open late with the store, if you ever wanted to consider live music on weekends, Sue says he's willing to perform for free. It's not arena rock, like at the concert. His style is much different than Brady's. Very mellow."

"I see. Well, I hadn't given thought to turning Jake's into a hangout." He was, however, surprised to actually be thinking along those lines now. True, he had seen Jake's as more than just a grocery store, and the addition of the cafe did enhance the community atmosphere he nurtured. As it was, there were few places in the town to gather and socialize, and Jake had noticed that the cafe was home to a number of nightly regulars of late.

"If you're worried about the kind of crowd Cal would bring in, you could see for yourself." Lauren twisted back to her purse, searching for something. The fluid gesture ended in a bent pose that accentuated Lauren's firm bottom and long legs, shapely and barely visible as her long skirt swayed. Jake had to admit, the woman was easy on the eye.

It means nothing. Nothing wrong with admiring a pretty lady. Jake admired his share when Cindy was alive.

Admiration, though, seldom contributed to an erection, and Jake's cock seemed far from going limp. Lauren wasn't helping matters by staying. How long could he sit here?

Lauren handed him a blue flyer. "There's a group of us heading out to the beach next week. Sue and Brady and Ellie Garriston are getting some people together, and you're welcome to come with. If Red and Charlene and J.J. want to come out, too, the more the merrier."

"Really?" Jake nodded slowly at the invitation and studied the flyer. His expression fell slack at first notice of the venue. Of course, the event *would* have to be at Maui Joe's, where the family had celebrated Cindy's life and wrestled over fried shrimp almost two months ago. More memories for the pile. "I'm sure it promises to be an exciting evening."

"The beach debut of the Cal Briscoe Four, and Brady's buying the first round," Lauren said. Her voice then took on a softer tone. "I hope you'll come...I mean, we'd love to see you."

You'd love to see me. Yes, Lauren was pretty to look at, and pleasant with conversation. Jake had certainly seen enough of her to last years. He set aside the flyer and tried to look busy. "I'll certainly give it some thought."

"Good." Lauren smiled again. Jake felt a bit unnerved at her sudden hopeful expression; he realized he hadn't said no. "Well, I guess I should get back to work," she added, the hint evident in her tone.

"Of course," he said, and moved to stand. Just as quickly, though, he clamped his thighs together.

"Uh, Lauren." Deftly he moved the flyer over his lap. "You know, you did such a good job with the payroll today, and really the day's been slow. Why don't you go ahead and take the rest of the day off? I'm sure it'll pick up tomorrow."

"But the standing orders need to be confirmed," Lauren protested, "and there are still some invoices left—"

"—that can wait until another time," Jake finished, masking the strain in his own voice. "Really, it's only three hours. Take them for yourself." When Lauren frowned and remained still, he added, "I'm not firing you, Lauren."

Lauren blinked. "Oh. No, Jake. I'm sure you didn't mean it like that. I just feel weird taking off when everybody else has to work, and there is work to be done around the office."

"Nothing that can't wait, like I said," Jake echoed. *Please don't make me escort you.* Dareville didn't need to see Jake led by his other head. "The one plus to being my own boss is that I get to bend the rules as I see fit, and with the adjustments in your life you deserve a little break. Go on."

"Okay, but you know I'll just nickel and dime the time back by working through lunch next week." Lauren slung her bag over her shoulder but paused at the door. "How's the new computer working?"

"Hm?" Jake's gaze fell to the dark screen. "Fine, I suppose. I-I haven't really looked at it. Did you set it up?"

Lauren shook her head. "No, it was still in the box when I left. Maybe Danny did." With a small wave, she bid goodbye and disappeared, leaving Jake to sigh with some relief.

Okay. Assuming Lauren was telling the truth, she hadn't posted her picture for him to find.

Checking the crease in his pants, Jake did wish Lauren had taken the time to close his office door. Some things, unfortunately, couldn't wait until tomorrow to fix.

Seven

"He's not coming, I just know it. What time is it again?"

Brady's mouth was a straight line. He didn't bother looking up from his menu to check his watch. "About five seconds since you last asked."

"He's not coming," Lauren said simply. She could feel a fault line slowly cracking her heart, and she blinked away a threatening tear. She should have known to expect this. Jake had been acting oddly around her all week. Every step taken toward him resulted in his taking two steps away, oftentimes behind a piece of furniture or dry goods display. She couldn't help but notice, too, that Jake didn't seem so halted and unnerved around anybody else.

"He saw the pictures, that has to be why he's not here," Lauren said to her friends' labored sighs. "He saw the pictures and he freaked out. I should never have had Sue take them. Never." Any chance she had with Jake was gone, finished, thanks to her raging hormones.

"Or," Brady said, folding the menu on the table, "traffic is slow from Dareville as it always is on the weekend, and he's running late."

"And stop obsessing about those pictures," Ellie added. "What's done is done, and I can't imagine you're making Sue feel good every time you grouse about them." The party glanced as one to the stage setup, where Sue and Cal kissed for good luck. "Look at it this way, Lauren. Without the pictures, you wouldn't be working at Jake's store and you wouldn't have as much access to him as you do now. So don't complain."

"And if Jake wanted you gone, he'd have fired you long ago," Brady said. "He doesn't seem the type to string people along, particularly where his business is involved. You're fine. Relax, okay?"

"Okay." Lauren said, though she was nowhere close to relaxing. She fidgeted in her chair, so much that Brady, sitting next to her, visibly shifted closer to his wife.

"But maybe—"

"Lauren." Brady clamped a hand over Lauren's wrist, pinning her own trembling hand to the table. The white cloth beneath them wrinkled in Lauren's grasp, shifting silverware and half-empty rocks glasses. "Chill. Jake's likely absence doesn't reflect upon you. The man runs a business and is in the middle of starting another one. He probably doesn't need to be driving all the way out here, anyway, and I wouldn't blame him for bowing out tonight. It has nothing to do with you personally, whatever he does."

"Right." Lauren knew better to think otherwise. Jake's universe, as much as she wanted it to, didn't include her beyond a professional relationship. Not yet, anyway; she had to remain positive.

She wasn't being stood up; this wasn't a date. She hadn't seen much of Jake at work today, so how was she to know what he had planned for the evening?

All the same, though, she hoped he would show, if only to prove that his cooled behavior toward her was nothing more than a product of her overactive imagination.

"Sorry," she said finally. She straightened the shoulders of her low-cut green blouse and leaned back in her chair. "I should relax. Maybe I need another drink."

"You need to get laid." Brady was blunt, but Lauren was used to such talk from him.

"Yeah."

"You know the offer's still open, too. Say the word, I'll fill the void."

That remark, however, was not expected. Lauren leaned over the table and raised an eyebrow at her friend, who only raised her martini glass in a toast. Around them, people milled and laughed and chatted, waiting for the band to begin their first set. Some were acquaintances from home, others Lauren didn't know. Yet, anybody could have overheard the legendary Brady Garriston proposition a woman who wasn't his wife, while his wife sat next to him!

"You're incredible," Lauren said.

"I know." Brady winked and set down his glass. "You need help now? Speak up while I have a free hand."

"What?" And Lauren followed Brady's downturned gaze to the hem of the tablecloth at his lap. One brief flutter exposed his other hand in Ellie's lap. More specifically, Brady's hand was tucked under Ellie's short skirt, and presumably stroking the woman's clit. No wonder she had been so quiet, her face split with a goofy smile. Lauren had just presumed she was drunk.

Lauren said nothing, but flagged a passing waitress for a second martini. Any other day she might have taken Brady up on his offer, and let him play with her pussy. Heaven knew she needed the release, and she knew Heaven had better reward her good behavior. At home, in a crowded restaurant, in the back seat of Brady's car while Ellie drove...all options sounded better with each sip of her martini.

When Sue returned to the table, Lauren let her have the seat next to Brady to avoid further temptation. Soon after, the lights dimmed and the restaurant exploded with applause as The Cal Briscoe Four took the stage. Cal said nothing to acknowledge the reception, but fondled the maplewood neck of his bass with a general nod to the crowd. His fingers moved rapidly over the frets, pounding a seductive beat certain to set the tone for the evening.

Lauren recognized the drummer from Brady's benefit concert; joining them were a young, long-haired man on keyboards and a stocky black woman wearing long, dark reddish braids and a flowing batik-patterned gown. An amber spotlight illuminated the band, highlighting the woman's flawless skin and piercing dark eyes as she greeted the crowd before launching into the band's quick-paced, smoky rendition of "Moondance."

Someone, or something, poked Lauren in the head as the people gathered around them surged to the music. "Watch it." Lauren didn't want to be a wet blanket, and was relieved somewhat that Sue didn't hear the annoyance in her voice as the entire table swayed to the song. It would be a wonder if Sue could hear anything at all for the music. She wanted to enjoy the show, but being the fifth wheel had little appeal to her, despite her friends' assurance that she was welcome.

She grabbed her purse and tried to stand, but the crowd thickening around the tables by the stage made it impossible to move. A stray patron clutching a beer bottle asked loudly for the vacant chairs at the table, and Lauren was ready to surrender. No sense fighting people off, she reasoned.

"Sorry, they're saved," Sue called over her shoulder before Lauren could react.

"What?" Lauren turned back to her friend, then toward a gap in the crowd, where Sue was pointing.

What?!

* * *

Isn't that a beautiful sight?

You certainly are.

I meant the ocean, Jake.

There's an ocean? I hadn't noticed.

Yes, Jake, it would be that large wet thing between the sand and the sky.

Speaking of wet...

You beast. Shut up and kiss me.

And Cindy's laughter dissolved into the distant roaring waves. The tears remained.

Jake wiped his face with the back of his hand and sniffled. He stood on the boardwalk near the back entrance of Maui Joe's, overlooking the ocean and remembering the conversation. Exactly when it had taken place, Jake couldn't say, as he was certain they had shared the exchange more than once. It was a loving routine between the couple, practiced over years of anniversary dinners and weekend outings to the beach with the boys.

His hands gripping the paint-chipped rail bordering the restaurant's patio, Jake stared into the calm sea. There were no rustling whitecaps to indicate movement along the water. With the lack of light, the ocean resembled an endless glass platform as it reflected the moon's light...perfect for waltzing with a lady love.

Cindy loved to waltz; Jake didn't much care for it. How he would gladly trade years of indifference for one last dance.

"Ugh." He felt the vibration of Cal Briscoe's bass in the metal railing; it shook his bones and set his teeth on edge. Abruptly he released his hold and rubbed the stench of metal from his hands. Why had he come here tonight? There was still much to do before the Suffolk store opening, and though he hadn't planned on working all hours, he knew better than to make a late night of it in Virginia Beach. Even though J.J. drove them here and would escort him home, Jake didn't trust the narrow road to Dareville in the wee hours. Too many big rig truckers used it as a shortcut.

Besides, he didn't drink, so why come to Maui Joe's in full bar mode? It sounded, too, as though Cal's new band favored jazz, which Jake hated.

Three quick strides had Jake rounding the corner of the building. Maybe he could catch J.J. before he crossed to Pacific Avenue, and they could just leave. He liked Cal Briscoe fine, and had adored young Sue Carmichael and Ellie and Lauren for years, but he knew he wouldn't be very good company tonight. The added memories of Cindy sunning herself in one of her modest yet arousing swimsuits, and strolling arm in arm with him along the boardwalk, only enhanced the emptiness in his heart.

He looked out to the sea again. In the distant, glowing sands a young couple reclined in passionate embrace, unaware of and unconcerned with gawking passersby. Thirty years ago, that had been him and Cindy, tucked away behind a dune shaped after a hurricane. They had embarked upon a romantic weekend by the sea, a second honeymoon to help ease the pain of a recent miscarriage. Cindy had so wanted to give little J.J. a sibling.

Jake smiled at the memory. There were fewer lampposts and fewer hotels on the shore, making it easier to slip into the dark unnoticed. He could still feel the abrasion of dry sand, grit under his fingernails and between his buttocks as he lay back and settled Cindy on his waiting cock. She was so beautiful, crowned by moonlight as her body swayed over him. They had made love for hours by the shore, with nobody to bother them.

And Redding was conceived.

The dream faded with a blast of ocean mist; the faraway lovers rolled one last time and rose. Jake stepped away from the scene and stifled a sob. The memories followed him everywhere; he had to leave now. J.J. wouldn't protest, he hoped.

Jake's hopes, however, were quickly dashed. J.J. met him on the sidewalk leading to the boardwalk, a line of sweat beading across his forehead. "No, we're not going, I just parked the car," he cried. "You know how much gas I wasted just to get here?"

"I'll cover the gas, son. Why are you so annoyed? You don't want to be here any more than I do." Jake knew the only reason J.J. had consented to accompany him was to

protect his father from Lauren McKenna. It annoyed Jake to think his son believed he couldn't look after himself. What was Lauren going to do to him in a crowded bar, anyway, give him a lap dance? The woman had more class than J.J. gave her credit; if she did have feelings for him, certainly she knew enough not to make a public spectacle of herself. Jake was still her boss.

"Maybe, but I'm not going anywhere until I've had a drink. Come on." J.J. barged full throttle into the main bar.

The atmosphere was unavoidably obnoxious, stinging Jake's nostrils and retinas. The stench of stale beer and thick smoke hung in the air, the pink neon rope piped along edges and walls was blinding, and the rolls of flesh enhanced by unfortunate combinations of tight halters and low-cut jeans... Well, Jake couldn't think of anything positive to say about the absence of a dress code.

The noise, the language...this couldn't have been the same restaurant where he and his family celebrated Cindy's dinner nearly two months ago. Jake felt ten years older just standing among the crowd.

"Oh, Christ."

Jake glared at his son, surprised he could hear the oath over the music's volume. He didn't approve of such language, he didn't care how old J.J. was. However, he was ready to mutter it himself when he followed J.J.'s gaze to a large round table near the stage.

Why hadn't Lauren mentioned that Marlene Robeson would be joining them this evening? She looked more out of place than Jake did in her matronly blue dress and finely coiffed hair, a glass of white wine resting by a perfectly manicured hand. She greeted Jake with an enthusiastic smile; Jake's attempt to return it didn't feel genuine, but it beat trying to shout hellos.

He took a vacant chair between the two ladies. Lauren offered a smile of apology, and Jake relaxed somewhat. The furtive glances at Marlene said plenty, though explanations would have to wait, assuming Lauren was willing to give anything away. Assuming, too, J.J. was right about Lauren having a thing for him. Jake could only sit and try to enjoy the cacophony of thumping bass and drums and husky, rapid vocals.

Thankfully, he didn't have to wait very long for some semblance of peace. Fifteen minutes into the concert, Cal thanked the crowd and launched into a genial patter while the keyboardist switched to a saxophone. Jake glanced across the table and scowled as J.J. flagged down a waitress for a second drink.

"Rough day at work," J.J. said, chuckling as he raised his empty martini glass. "I could a few more of these."

"Yes, I imagine dealing with property owners who don't want to sell would drive me to drink, too," Jake countered coolly.

"Jake, are you having trouble with the new store, buying the property?" Marlene asked, and placed a clammy hand on his wrist.

"No." He smiled in kind. "Nothing like that. I've just had a rough day as well." He was bringing down the atmosphere and he knew it. As much as he didn't want to be there, he didn't want to spoil the party, either. "I tell you, I wouldn't mind a drink myself," he added, and ordered a Scotch and soda.

"You go right ahead, you've earned it," Marlene said, and ordered another white wine. "I can't remember the last time I've been to a live show. I'm glad I saw the flyer at the store, otherwise I wouldn't have known about this." She poked Jake's shoulder. "Why didn't Red put anything in the *Shopper*?"

"You'd have to ask Red. I don't tell him what to print, and he doesn't tell me how to run my store. We both felt it would be better that way." Jake tried not to smile. Marlene's presence here had nothing to do with wanting to support Cal Briscoe, and Jake gathered

Lauren suspected as much, judging by the look of uncertainty on the younger woman's face.

Well, Marlene would have to grin and bear it as well. He sure as hell wasn't going to ask her dance to this music. He wouldn't know how, anyway. Instead, he sipped the drink set before him.

One hi-ball of Scotch and soda soon turned into two, compliments of Brady Garriston, then three. When the band wound down its second set for a longer break Jake had a good buzz working. His body tingled and his head spun, and his vision blurred with every turn of his head. Neon auras haloed everyone at the table as they welcomed Cal to a vacant seat placed between Sue and Lauren.

Lauren. Lauren looked especially angelic in the hazy light.

"You okay, Jake?"

Why had he never noticed before the timber of her voice, or her beautiful smile? His chest tightened underneath his Polo shirt. "I might be soon. We'll see after the next drink."

He wanted to laugh at Lauren's puzzled reaction but managed to reign in enough inhibitions so he wouldn't make a total ass of himself. He hadn't had this much to drink in years, and he didn't trust himself to maintain the ability to hold his liquor as well as he could in his youth. As it was, holding off J.J. was enough of a challenge. The young man stewed in his seat, the desire to drink long over. Jake ignored his son's every longing gaze at his watch.

Spoil sport. Jake snickered. The Scotch was warm and empowering, and he held onto the good feeling and let the years melt from his life as he joked and laughed with his companions.

"Cal, your new band is wonderful," Marlene was saying. "I know you've been around for a while, but I just know you're finally going to be popular." Marlene sounded a bit too enthused. Whether it was the wine or the need to feel complimentary Jake couldn't tell, but watching Sue's polite nod he imagined the musician and his wife saw through the flattery. Sue also seemed offended by the implications behind the remark, but Cal appeared unfazed. Jake surmised the time served in the business helped the musician grow a thick skin. Cal didn't need to be popular to find success; Jake was not overly fond of jazz, but he had to admit Cal had talent.

"Thank you, Marlene," Cal said, "but I'm not too concerned about popularity. If I never make a dime with this group I won't be upset." He squeezed his wife's hand. "We live on love."

A chorus of drunken, exaggerated "awws" followed.

"Of course, you can't speak for the rest of the group. They have to eat and pay rent," Brady cracked to laughs all around.

"Oh, I didn't mean anything by it, Cal, I know you've done well," Marlene said. "I just think it's great somebody like you still has the drive to do what he loves."

Cal raised an eyebrow. "Somebody like me?"

"Somebody old," Jake bellowed, and stirred the melting cubes in his glass to catch the last drops of Scotch before the water diluted them. He glared at his son and Marlene.

"Dad, don't put words in Marlene's mouth," J.J. sighed. "Christ, Marlene's older than Cal."

"Yes, and thank you for reminding us all," Marlene snapped.

"Oh, I hadn't noticed." Brady winked at her.

Marlene cast a demure look, smiling over her shrugged shoulder. "I'm sure you don't notice any women, Brady Garriston, not with that pretty wife beside you. Honestly, I look at you and can't believe there's such a big age difference."

Jake felt all eyes suddenly on him as his rocks glass came down on the table a bit too hard. He hadn't meant to make a racket, but Marlene's remark burned. What did it matter that there was an age difference between the married couple? Why did age have to be an issue tonight?

"Marlene," he began, but the woman babbled on as if he were invisible.

"There's what, ten years between you?" she prodded.

"Fifteen, actually," Brady replied in an even tone. "But I hadn't noticed that, either."

"Same," Ellie sang, and quickly brought her glass to her lips for a deep drink, no doubt to refrain from saying something more biting, Jake guessed.

"Wow. That's great for you." This from J.J., now on his umpteenth. "I have to tell you, I never would have thought a May-December romance could last, but I really have to give you guys credit. Both of you." His rocks glass wavered from Cal to Brady in a drunken salute. Jake felt embarrassed for all of them, but relieved both musicians had clearly decided to remain gentlemen.

"Our credit is just fine," Cal said with a smile, then stood and announced that his break was over. He bent low to kiss Sue and returned to the stage to warm up for the next set.

Jake turned on his son. "Why should it matter how old anybody is? I can't believe you actually said that."

"Jake, really, it's okay..."

Jake wanted to acknowledge Ellie's attempt, but his anger was too strong. "You know, I was ready to head back, but I changed my mind. I think we will stay, until you apologize to everyone here, and to Cal when's he done."

"Jake..." Brady said, but his voice was overpowered by a loud bass test blasted from distant speakers.

J.J. looked mortified, and drunk. They would have to stay regardless, until the man sobered. Jake couldn't figure out his son's fancy foreign car in the daytime, and he wasn't about to try in the middle of the night with a belly full of Scotch and little else.

"Jake, I'm sure J.J. meant nothing by it." Marlene patted the younger man's arm.

"You look like you agree with him, Marlene." Jake couldn't stand it any longer. For weeks the two had badgered him constantly about one thing or another—if not retirement, then hiring extra help. Slowing down, accepting age, and now this veiled talk of age and love. They were driving at something; even amid the bright lights and loud music, J.J. and Marlene were easily transparent. Jake had to wonder if the two were united in some conspiracy.

He felt a light brush to his side. A clandestine glance to one side told him the three young ladies at the table appreciated his challenge.

Marlene coyly raised an eyebrow and drew her wineglass closer. "Well, present company excluded, I haven't seen many relationships like that last. There's so little in common, so many factors...I just think two people closer in age are more apt to a lasting relationship, is all."

"Like you and Chet?" Jake asked. Yes, it was a cheap shot, but Marlene hadn't exactly been the picture of tact.

Marlene soured. "I don't expect *that* to last very long," she said, and Jake felt immediately sorry for having stooped so low. He should have realized Marlene might still be smarting over being left for a younger woman. Irascible as she had been lately, she didn't deserve the poor treatment by her ex-husband.

"Eventually, they'll break up," Marlene continued, sounding confident. "One will tire of the other and become drawn to somebody closer in age. It's the way, I believe. Like goes with like."

"Good argument for the gay movement." Jake heard Sue mutter into her martini.

"You and Cindy had a good, long marriage. You were the same age, there had to be something there," Marlene said to him. "Really, Jake, look around you." She gestured to the tightly packed bodies around them. "You're old enough to have fathered any of these girls. Can you honestly say you could have a lasting, loving relationship with any of them?"

"Not with just any of them," Jake conceded, and cast a glance to the younger women around him. Ellie, Sue, and Lauren appeared enthralled by the exchange, left hanging for the rest of his answer.

He winked at them before turning back to Marlene. "I don't know if I could top the kind of relationship I had with Cindy, but if the right lady came around, I wouldn't give a damn how old she was. In fact, the young the better, to keep up with me."

He flagged down the waitress for another drink. Marlene opened her mouth to respond but was drowned out by Cal's introduction of the next song.

* * *

Yes! There was hope.

Lauren sipped her drink. *He could only be saying that to piss Marlene off, you know.*

She grimaced. Her conscience had taken on Blowjob Bob's voice of late, and it unnerved her. Her attempts to blot it away by singing Cal's music in her head was not working. That left only a good dose of alcohol to dull any doubts. She didn't wait to finish the one in her hand, and ordered a Scotch and Coke when Jake requested a refill on his own.

A hand brushed her from behind, and she started. Brady was leaning over Sue; he soon soothed her with a pat to the shoulder, and she followed his hand as he pointed at Jake. "Jake, put it away," she heard him call, but Jake had yet to return his wallet to his pants. "I got this one, too."

Jake looked past her and nodded, then turned back to enjoy the music.

Brady leaned in closer and brushed against her ear. "Yours, too, babe." Lauren felt her skin prickle at his words. Everything from Brady Garriston sounded like a come-on, and it didn't help that she caught the aroma of pussy on his fingers as he touched her. The thought that Brady could be so brazen as to finger fuck his wife—and even his best friend's wife—in public set her own pussy close to the melting point.

She barely managed a thanks when Brady added, "Anything else, you name it."

Now, there was no mistaking *that* remark. When Brady released his grip and leaned back, she had to wonder where those fingers would be next.

She didn't have to turn around for her answer. The distinct moaning of the two women behind her was an obvious clue. Still, the alcohol burning through her veins, coupled with the growing surge of arousal, encouraged her to shift in her chair and turn away from the stage. Sure enough, Brady's hands were under the table, and the two ladies flanking him wore similar expressions of ecstasy.

The search under the table for a purposely dropped keychain confirmed her suspicions. Lauren imagined her chair would flood as she bent over to see two pairs of legs spread apart, each of Brady's hands stroking a bare pussy. It didn't appear to be gentle stroking, either, with the way Brady rubbed their pussy lips and clits, and curled his fingers inside them. He fingered each pussy the way he played the piano, practiced and quick, hitting all the right notes. Lauren wished for him to grow a third arm, and saw he sported a rather impressive third leg about to burst from his jeans.

The heady scent of sex made her dizzy, more so than the drinking. The bulge in Brady's pants seemed to grow, and her mouth watered with the temptation to remain underneath the table, release his cock from its confines, and offer it a new home deep inside her mouth. She couldn't remember the last time she tasted cock, and she missed the sensation terribly. No doubt one like Brady's would keep her occupied for a long time.

"Back," she warned herself, and slowly rose. Inviting as the prospect of restaurant sex was, and no doubt Brady wouldn't mind, Lauren knew she had to stay focused. The only cock she wanted was Jake's. In her mouth, in her pussy, up her ass...wherever he wanted to put it, she'd take it.

She straightened in her seat and curled a hand around the fresh glass before her. J.J. and Marlene studied the stage with twin begrudged expressions. Sue and Ellie rocked to the music played in the air and on their clits. Onstage, Cal swiveled his hips and pounded his bass guitar as the lady singer matched his notes with an infectious scat that had to be improvised. Lauren could only sit, hypnotized as she watched Cal's fingers dance up and down the neck of his bass, and imagining how well and how quickly his hands could drive a woman to orgasm.

Holy hell, she needed to come.

She scooted her chair closer to the edge of the table and grabbed her crotch, stroking her pussy over layers of slacks and panties. She couldn't feel much, but it would have to do until she could figure out a way through the crowd to the ladies room where she could masturbate in relative privacy. She tried to aim for her clit but found it difficult, having to negotiate with the thick seam that held her pants together. Furiously she rubbed her pussy but felt no sensation to indicate she was any closer to orgasm.

Yet, she nearly wet herself in fright when a second hand, not her own, touched down on her thigh.

"Let me help," Sue whispered in her ear. She smelled of sex and booze.

Sue deftly undid the clip that concealed the zipper flap on Lauren's slacks. Even in the din of bass and deep vocals and general audience melee, Lauren could hear the zipper being undone.

Holy hell. Sue didn't wait for a yes. She was actually going to do this.

"This isn't what I had in mind," Lauren hissed back, yet made no move to stop her friend. Sue had slipped her hand beneath the wispy layer of lace panty and attempted to stroke skin. It felt too good to discourage. It had been too long since somebody touched her this way.

Damn it. It should be Jake doing this.

"You want to come, I know. You'll feel better when you do, I want to help."

"Wha...?" Lauren checked the other side of the table. Neither Marlene, J.J., or Jake had a clue. She quietly conceded and relaxed her thighs, allowing Sue better access. The other woman's hand gently stroked her pussy lips, delving her fingers in and out of the folds, until one found her clit.

"Your pussy feels wonderful," Sue purred as she tugged Lauren's clit in circular motion.

That feels wonderful. Lauren had to admit, Sue knew what she was doing, and she did it so well. For a brief moment, Lauren regretted not joining that orgy when invited.

"Just close your eyes and pretend Jake is doing this," Sue buzzed in her ear. "Jake is stroking your clit and loving your pussy, making you wet."

With Sue tangled in her pussy lips; Lauren exhaled a pleased sigh, then sucked in air when a finger breached her flooded core.

"That's lovely. I wish I could see your pussy now. Jake would love it. Just picture him slamming his cock into that beautiful, wet pussy. Can you feel it? Can you feel him fucking you?"

Yes.

Sue's husky giggling caressed every nerve, and increased her heartbeat. She'd come in record time by virtue of the other woman's voice at this rate. That Sue's lips nearly brushed the outer shell of her ear helped.

Lauren trembled. She needed support, and grasped Sue's thigh, only to brush against Brady's wrist. He continued to work Sue's own clit with a fervor that rivaled Sue's hand. Still, Lauren would likely beat her to the climax.

"That's it, baby. Come," Sue urged. The rough tugging stopped, and Sue alternated quickly between rubbing Lauren's clit and probing her cunt. "Come for Jake. Let him know how much you love it."

Yes. The buildup in her pussy was too much to bear, her orgasm was close. Lauren blocked out the surrounding noise and kept focus on the vision behind her eyes, of Jake fingering her pussy and guiding her to heaven. He would do this, she decided. No more side-stepping around her feelings. He would have to know how she felt and what she wanted him to do to her. Once Jake knew the truth, how could he refuse her? He'd already conceded that a relationship with a younger woman was not out of the question, and given how hard he was right now, Lauren was a step closer to her goal.

Just as quickly as her building orgasm teetered on the edge, it suddenly fell back and Lauren felt it dissolve to nothing.

How hard he was now?

"Lauren?" Sue released her touch and left her hand limp in Lauren's lap.

Lauren looked over to Jake, who stared back at her in drunken shock, then followed his gaze as it slowly cast downward.

Lauren's hand was in Jake's lap.

Somewhere in the course of Sue stroking her, Lauren had reached, unbidden, for Jake's cock and had stroked it to stone.

Lauren drew her hand back and grasped her drink. The cold of the rocks glass stung her skin. "Jake," she said, mortified. "I'm s-so..."

Jake looked away, clearly embarrassed. Lauren imagined her face was just as red, and quickly she remembered her indiscretion, though Sue no longer touched her. She snatched a cloth napkin for her lap.

"I-I should go," Jake said, so quietly Lauren could barely hear it. She could, however, read his lips.

Jake calmly righted the crotch of his jeans and stood, then motioned for J.J. to leave.

"Jake," Lauren said, "please, let me—"

"That's okay, Lauren, it's getting late." Jake smiled at her, and it surprised Lauren how calm he could be in spite of what she had done. His crotch was eye level now, and Lauren could tell his cock was still erect, just arranged so it wasn't as obvious. This was not how she wanted him to find out about her feelings for him. There were pictures, yes, but everything she had planned was intended for private revelation. She never sought to embarrass him like this.

Jake spoke over her head to a silent, seemingly subdued Brady. "Please give Cal our regrets. See you at the store." With that, J.J. rounded the table and gladly escorted his father away.

"Well, I might as well get moving, too. Night, all," Marlene said hurriedly. She took off after both men, casting one last smug look at Lauren before leaving. Had the old woman known what Lauren had done? Doubtful, but since Lauren had come to the beach with the Briscoes, Marlene must have surmised she was powerless to move, and took the opportunity to accost Jake in the street.

As it was, Lauren *was* powerless to move, frozen by guilt. The remainder of Cal's show was spent fighting back the tears and drowning in Scotch, unresponsive to Sue's comforting, sympathetic touch across her neck and shoulders.

Eight

Jake spent most of the next week in Suffolk, seeing the new store to completion. He wanted to be sure all the machines worked and the inventory checked out before he handed Danielle the keys for the soft opening. The Dareville store saw very little of him as a result, which is how Jake had planned it. Though he knew that Danielle should have been there instead of him, since it would be her store to run, he insisted on doing the work himself. Danielle needed the experience of operating a functioning store on her own, was his excuse, and everybody seemed to buy it.

When he steered his truck into the lot early that Friday morning, an odd feeling rumbled in the pit of his stomach. He had been away so long, he wondered how soon he could reacclimate to the environment.

As it was, it was definitely too soon to face Lauren again, after the fiasco at Maui Joe's. No doubt the store's other employees had accepted his alibi in preparing the Suffolk store, but certainly Lauren knew he had been intentionally avoiding her. Better to face the eventuality today, he decided, and maybe their meeting wouldn't turn unpleasant.

What would he say to her? He had too much to drink that night, but could he really use that as an excuse? He would have to, he couldn't bear for Lauren to know the truth; it was his libido that had been his true undoing. How could he tell Lauren that just the mere sight of her that night, a surreptitious glance that revealed a beautiful body swaying to the music, set his cock to attention? That the sight of her just sitting there prompted an image in his mind of the nude photo planted in his computer, which further excited him? That over the past two weeks, since seeing that photo, he had entertained thoughts of Lauren that were anything but professional? Thought he fought to dismiss, but failed?

His cock had been hard for a few good minutes before Lauren's hand found its way there by chance. What's more, though he didn't know what prompted her brazen move that night, he hadn't minded it so much. The thought of what might happen next scared him enough to run.

Don't be silly. He knew what inspired Lauren to touch him. If she did have a thing for him, perhaps her boldness had been manifested by her own imbibing. All the same, he was hard first, so by logic he had to take blame.

Hands in his pockets, shoulders stooped, he barreled into the store and barely acknowledged the many greetings received. How could it have happened, that he was developing feelings for Lauren beyond friendship? Were the feelings genuine, at that? Had Lauren become a replacement for Cindy?

No. Nobody could replace Cindy in his heart, and he had believe nobody could replace her in life. Perhaps this was some kind of transference. With Cindy gone, his desires had nowhere to go but to focus upon the first convenient, attractive woman in his path. With Lauren around more due to work, surely nature took its course.

"Hey, Jake." Danielle breezed out of the office and greeted him in passing. Jake nodded a hello, but turned to watch the young woman stride toward the coffee nook. Danielle was certainly attractive, single and shapely with beautiful black hair and a perky smile. Jake spent quite a bit of time with her, more so with her than with Lauren. Logically, wouldn't his feelings of desire have transferred to her instead?

Of course, Jake never saw Danielle naked, and as such never wondered what it would be like to be with her...naked.

No sense in trying now, he decided. He had enough to occupy his mind.

Sighing, he steeled his posture and entered the office to find Lauren busy at the computer. Her smile in greeting was tentative and knowing, yet not embarrassed. Jake took it as a sign that she wasn't angry or upset with him, and he felt suddenly relieved.

"Good morning, Jake."

Oh, boy. Now he felt suddenly aroused. Until this point, Cindy had been the only woman who could cause his groin to stir by just talking. Lauren did it in three words flat. What was wrong with him?

Apparently nothing. Jake imagined most men his age would be thankful to get an erection at all.

Lauren straightened a stack of envelopes on the desk. "Paychecks are ready to go," she was saying. "This computer accounting program is terrific. You won't believe how much time I saved this week doing the books with it."

"That's great," Jake said, moving to the coffee pot. He kept his back to Lauren so she wouldn't see the stiffening bulge in his jeans. This...from talking about paychecks. Jake surmised talking about sex might just give him a stroke.

"Aaaaand, you won't believe what happened while you were gone," she continued gaily. "There was a lady in here the other day, she got lost on the way back to the interstate and stopped for directions. Bought some coffee and one of Jo's biscotti. Turns out she's a vice-president at Daisy's Whole Foods. She wants to market Jo's products under a new label! Isn't that exciting?"

"Very." Daisy's was a reputable international food company. Jake stocked some of their organic brands. "I don't suppose we'll get a hometown discount, will we?"

Lauren lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Guess we'll have to ask Daisy."

"Guess so." The coffee tasted sweet and bold. Jake noticed Lauren had brewed a specialty blend the store didn't carry, probably something brought from home. A small bud vase next to the machine held a white carnation; it wasn't there before, either. Nice of her to want to lend a personal touch to the otherwise dull, wood-paneled office.

"Lauren..." Jake faltered and turned to face her, then started when he saw Lauren was now standing in front of the desk. With her long, brown hair dusting the shoulders of her aqua blue blouse, she looked beautiful. Her dark eyes reflected an expectant blow, and Jake felt his heart sink. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her, much less ruin her weekend.

"About...what happened..." He wanted to look her in the eye, and found it to be a difficult task. Casting his gaze downward helped less. The view of Lauren's curved hips, hugged by her black pencil skirt, triggered his want again, but there was no display or table he could hide behind this time.

"Yeah, Jake, I'm sorry about that." Lauren seemed to look for a distraction in the office as well. The open doorway provided plenty, and they watched shoppers pass as they talked.

"I had too much drink," she was saying, "and I wasn't thinking. Trust me, I would never do anything to embarrass you the way I did."

"Lauren, you did nothing wrong. Truly, you're a great friend and a good worker, and I'm the one who should be sorry for embarrassing you. Wow." He chuckled. "You'd think at this point in my life I wouldn't have...*that* kind of problem. I supposed I should be flattered..."

Now was a good time, he believed, to stop talking. He didn't need to discuss further his ability or lack thereof to obtain and maintain an erection.

"Jake, are you saying...you're sorry that I came onto you?" Lauren frowned. As if in afterthought, she rushed past him and closed the office door. "Or," she turned slowly around, "are you apologizing for coming onto *me*?"

"I guess, I guess...the latter." Had he come onto her as well? Was he that drunk?

"But you didn't do anything."

"I certainly haven't done anything gentlemanly, Lauren," Jake said. The circulation in the small office ceased when Lauren shut the door. His heart stopped upon hearing the familiar click of the lock being engaged.

Now why...?

The aroma of vanilla coffee and sweet perfume clashed and assaulted him at every angle. He felt light-headed and nauseous, more so than earlier.

"Are you okay, Jake?" Concern colored Lauren's voice and she reached forward, as if to steady him. "Do you need to sit down?"

"No, no." He noted the look on Lauren's face as he flinched away. She looked hurt, and he wondered if she thought he was repulsed by her. Quite the contrary. Given what her voice could do, a simple touch was certain to cause an eruption.

"Lauren, I'm fine. Just a little stuffy in here." He illustrated the point with a hooked finger tugging at his shirt collar. "I think if we just—"

"Jake, I love you."

"What?"

Lauren looked a like a deer in headlights. Her soft, brown eyes seemed to double in circumference, and her hands tightened into a large fist that wavered up and down before falling sharply to her abdomen. She didn't seem to know what to do with herself.

"I can't take it anymore, Jake. I have to tell you that I love you."

Her voice now took on a desperation that rattled Jake. It was true, what J.J. had said. To think, despite being somewhat aware of subtle gestures and body language, and of course the pictures on the computer, Lauren's revelation still came as a shock.

"Well," he said finally, "Lauren, I adore you, too..."

"I'm in love with you, Jake. I don't love you like you were my father. I already have a father. I want a lover, I want you."

Oh. There was that unmistakable sensation. His cock stirred to life again, bidden by her voice. When did he lose control of his body? His heart knew this couldn't happen, but his cock had other ideas.

"Lauren..." He said nothing more as he backed into the coffee station. A tower of Styrofoam cups toppled to the ground. The coffeepot clattered on its burner, yet Lauren's approach remained steady and seductive. She seemed to move toward him in slow-motion, graceful, like a movie seduction scene.

"I'm almost ashamed to admit I sort of carried the torch for a few years now," she said softly. "All that time I was married to my loser of a husband, I'd watch you with Cindy, how loving you were to her. I'd wonder why couldn't I have a man like you."

"Lauren, you're a beautiful woman. You could have many men who'd love you." *Shit.* That didn't sound right, more like something J.J. might have said to imply promiscuity. "Er, I mean, that man does exist for you..."

"And he's right here," Lauren finished. She was a breath away now; her scent intoxicated him, and the whisper touch of her skirt against his thigh was enough to keep his cock stiff. "I felt so bad when Cindy died, yet I still wondered why I couldn't have a man like you. It didn't hit me until a few months later that you could be that man, Jake."

"I can't be that man, Lauren."

Lauren frowned. "Why? Because you think I'm too young for you? I don't care about any age difference, and you said—"

"I can't because I love my wife, Lauren."

"But she's dead. You're here, Jake."

Yes, Cindy was dead, and he was alive, and the ache in his cock was proof of his remaining virility. It was a feeling he didn't want, yet couldn't bear to surrender. He wasn't supposed to feel desire anymore, he thought he had buried those feelings with his wife. What was so special about Lauren that they were resurrected?

Stop it. Lauren was a lovely woman, inside and out, and deserving of the kind of love he and Cindy shared. He couldn't share it with her, though. He couldn't.

"As long as I am still breathing, Lauren," he said carefully, "as long as I can see her in my sons and granddaughters, Cindy will be alive to me. I know she won't *be* here with me anymore, and it's taken me a while to accept that—"

"I can be here for you now, Jake," Lauren begged. "I know you still have desires, you can't just ignore them."

"I can be happy with the memories of the woman I loved. Still love." Any other time before this, he could have said that without conviction. Now, the trembling in his voice disturbed him. The shell of his grief was cracking. He had been so comfortable in this cocoon, wearing it to work every day, and he worried about what to expect should it crumble completely. What exactly did Lauren want from him? His love? It couldn't be the same love he had for Cindy. Any woman—Lauren, Marlene, whoever—would want more than he could offer.

No, he decided. Best to be blunt, and fast. This conversation was too long already.

"What I felt that night," Lauren said, "told me you still have desires. You're capable of desiring another woman, I know it. Why can't it be me?" Her face darkened. "Unless, you think you might have feelings for somebody else, like Mar—"

"I love my wife, Lauren. There is nobody else." There wouldn't *be* anybody else. There wouldn't.

There wouldn't...

Jake tried to move away. Lauren was too close now. The edge of the coffee station stabbed his hip. Shooting pains raced down one leg.

Her gaze softened. "I felt your cock, Jake. Were you thinking of your wife while I was stroking you?"

Jake's heart expanded in his chest, compressing the air from his lungs. Dirty pool, she was playing, with that sexy voice and that smoldering gaze.

"You were hard and thick, yet so soft. All I could think about was how good it would feel inside me, how I'd love to be on top of you, easing myself up and down on your hard cock and rocking against your body." She braced a hand against the wall behind him. "Don't you ever of think of things like that?"

"N-no," he lied. What little he knew of women, after all these years. Cindy had been sexually aggressive in their marriage, not that he ever complained, and Lauren was no less the lioness. It was a wonder he lasted this long.

"I had these pictures taken of myself, Jake..."

I know. "Lauren, please..."

"...it probably wasn't the wisest thing to do, since they got me fired from DPA, but I wanted you to know what you'd be getting, what I'd be willing to give to you."

Her hand came down on his crotch. She smiled, victorious. "Is this for me?" she asked. "Would you give this to me? Would you like to know how happy I can make you?"

"It's just a natural reaction," Jake managed. "You can't expect me not to be moved, the way you're acting."

"So you find me attractive?"

"How could I not, Lauren? Of course, you're a beautiful woman, it's just..."

Lauren was a woman possessed now, close enough to kiss. Apparently, she shared the same thought. Lauren leaned in close and brushed her lips against his. She was soft; her lips against his set off a series of nerve explosions that nearly melted him. He didn't feel his lips part to accept her until the tip of her tongue breached and glided across his teeth.

"Jake." That was the last word said as they melded into a scorching kiss. Hands grazed his body, a thigh brushed against his hardened cock. Jake's reluctance to reciprocate dissipated quickly as Lauren's continued exploration with her hands and tongue slowly wore down his defenses. His own hands found a safe place cupping her shoulders, but soon dared to trail down her back and caress the swell of her pert, firm bottom.

A nice ass it was, too. If Jake had to categorize himself where preference was concerned, he was an ass man all the way. As long as he knew his wife, Cindy had a lovely bottom for watching. He especially loved watching it as he entered her from behind, and fondling her curves as his cock slid effortlessly in and out of her pussy. Occasionally, when Cindy allowed, he would test her anus with a forefinger and savor her pleased reaction to his touch.

Kissing Lauren now, there came a vision of her beautiful, naked body bent over the desk, her ass high in the air, awaiting his cock. What would it be like to take her in that position, to be hypnotized by the jiggling of her breasts with each rough stroke into her pussy? What would his cock look like disappearing into such a beautiful, smooth pussy?

Lauren's pussy.

Lauren's pussy ground against his cock, and Jake mimicked her movements in synch, as if seeking an entranceway through the barriers between them. It had been too long since he felt this way. He needed relief, and masturbation wasn't going to cut it this time. She felt too good to ignore.

"I want you, Jake." Lauren's breath tickled him, her scent taunted him. Her nipples were taut and stabbed his chest through her thin blouse. He could see the wisp of lace underneath the white fabric, and twin, dark pebbles underneath that. She was a lovely sight, crushed against him and heaving, so much that for a brief moment Jake pondered switching loyalties to parts above the waistline.

Switching loyalties...

He jerked free completely from Lauren's kiss and bent low to take a nipple over her blouse. Delicious, even with the obstacles to negotiate. Lauren's high-pitched gasp still rang in his ears once he undid enough buttons to expose the swell of one breast. Sliding away the lace cup, he moved to the other, bare breast and sucked. Her nipple was thick and hard and tasted of lavender. So delicious.

"Yes," Lauren whined.

His sentiments exactly.

He heard a muffled zipping sound, then felt the heat of soft fingers fumbling through his fly to touch his cock. Lauren's finger slid under the flap of his boxer shorts and traced a raised vein on his shaft. She was plotting a course he was ready to follow.

"Your cock feels so good." Her voice rasped in his ear. "I want to taste you. I want your cock in my mouth, so I can pleasure you. I want to make you come and swallow you whole."

Oh my. When had that been said to him last? Never.

She tried to sink lower, presumably to do just that, but Jake held her high. Her breast tasted too good to stop, and there was still one more to sample. Lauren seemed to catch the hint and settled instead for continued stroking of his cock and backside.

"Take me, Jake," she gasped. "Right here, please."

"What?" Jake released her nipple and trailed light kisses up her neck.

Fingers tapped at his shaft and scraped against his scrotum. Lauren pressed into him for better access. "I need you inside me, in my pussy," she whispered. Her eyes bore into his and granted him a view of the fire that no doubt burned in her soul. "Make love to me, Jake."

If she had said nothing, and maybe just guided him to where she wanted to be touched and pleased, he might have indulged her. He might have eased her bottom against the edge of the desk and slid a hand up her skirt, seeking the source of her fire. He might have alleviated some of the ache first with a gentle massage to her pussy lips, then soothed his own ache by introducing his cock, burying it deep inside her.

He might have done that and more, had her voice not resembled Cindy's in the heat of passion. He closed his eyes and saw his wife's face, pinched in ecstasy, her mouth rounded in orgasmic release. He missed that look, that face. He missed giving her that look.

Holding Lauren now, kissing secret places and driven by lust to want more, he realized he couldn't give her what she wanted, not now. Cindy still lived, in some respect, and he couldn't be certain who controlled his desires at this moment.

If ever he would make love with Lauren McKenna, she would have to be only one with him. Even ghosts could crowd a bed, or a desk.

"Jake?" Lauren nipped at his neck and pressed her pubic bone against him. She noticed, too, his cock's quickly softening state. "What's wrong?"

What was wrong was that he couldn't make love with her and think of Cindy, he wanted to say. It wouldn't be fair. He opened his mouth, but no sound escaped.

Gently he stepped away and righted his fly, tucking in his shirt.

"Jake?" Lauren's voice took on a panicked pitch, and Jake refused to look at her. He couldn't bear to see tears now. He felt bad enough for toying with Lauren's emotions. He did reach out to straighten her blouse, relieved she didn't protest when he buttoned her back to a presentable look.

"I'm sorry," was all he could say. "I can't do this. You deserve so much more." And he fumbled with the locked door, his hands still shaking as he dashed out of the office before Lauren could speak.

Most definitely, he had not been ready to face Lauren. He certainly wasn't in the frame of mind to deal with Marlene Robeson, either, but here came the older woman from the produce section. She followed him to the parking lot, huffing and calling his name.

"Jake Marbury, where are your manners?" she scolded. "Honestly."

Jake was halfway in the cab of his truck when he craned his neck back toward the store. Marlene limped across the gravel lot in heeled shoes, kicking up a cloud of white dust. Wisps of hair had loosened from the banana clip fastening her hair behind her head, evidence that she hustled to catch up to him.

"I'm sorry, Marlene," he said, and slid back to the ground. "I have a lot on my mind, and a lot of things to do."

"I don't doubt that, Jake, but it's not like you to come shooting out of the store like it's on fire." Marlene frowned. "Damn it all, I forgot what I was going to ask you, too, you got me so riled up."

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "I'm sure it'll come to you, and if it's important you can call me." He glanced over her head at the store. His heart skipped a beat when the automated doors slid open and a woman with Lauren's coloring and build strode onto the lot. Had Lauren tried to follow him? Was she weeping in the office? He shook his head. What a mess he made.

"I'll do that." Marlene sounded appeased, and Jake murmured a nicety to get her to move. He needed to get out of here. He'd go back to Suffolk, busy himself with the store there until today's embarrassment was distant enough to retreat into memory.

"But I don't like the idea of letting you go in such a rush, Jake," Marlene told him. "You look distracted."

"I look busy, because I *am* busy." She clucked like a mother hen. It irritated him.

"You need a break before you work yourself to death." Marlene fisted her hands and put them to her hips. "Really, Jake, you look terrible. I bet you haven't had a decent meal since you started this new store business."

He managed to get inside the truck and shut the door behind him. His elbow hung over the open window as he jammed the key into the ignition with his other hand. "You offering to cook for me?"

"I can." The maternal pitch was gone now from her voice. Jake stole a glance in her direction. Her gaze was now cast shyly to the gravel.

He sighed. "Well, why don't I come over tonight, say, six? We can talk about whatever then." Anything, he'd do anything to get away now. An hour or so of his life eating a dinner he didn't particularly want seemed so little a sacrifice if Marlene would just move away from his truck.

The look on Marlene's face was victorious, and suddenly youthful. Jake felt bothered by it, and the uneasiness grew as he pulled away and noticed Marlene's shrinking form in his rear view mirror. She was watching him drive away. He consented to dinner, just dinner, and yet her demeanor implied she interpreted the exchange to mean much more than that.

Unbelievable. He was a sixty-year-old man, fighting off women left and right, and Dareville had a good number of single, handsome men. His oldest son should have this kind of luck.

He gripped the wheel and turned onto the road toward Suffolk. If anything, maybe dinner with Marlene would help him forget the scene with Lauren. It would have to be a spectacular meal, but it was worth a shot. Maybe word would spread about the so-called date, as news like this often did in the small town, thereby discouraging Lauren from future propositions.

Right. He saw the fire in Lauren's eyes. That wouldn't be doused easily.

And what would help him discourage his own growing desires?

To say nothing of Marlene.

* * *

Lauren watched the numbers on the computer spreadsheet wriggle and dance through the misty veil covering her eyes. Jake's abrupt departure left her stunned and speechless, so much that she couldn't concentrate on work. How could he expect her to continue working after what had happened, anyway? She doubted he'd return to the store today, and there was nothing stopping her from leaving, nothing but foolish pride.

Over and over, she replayed the scene. Jake wanted her, she sensed that much. The way he touched her, and took her nipple into his mouth, was so loving. There was no sense of obligation or pity in the way he acted, clearly he had responded to his desires. Jack had responded to *her*.

And without warning, he ran. Lauren hit the mental rewind button to determine the exact point of reversal. What had she said, done? All she wanted was for Jake to make love to her. He was halfway there as it was!

She shut off the computer and leaned back in her chair, nauseous dread grasping her by the throat. As much as the notion of facing anybody bothered her, she knew she couldn't stay holed up in the office. She would have to leave eventually, but pride kept

her seated. She had drawn enough attention to herself this past month; nobody needed to see her face, puffy red from crying, and ask questions.

Marlene Robeson topped that list, and Lauren cringed when a distinct humming sound heralded her approach.

Fuck.

"Lauren, good morning." Marlene's grin was feline, sly. Lauren envisioned the dairy section ravaged in the wake of a tigress' attack...that best described the older woman's look.

If Marlene noticed that Lauren had been crying, she was gracious enough to not make mention of it. Instead she tiptoed the length the desk, eyeing the scattered papers. "I left something here a while back, when I was still doing Jake's books. A small day planner with a blue cover, gold lettering. have you seen it?"

It was probably safe inside Marlene's heavy grandmother purse. The woman was fishing, and Lauren wasn't in the mood for games. "You know it's not here," she said dully. "Just speak your piece and get the hell out. I'm busy."

"You don't look it."

Lauren only stared, wanting very much to fix it so Marlene wouldn't be able to see anything.

"Very well." Marlene appeared unaffected by Lauren's demeanor. "I wouldn't worry much longer about being busy here and crunching numbers. Your days *here* are numbered."

"Funny, last I heard only Jake could make that decision," Lauren snapped.

"And he will, once I've convinced him to fire you and take me back," Marlene said. She paced the office with a high-born air, eyeing the trinkets Lauren had placed about the office with some disgust. She plucked a petal from the flower wilting in the bud vase and tut-tutted. "Tacky," she murmured. "Suits you, anyway."

"Jake is a smart enough man to know what he wants, Marlene." Lauren rose and took a defiant stance, arms folded over her chest. Her left nipple still burned from Jake's kiss. What she wouldn't give for the nerve to inform Marlene how Jake had kissed and fondled her, but she wouldn't embarrass Jake further. Besides, it was none of the woman's damn business.

"I never said Jake was stupid, Lauren, but anyone can see that his judgment of late is clouded. He's too focused on his grief to think straight, and he's making bad decisions." Marlene came to the desk's edge and matched Lauren's posture in a showdown. "He should be enjoying the rest of his life, not creating more work with a second store he doesn't really need—"

"He should do what he wants," Lauren argued. "If he wants a second store, I say let him have one."

"Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you?" Marlene's eyes narrowed. "You'd love to sink your claws into Jake and get him to marry you. Then work him to an early grave and reap the benefits."

"What? You are insane to think that." Lauren pressed her hands close, so tempted to slap the old woman. "Jake came up with the idea for a second store on his own. I had nothing to do with that."

"Am I insane now? Come on, Lauren. You're a young woman, you can have any man in town," Marlene said. "There's only one reason a woman your age would want Jake Marbury."

"Love," Lauren said. "I love him."

"Money," hissed Marlene. "You love the *idea* of having Jake. You're nothing but a cheap goldigger, McKenna, and I'll be damned if I'm going to stand by and watch you ruin a good man."

"I have no intention of doing that," Lauren bit. "You think you could be better for him?"

Marlene looked down her nose at her. "I know so. I don't have to resort to acting like a whore to earn a man's affection. That's right, don't think I don't know about those porn pictures of yours. I wouldn't be surprised if you used them to get yourself fired from DPA so you could play up to Jake's sympathy."

Lauren's hands and toes turned numb as her blood ran cold. "I wouldn't talk about things you don't understand," she said.

"Oh, I understand you. Believe me, missy." The temperature in the room dropped significantly. Marlene's voice took on an otherworldly tone, taunting Lauren. "You're no better than the bubbleheaded whore who seduced my Chet. You think I believe for one minute she actually *enjoys* fucking my lump of an ex-husband? Every faked orgasm for her is another dollar in her bank account." She shook her head. "The things people like you will do for a life of leisure. Sad."

"This office is for employees only, Marlene." Lauren willed herself to restraint. Nothing would make her happier than to wipe the smug look from Marlene's face with a sharp left hook, but word would certainly get back to Jake.

"Don't worry, I'm leaving. I just need to get some groceries first, for the dinner I'm cooking for Jake tonight."

"You're not having dinner with Jake."

"Yes, I am. We made arrangements not five minutes ago in the parking lot." Marlene cast her a sympathetic smile. "Why don't you drive by my house tonight, you'll see his truck. But I wouldn't stop for a visit, we'll be busy. Ta-ta." And Marlene glided from the office with a confident stride.

Lauren remained standing, fighting the quiver in her knees that threatened to buckle her. Marlene had to be lying. How could Jake possibly make a date with another woman, with Marlene, after kissing her? It couldn't be true, the woman was bluffing about Jake coming to her house, and about convincing Jake to fire her.

Lauren felt dizzy; she lost the fight against her weakness and slumped into the chair.

If Marlene was indeed bluffing, why, then, was she so worried?

Nine

Well, here we are.

Yes, home sweet home...I had a great time tonight.

Me, too. I'd love to have another great time soon.

I'd like that.

Jack killed the engine and glanced at the passenger seat. The trappings of a modern-day pickup truck were no longer visible. Jake had left home in his fully equipped Dodge Ram and ended the short trip sitting in his father's rickety Ford stepsider, that he had driven on his first date with Cindy.

She was beautiful in her thin, mint green sweater and black skirt, with her red hair worn in a chignon fastened by a matching green clip. Her head was bowed, her hands resting in her lap. In the distance a yellowed porch lamp lit the short path home. It would be a lonely trek back to the truck once he escorted her to the door, and Jake struggled to think of something to say to prolong their goodbye.

"I like you, Cindy," he said finally.

Her lips curled into a sweet smile. "I like you, too, Jake."

"I-I wish you didn't have to leave right away."

Cindy turned slightly toward him. Her skirt rustled and he caught a flash of sheer stocking stretched over a shapely leg. "Well, I have a few minutes before I have to be in, we could talk." The look in her eyes, though, told Jake she hoped for more.

"Talk, we could do that." Words felt odd rolling off his tongue. "What do—"

But Cindy answered him immediately, leaning forward to plant a kiss on his parted lips.

Forty years later, the impression of her soft lips on his remained, and Jake descended from the Dodge to stand before Marlene's new home. This new subdivision had been built over the old neighborhood where Cindy's family once lived, and while Marlene's home didn't stand on the exact spot of the old gingerbread-style house that had been torn down in the name of progress, Jake felt odd all the same standing here.

Was this history repeating itself, or just odd coincidence? He hoped for the latter and started up the walk, but screeched to a halt midway up the stone path upon hearing a high-pitched wolf whistle.

"Looking good, Jake!"

He whirled around to see Sue and Cal Briscoe jogging up the walk. The summer evening was still warm enough to allow the couple the bare minimum of clothing, and Jake offered an embarrassed smile as they approached. He tried to focus more on Cal, and less on Sue's bouncing breasts, which were encased tightly in an ash-colored jogging bra.

"Look at you, all dressed up. Almost didn't recognize you without the coveralls," Cal said.

Jake looked down at his pressed tan slacks. He dressed for tonight out of courtesy to Marlene. No doubt the older woman would use his semi-formal appearance to justify the evening as an official date. "You guys live around here?" he called as the couple slowed to a static jog in front of the house.

"Just down the block, where the red BMW is parked." Sue hiked a thumb behind her. "We're having an album release party Saturday night at seven. J.J., Red, and Charlene are coming, you should, too."

"I just might." He waved as the couple resumed their jog, taking a moment to watch Cal's lean body jog away. He was only ten years younger than he, but looked much younger than that. Acted younger, too, given the way he goosed his wife's bottom as they raced down the sidewalk.

You're only as old as you feel, I suppose, Jake told himself. He knocked on the door and waited for Marlene, feeling every bit his age. The view through Marlene's living room window told him to expect nothing less of an environment to foster the feeling. Lace doilies covered oak furniture, and the faint odor of wisteria and cat tickled his nostrils when Marlene greeted him in a modest blue dress.

"I hope you brought your appetite," she said pleasantly.

"I most certainly did," Jake returned, sounding more enthused than he actually was. He cast one last glance down the street at Sue's shapely, retreating form. Her laughter carried on the wind. It sounded so lovely, so familiar.

He almost wanted to follow it, hoping it would lead somewhere he truly wanted to be.

To something else, someone else.

* * *

Dinner was a subdued affair, yet not unpleasant. Marlene offered up a delicious meal and interesting conversation—they discussed arts, local politics, their respective interests, and traded anecdotes about their children and grandchildren. Neither Cindy nor Chet figured into the evening, and as Marlene cleared away the plates Jake was surprised to learn two hours had passed.

"I thought we'd have coffee in the living room," she said, retreating to the kitchen. "Make yourself comfortable."

"Okay." In truth, Jake had hoped for an out. It had been a long day and he looked forward to going to bed. He decided to indulge in one cup, no dessert, and graciously beg off any other offers Marlene might propose.

He realized, too, Marlene had never mentioned that important thing she had wanted to discuss earlier, and he wondered if she were stalling to keep him there.

He circled the living room slowly before settling on the couch. The night outside the window was streaked red and beautiful. A few neighbors lingered on their porches, enjoying the evening. Jake watched a several cars cruise slowly past the house, then one suddenly sped up and tore out of the subdivision. He shook his head; probably a teenager showing off for friends.

Marlene coyly shrugged when Jake recounted what he had seen. She took the opposite side of the couch. "Perhaps we're being spied upon?" she suggested jokingly.

Not much to see. "People are interesting animals," he agreed, and took the warm mug brimming with French roast. "It's interesting to watch them in the store, how they interact with each other, and how they shop. I like to think that's why the store does so well."

"Because you watch the customers?"

Jake nodded. "It's helped me become more intuitive about my customer base. I learn more from their behavior than through the item sales."

"Makes sense," Marlene said. "That certainly would explain why the cafe is so popular. Your adding Jo's biscotti was a good move."

"Actually that was Lauren's idea, I can't take credit." What was Lauren doing now? Jake doubted she was laughing like her friend Sue. He hoped she was okay.

Marlene was oddly quiet, and appeared pensive as she set down her mug on the coffee table. "Jake, about Lauren," she began, and Jake cringed. He imagined what would come next wouldn't be glowing.

"Don't you think she's a bit out of place, working at the store? I mean, she has no accounting experience, yet you have her doing the books."

"Would you rather I put her behind a cash register, or have her stock?" Jake chuckled. Those jobs he often reserved for local high school students. Lauren was much too advanced for that kind of work.

"I'd rather she not work there at all." Marlene was blunt. "The thing with the biscotti notwithstanding, I just don't think she's good for the store."

Jake sighed and set down his own mug. *This* was the important topic for discussion? As much as Marlene seemed to constantly resent Lauren's presence, Jake found it difficult to believe this was something she couldn't remember earlier.

"You and J.J. both. Tell me, what is it with the two of you that you have it out for Lauren? Are you upset I offered her a paying job instead of you?"

"Well..." Marlene stammered a few words before regaining coherence, "you know my financial situation. I'm comfortable, and I was able to buy this house after Chet left me. But, logic would dictate that if you need an accountant, you *hire* an accountant."

"Normally, but you did the job for free, and don't think I never appreciated it, Marlene—"

"I could have kept doing the job for free," Marlene muttered. "Saved you some money."

"And like I said, I appreciated you're stepping in when Cindy died. But you don't need a job, you've said so. Lauren, however, does. She needs the money, and logic dictated to *me* that I should offer her some in exchange for work. Work, I might add, she does well, regardless of what anybody says or thinks." Jake was annoyed, and why not? It irritated him for anyone to second guess a business decision of his.

"Seems to me Lauren would do more in exchange for—"

"Don't, Marlene," Jake warned. "You're a wonderful woman, and a good friend. Please don't say or do anything to make me change my opinion of you." He was nearly there, however. Mild jealousy was flattering, yes, but Marlene's current attitude bordered on being downright vicious, and it was definitely not attractive.

"I don't want to be, Jake, but I worry about you." Marlene touched a hand to Jake's knee and squeezed. Jake felt nothing of the fire and passion Lauren had stirred within him.

"Lauren has it in mind that she wants a relationship with you, and while I can understand her attraction to you," Marlene chuckled, "I don't think she would be good for you, Jake. The way you've been acting lately, I worry she might take advantage of you."

"And you are?" Jake challenged. "Good for me, that is? That's why the dressing up to do my books, and sitting through Cal Briscoe's concert, and this dinner? You want to be my girlfriend, right?"

Marlene puffed out her chest. She had a nice body for a woman her age, but the move did nothing for him. A similar move by Lauren might have set his cock to stone, he realized.

"I like you, Marlene," he said as she suddenly wilted into the couch. "Like I told Lauren earlier, I'm not ready to be with another woman. And I wish you wouldn't feel so threatened around her." Was this a lie? Why could he only think of Lauren now, leaning against the office desk, her head tilted back dreamily as he sucked her bare nipple?

"Maybe you feel that way now," Marlene said, "but what if you change your mind down the road? Wouldn't you rather want to be with a woman with some class?"

So now Lauren was classless? True, she had erred in the past, but Jake didn't let it color his opinion of her, unlike others.

"Marlene," Jake said, looking at his hands, "somebody planted a rather explicit picture on my work computer for me to find. Was it you?" He then searched her eyes for any trace of guilt.

"No." Marlene was horrified. "I would never do such a thing. That would be, would be..."

"Classless?" Jake arched an eyebrow. She seemed to be telling the truth, anyway. "You know Lauren posed for some racy pictures recently? I learned she did it for me."

"She must have done it then, in some misguided attempt to seduce you," Marlene scoffed. "Disgusting."

"Is it, Marlene?" Jake scooted closer, surprised by the shock on her face. He thought perhaps she'd feel elated by the move. "Lauren wanted to please me, is why she posed for the pictures in the first place. Now, I might not have taken such a drastic course of action to get somebody's attention, but I have to admit a part of me was flattered that she thought to do something like that."

"I can guess which part. Typical male response, I suppose," Marlene said, sounding uncomfortable. "I never expected to hear something like that from you, Jake."

"I kissed her today, before I saw you."

Marlene's eyes widened. Clearly she didn't expect to hear that, either.

"She wanted to pleasure me any way I wanted. Me," Jake said. "She said she wanted to suck my cock, if it would make me feel good." He leaned close enough to kiss Marlene. She looked as though she wanted to squirm away. "What about you, Marlene? Would you want to please me? Would you suck my cock?"

"No!" she cried. "That's disgusting. I'd never...in my mouth." Jake could see through her eyes the vision formed in her mind.

"How about if I returned the favor?" His gaze panned down to her lap. "Performed oral sex on you? Would you do it then?"

"Jake! Where is this coming from? Why would you say such a thing?"

"To give you pleasure, Marlene. Did you ever do it for Chet? Suck his cock?" Maybe that's why he left, he wanted to suggest. Marlene wouldn't do it, so Chat found a willing young woman for the task. Maybe there was so much more Chet had wanted that Marlene wouldn't give. Jake couldn't condone Chet's behavior, but if this were true he wasn't too surprised.

"That's none of your business." But Marlene's sour expression told him plenty.

"No, it isn't," Jake agreed. "Just as it's none of your business what I do and whom I hire." He stood. "I don't think Lauren is classless, I think she's passionate. Maybe she goes a bit overboard at times, but she's been nothing but sincere. And if and when I decide to pursue another relationship, I hope the woman I'm with is as passionate and desirable as Lauren McKenna is...and Cindy was."

"I can be passionate," Marlene said defensively.

"I don't doubt that, Marlene. I don't doubt, either, that you'll find a man to love again." Jake started for the door, and turned back to her. She remained on the couch, looking forlorn. "I just don't think I'm that man."

Marlene's face flushed deep red. "Don't fall for that woman's charms, Jake. She's not good enough for you."

Jake shrugged, thinking sadly back to the morning's kiss, and his abrupt departure. "Funny, I wonder if I'm good enough for her."

* * *

J.J.'s Mercedes was parked in the driveway. Rooms that had been dark when Jake left were now illuminated. Jake slid out of the truck cab and sighed. His sons still had

keys to the house, and came and went as they pleased. Usually it was to pick up something in storage or borrow something without asking; seldom did they wait for him. When they did wait, the conversation rarely went well. Jake hoped J.J. wasn't prepared for another confrontation about selling the store.

He found the younger man seated at the small, Formica kitchen table, hunched over a mug of hot tea and a plate of Jo's biscotti. J.J. acknowledged his father with a wan smile and let his gaze drop back to the plate of cookies.

"Something wrong, son?"

J.J. shook his head. "Just didn't feel like going home," he said. "Too small and empty there. Thought you'd be home, was going to suggest we watch the Yankees game."

"We still can, I'm sure it's still going on." Jake rummaged through the refrigerator for a soft drink. "Sorry I wasn't here, I was at Marlene's for dinner."

J.J. looked up.

"It wasn't a date," Jake clarified quickly. "In fact, I'm not sure what it was. An intervention, a bungled attempt at seduction, I don't know." He took the chair opposite J.J.'s and mimicked his son's posture. "I'm going to guess your reason for not wanting to go home involves a woman as well."

Several seconds passed before J.J. spoke. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong, Dad. I took her to Mick's Grill for dinner. Bottle of wine, great conversation, I enjoyed myself and she was definitely interested. I got more signals than NASA." J.J.'s laugh was low and hollow. "But the same damn thing happened that always does when the date ends. She invited me inside, and I begged off. Don't know why, either. I just kissed her like she was my sister and drove away. Damn it."

He tapped the bottom edge of the mug against the table. Droplets of tea splashed on the surface. "And here it is, Friday night, and I'm sitting in my father's kitchen. I could be with a beautiful woman, right now, hav—" J.J. stopped upon seeing Jake.

"You could be making love with a beautiful woman right now," Jake finished for him.

"Dad." J.J. was clearly embarrassed now.

"What? It's the truth, isn't it? I'd be more concerned if the opposite were true, that you'd rather be here. Hell, *I'd* rather be making love with a beautiful woman than sitting here, watching you mope. What's the girl's name again?"

"Dad!"

Jake picked at his soda can tab. "What? Uncomfortable talking about sex with your old man? I've had sex, you know. You and Red didn't come sailing down the Elizabeth River in palm-woven baskets, you know." He winked.

"I know that much, Dad, it's just..." J.J. looked for a distraction in the kitchen window. Presumably finding nothing, he turned back to his father. "I don't think we've ever had a frank discussion before. Even for the big sex talk," J.J. emphasized the phrase with bent fingers, "you bought me a book, and I had to rely on other resources."

"I know, I guess I dropped the ball there," Jake said on a sigh, then slapped the table. "Hell, we're not doing anything now, why not make up for lost time?"

"What?" J.J. looked at him warily.

"Let's have the big sex talk. Right now." He snatched a biscotti from the plate. An appropriately-shaped snack for the discussion, he mused to himself.

J.J. rolled his eyes. "Dad, it's okay. I think I know how everything works."

"Fair enough, next topic. When did you lose your virginity?"

"Dad!"

"Was it in high school? I'm not going to get mad if it was, son," Jake said. "What can I possibly do to you?"

J.J. hid his face behind his mug. "I know, it's just not something you discuss with a parent."

"Would you like to hear about how I lost mine?"

"It was prom night," J.J. said quickly. "You know how the school reserved chaperoned same-sex rooms at the host hotel for anyone who didn't want to drive back from the beach? Well, you remember I told you I was gonna crash there, but a group of us got our own rooms instead at another hotel. Bada-bing, bada-boom, and I wore a condom. There you have it."

Jake nodded. "Was that so painful?" He smiled as his son slowly shook his head. "Well, I admire you for at least having the restraint to wait until you were eighteen. And the girl, who was she again?"

"Claire Walker." J.J.'s eyes glazed over. "She wore a strapless baby blue dress with a white sash. We slow danced to some Gloria Estefan tune and got bombed on MD 20/20 because it was the only thing we could find at the quickie mart, and getting that was a chore since Arnie Logan's fake ID...and, I think I'll stop there," he said, looking away.

It sounded to Jake that his son probably still danced with Claire Walker while having dinner with these other women. The look on his son's face as he mentioned Claire told Jake there was plenty yet to be resolved; the prom wasn't over. That was the problem.

"Claire Walker, I remember her. Nice girl," Jake said. Ellie Garriston's cousin, if he remembered correctly. The two used to sell Girl Scout cookies in front of the drugstore. "Tell me, son, when you were with her, did you...perform..." Great, the embarrassment was wearing off on him.

"Perform...the macarena?" J.J. cracked. "That dance wasn't in vogue at the time."

"Oral sex," Jake said. "Did you—"

"Okay, we are definitely not having this conversation." J.J. rose abruptly and took the mug to the sink.

"J.J., I just want to know—"

J.J. jerked on the faucet. Water rushed full blast and Jake noisily rinsed out the mug. "Can't hear you," he sang.

"I've never had oral sex, giving or receiving," Jake said over the rush. "In fact, there's a lot I haven't done sexually. Your mother was my only lover, our first time was our wedding night, and as much I loved being with her we weren't very experimental."

The faucet silenced. J.J. didn't turn around.

"I guess the reason I never pushed a sex talk on you and Red was because there was still so much I didn't know. Don't know," Jake said. "I guess I was afraid I would have made an inadequate teacher."

"Dad, you were anything but," J.J. said, his back still facing Jake. "If anything, you showed us what it was like to nurture a loving relationship. Everybody could have learned from you and Mom. From what I remember of you and Mom being together, she never looked unhappy."

"Thank you, son." Jake studied the biscotti in his hand put it to his lips. One bite might crack a molar, it felt so tough. Jake hoped Daisy and Jo were prepared for a possible onslaught of dental insurance claims. "Where your mother was concerned, I never wanted for much else sexually. Pardon the pun, but she and I were a perfect fit."

Though Jake couldn't see it, he was certain J.J. smiled at the remark.

"All this business about you telling me to find a girlfriend, or companion, I guess it scared me a bit," he continued. "Everything's scared me since your mother died. She was my one constant, and it seemed everybody wanted me to change before I felt ready to do so. Sell the store, sell the house, get a girlfriend, change my life completely...it changed

when your mother died, certainly not for the better. Any suggestions seemed destined to make things worse."

"Dad, I'm sorry if you felt Red and I were pushing you. Hell, we *were* pushing you," J.J. said. He finally turned around and took a seat. "We just want you to be happy. You've been miserable for so long, we were worried you wouldn't last much longer."

"There were times I wished for death," Jake admitted, "but as I told you once before, my work helped me through the worst of my grief, even when I wished for death. When I work at the store, sometimes I get so busy I don't have time to grieve."

"Then it's wrong for me to suggest you give it up, Dad. I won't bring up selling anymore," J.J. said. "Though I don't like the idea of expansion, I'll support you in whatever you do."

"Thanks, but I'll let Danielle worry about the Suffolk store. As far as the Dareville store goes, I've given some thought to cutting back my hours and allotting more responsibility to others."

J.J. visibly perked up at this. Jake swallowed, prepared for the eventual fallout.

"Lauren's done such a good job in her position, I was thinking of training her and a few other employees as assistant managers, and divvy up the work Danielle and I are going to leave behind."

J.J. was quiet.

"Actually," Jake continued, twining his fingers into a contemplative fist, "I've been thinking a lot about Lauren lately."

"That I can't support," J.J. said solemnly.

"We kissed earlier, in my office." Jake saw his son tense, but kept talking. No sense putting off the inevitable argument, best to get all of his feelings in play. "We kissed, and I enjoyed it. Lauren wanted to do much more, of course, and...so did I."

"Did you?"

Jake shooked his head, and J.J. visibly relaxed. "But I wanted to, and I regret not staying to let it happen."

"That I *definitely* don't support." J.J.'s voice reflected growing anger.

"She wanted to give me oral sex, right there in the office. She touched me. I kissed her neck, and her bare breast..." The memory of his lips pursed around Lauren's hardened peak came alive, and he felt his cock stiffen slightly in response. "I wanted her to do it, J.J., I wanted to feel what it was like to have a woman...Lauren..."

"I'm not talking about this, I don't want to hear about you and Lauren McKenna," J.J. said firmly, and rose. The chair scraped loudly against the floor, and banged the stove with J.J.'s abrupt stance.

"I do, son. You're the one who suggested I find companionship, can't we at least talk about it?"

"A companion, Dad," J.J. snapped. "I meant somebody closer to your own age. Somebody who isn't a sex freak."

"Lauren isn't a sex freak," Jake said, annoyed. "She has desires, and isn't afraid to show it. Your mother was like that, too, would you call her a sex freak?"

"Mother didn't pose for slutty pictures to get your attention, did she?"

Jake said nothing, but looked at his hands. "She didn't have to," was all he said of that. "Your mother did have a ferocious, attractive quality about her that mirrors Lauren in many ways."

"Well, maybe that's what you're seeing in Lauren right now, some part of Mom that you miss," J.J. said. "I'm sure once you cut back your hours and distance yourself from the store, and Lauren, you'll see that she's not right for you, Dad. You need somebody on your own level."

"Somebody like Marlene."

"Yes, somebody like Marlene," J.J. cried. "What's wrong with Marlene?"

"Nothing," Jake said. "Except I don't want her. I want Lauren McKenna."

There, he said it out loud. He wanted Lauren, he thought of Lauren. He wanted to kiss her again, and take her nipple into his mouth and suck longer and deeper. He wanted her to make good on her offer, and have her take his cock into her mouth. He wanted to know that feeling, one he and Cindy never explored, despite her high sex drive. Maybe it had been something never taught or encouraged, but for some reason neither one of them had suggested exploring oral sex. Not that they had wanted for pleasure without it, though.

He wanted Lauren, but he was scared of Lauren. No, rather, he was scared of disappointing her, and disappointing himself. He didn't know how many lovers Lauren had enjoyed over the years, but didn't think her promiscuous. Still, how could he possibly compete against what she had enjoyed? Was it too late for him to start?

He wanted to talk about wanting Lauren, but J.J.'s rapid pacing about the kitchen made Jake too nervous to continue the subject.

"Lauren McKenna, damn it all..." Similar, cruder oaths spilled from J.J. like he had Tourette's. The conversation would not end well, and Jake saw no reason to prolong it. He stood and emptied the remaining contents of his soda can down the sink.

"Lock up the front door, son. I'll assume you're staying over," he told J.J., and drew the younger man into a squirming half-embrace. "We can talk more at the store tomorrow if you want."

"Yeah." J.J. was distracted, and rightly so. Jake gave him too much, too soon. "Night, Dad."

They would talk tomorrow. Maybe he could help J.J. with his current woman troubles, help him find closure with Claire Walker. If he saw Ellie at the store tomorrow, he would get Claire's address.

Upstairs, Jake dressed silently for bed and lingered at his dresser before turning out the light. Opening the top drawer, he pulled out a tattered, bulging envelope and set it next to his wallet and keys.

He would need it for Monday, for something he would do after he and Lauren talked. This time, he promised himself, there would be no running away.

Ten

"Okay, friend, you wore me down." Lauren knelt on the unmade bed and discarded her robe with a flourish. She arched her back to emphasize her buoyant breasts, tipped with thick, hardened nipples. They ached to be sucked as much as her pussy needed a cock filling its void, and she didn't wait for her companion to respond. Cupping her breasts as if to test their heft, she pinched both nipples and rolled them between her fingers.

"You nagged me for weeks that you wanted to take care of me, that if I wanted to come all I had to do was come to you. Well, I came, and we're here, so make me come."

Bob said nothing. He lay flat on the mattress, staring vacantly at the ceiling, his silicone cock a thick compass needle pointing north. He looked like he should have been on display at some medical college, waiting to be dissected. Though Lauren had managed to rid her home of the bulk of her toys, she wasn't able to part with Bob just yet. For one, she didn't know what to do with him, and she feared any method of discarding the life-size love doll might be witnessed by somebody who might get the wrong idea.

Lauren sighed, hoping this one quickie would erase Bob's voice from her consciousness for good, and provide release of a great amount of tension. It appeared any chance she had with Jake no longer existed, and she hadn't the energy or heart to contemplate a relationship with anybody else. She couldn't swing with the Garristons or Briscoes, either. Enjoyable as the sex might be, it wasn't a permanent solution.

She squeezed a dime-sized drop of lubricant into her palm and greased up Bob's cock for entry, grimacing as she wrinkled the plastic bottle to get that much. Time for a refill, she noted. She had a feeling, too, she would need to buy a case of the stuff, as Bob would likely be around every night. She might as well save him a chair at Thanksgiving.

Lauren had just impaled herself on the vibrating cock when her doorbell sounded. "Fuck," she muttered, and bent low over Bob's face, touching her breast to his vibrating tongue. Who would come to call at nine on a Monday morning? Sue would be working, and Ellie had errands to run at the beach. The store knew not to expect her since she had called in "sick." Sick of being humiliated and rejected, she was. Surely nobody from work would think to check on her.

Whoever it was, persisted. One long chime sounded, followed by two short ones. Were they using Morse code? Lauren arched upright and twisted toward the hall, still pumping up and down Bob's cock. "Go away!" she shouted. "I don't want magazines and I already know about Jesus!"

The fifth series series of staccato chimes gave way to a thunderstorm of knocking. It was enough to spur Lauren out of bed and back into her robe. She didn't care what denomination the interloper represented, the idiot was dead meat for interrupting her orgasm.

"Can't a girl jack off in peace without the world wanting to watch?" she muttered, and threw open the door without checking the peephole.

Jake leaned heavily to one side, a small paper bag held chest-high. His smile was sad, but his graying eyes sparkled as they held her gaze. Lauren felt her breath catch in her throat. Blood pounded in her ears.

Jake's gaze panned the length of her body, his smile growing in width and mirth. "I tell you what," he said, "if every woman answered the door like you, I'd definitely start that delivery service."

Lauren looked down at herself and realized her robe flapped freely, exposing her taut breasts and bare pussy. She gasped and reached to close the fabric around her, but one word from Jake stilled all movement.

"Don't."

Jake handed her the bag and eased inside the foyer, stepping quietly as Lauren moved backward to give him berth. "Danielle told me you were sick with a summer cold, so I thought these horehound drops might help with a sore throat," he said. "Of course, I have to wonder if this gesture is really a hollow one." He looked at her pointedly, and Lauren felt the heat rise to her face.

"I won't ask you why you faked a sick call, Lauren," he said, "though I'd like to know. It doesn't seem right that a woman who would offer me oral sex in a grocery store would suddenly turn chicken and fake an illness to avoid me."

"Chicken? Chicken, as in the way you acted, running away?" Laura challenged.

"I guess I deserve that, and I expected more, though. I expected more fire and passion this morning, and I was ready for it this time."

Lauren didn't quite know what to make of that. Had he planned a more elaborate letdown? Forget it.

"Maybe I don't feel like expending the energy anymore, if it's not going to be appreciated," she said. "Or wanted."

"Lauren—"

"I planned to come in later today, and tender my resignation," Lauren said. "You made it clear Friday that you didn't want me, and seeing your car parked outside Marlene Robeson's that night confirmed that."

Jake blinked. "That was you, then, screeching down the road."

Lauren nodded. The sight had been a shock to the system. The old bat won after all, and ruined Lauren's weekend...and life. Maybe she should have toned down her desires and not been so emphatic about her feelings, but it was too late to speculate. Lauren could only hope Marlene treated Jake decently. "I don't want to be a distraction to you or a constant topic of gossip at the store. We're all better off if I don't come back," she said.

She deposited the horehound candy on a nearby table and moved to close her robe again, gasping as Jake stilled her, this time with a touch to her arm. The heat intensified, pooling low in her pussy. She pressed her thighs together.

"No, let me see you," he said.

Lauren let her arms fall to her sides. Her robe wavered and fluttered, offering teasing shots of skin that Jake seemed to appreciate.

"You are a beautiful woman, Lauren," he said. "It's been a long time since I've seen a woman's bare body this close. Could I..."

Was he blushing? What prompted this sudden change of heart? This couldn't be the same man who bolted from his office like a bat out of hell.

Still, why was she questioning it?

"Could I," he repeated, "see the rest of you?"

"What?" Lauren wished she didn't sound so incredulous. She had wanted to hear words like this from him for the longest time, yet her suspicions easily spoiled the moment. What if he ran again? She couldn't take that.

"Why look so surprised? You had pictures taken to show me, right?"

She nodded.

"Why not show me in person, now?" Jake smiled. "Besides, you're beautiful, why cover it up?"

They were in her living room now, Lauren standing over the wine stain made on the carpet during her "argument" with Bob. She glanced about the room for a hidden camera and, finding none, next searched Jake's neck and collar for a switch. Perhaps he was really Bob, in disguise.

No. She wasn't that far gone.

"What are you looking at?" Jake asked, chuckling.

"N-nothing."

"Let me see you." Jake brushed a hand against her cheek. His skin was rough, his touch gentle. This was a hand that worked hard for decades, yet right now Lauren could think of no greater sensation than those toughened fingertips stroking her face.

Quietly, a smile curling her lips, Lauren complied. The robe slid into a bright red puddle at her feet, and Lauren sucked in gut and squared her shoulders, holding herself in a forward pose that Jake seemed to admire. His happy sigh empowered her. She kept her legs together, taut, and thrust her hips forward slightly to accentuate the high curve of her backside.

Jake circled her as if studying a museum piece. Lauren felt his gaze evaluate every bulge, every ripple and curve. She didn't have the magic of Sue's camera lens to improve her body, and Jake's prolonged, silent appraisal soon became more nervewracking than erotic. Yet he continued to smile, and she had to wonder how strong his desires were that they usurped his ability to see her physical flaws.

"You know," he said finally, "somebody planted one of your pictures on the computer at work."

Lauren's heart stopped. "No, I didn't know that."

Jake nodded and stopped in front of her, his eyes on her breasts. "It was a beautiful picture, but it doesn't do you justice."

Oh, God. Those words, that smile, sent her pussy throbbing. Her thighs rubbed together, slick with her passion. She ached for his touch.

"Maybe soon I'll get to see the rest of the pictures," he said, and gently eased her to the couch and helped her sit. "Now, I'd like to see more of you."

Lauren couldn't feel herself move, couldn't feel the sofa cushion underneath her bottom. Jake's gentle touch to her knees as he spread them apart was magnified as a result. They were in a vacuum, it seemed, impervious to their environment. Around her, she knew there was sound—a bird chirping outside the window, the loud, staid ticking of her grandmother clock, the occasional tinkling of the chimes hanging in her kitchen. Lauren heard nothing of it for the gentle desire in Jake's voice, and sensed nothing else for his whisper touch to her pussy.

She thought she might come right there, and all he had done was brush a fingertip over her inner pussy lips.

"Tell me about your pussy," he said.

What? "Uh, what do you want to know?" What an odd request. She watched him study her pussy with fascination. She wriggled her bottom, causing her pussy lips to move. He seemed hypnotized.

Jake ran finger up the sensitive skin of her inner thigh where it met the right side of her pussy. "As often as Cindy and I made love, I was never this close to her. Not like this. We never did oral sex. It had nothing to do with the way we were brought up, it was just something we never did. Well, maybe upbringing does enter into it." He shook his head. "That's not very romantic at all, is it?"

Lauren bit her lip. No way in hell was she going to risk shortening this moment by saying something stupid.

"Yesterday you offered me oral sex, to pleasure me," Jake said, looking up at her. "Sucking cock, blow job..." He paused when Lauren snickered. "I understand it works

both ways. I could give you oral sex and pleasure you." His smile burned. "I could eat your pussy."

"I'd love that." Lauren couldn't help but let that slip out.

"I'd love it, too. Show me how, Lauren. Tell me how to eat your pussy. I want to do it right." Tentatively, he ran his fingertip between her inner pussy lips in a rhythm that drove her mad. At this rate she would come and soak the couch, and eating her would be moot.

"Jake, I don't see how I could *teach* you. I mean, you just do it," she said, and cringed. If that didn't kill the mood, it would be a miracle.

Thankfully, Jake didn't appear upset by her words. "You're a teacher, aren't you?"

"Well...this never happened to be on my curriculum." She laughed. Another swipe down her pussy lips, however, lowered her voice an octave. Jake seemed to do well enough learning on his own.

"Well, okay, there's really no right or wrong way to do it, long as you do it." Lauren cupped her pussy and splayed her fingers, spreading her lips. She tapped her forefinger at the cleft. "You know what a clitoris is, right?"

"Yes. Cindy had one, if I'm not mistaken."

Lauren tried not to laugh, but Jake encouraged her too much. She managed to calm herself to continue the lesson. "You can do many things. You can suck on my clit, lick my pussy lips here," her fingers snaked down to indicate spots that especially pleased her, "and lick me here." She dipped a finger into her flooded core. "But eating pussy isn't all about a woman's pleasure. If you enjoy it, you'll find there are things you prefer to do."

"I gotcha. I can suck on your clit..."

He lowered his face to Lauren's pussy, pursing his lips. Lauren gasped at first contact and tried to hold still to savor the moment.

* * *

Delicious.

If only Lauren didn't squirm so much, he could better zero in on her clit. He clamped his hands over her thighs to keep her body still, but figured this was probably a good sign. She probably wouldn't be moving if she weren't enjoying herself.

His lips parted over her pussy, he continued exploring her folds with his tongue, leaving no spot untouched and trying his best to catch every drop of sweet nectar. The taste was addictive, and Lauren's moaning encouragement moved his cock to stone as he nibbled and licked and sucked. How could anyone not have told him about eating pussy? How he had missed so much over the decades, knowing how Cindy might have tasted and might have enjoyed this sensation.

Well, Cindy had hoped he would find love again. Perhaps the only way he could make up this grievous omission in their own sex life to her would be to give his all to Lauren.

Further instruction to her pussy came out in ragged breaths as Lauren writhed and quivered beneath him, but Jake blocked her voice. He would do this right, and do so on his own. He sucked one bare labia into his mouth and let it escape with a light popping sound, then repeated with the other side. He lapped broadly at her inner lips and tickled the edge of her soaked cunt, drinking her pussy juices. He couldn't get his fill, it seemed.

When it appeared Lauren could take no more teasing, he pried her lips apart to find for himself that pretty pink jewel.

Her clit practically throbbed, engorged to a deep color. So pretty. To think such a small nub was the source of great pleasure, for the both of them. Jake glanced upward to imprint Lauren's look of ecstasy in his mind before taking her clit into his mouth and massaging it between his lips.

The impact was immediate. Lauren thrust her mound as high as she could go, screaming his name and riding an orgasmic wave that nearly drowned his senses as well. The scent of her sex flooded his brain, and instinct took over. Before he realized it, he had two fingers rapidly sliding in and out of her slit. He kept his mouth on her clit as he explored her inner trove in search of another way to pleasure her.

"Shit, Jake," she cried, "that's my spot, don't stop!"

He felt a rough patch somewhere along her smooth vaginal walls, and kept tapping at it to her delight. He'd heard about the legendary G-spot before, but believed it to be myth. Cindy had been silent about her own, but for all Jake knew he'd managed to hit it every time with his cock. Cindy's reactions had been no different to Lauren's right now.

Lauren squealed and writhed and bucked against him, as if fighting his ministrations. Jake held fast, however, determined not to stop until told. Lauren looked wonderful, smelled and tasted even better...he could do this all night if allowed.

Lauren, unfortunately, either wouldn't or couldn't allow that. Her orgasm racked her body with enough force that Jake was dislodged and sent reeling. He landed flat on his back, glazed and happy. If anything, the moment allowed him a few seconds to breathe before going back for more.

"So," he said, "did I do it right?"

* * *

Holy Mary, Joseph, Larry, Moe and Curly!

She had never been eaten like that in her life. She wondered if there was anything left. Like Mozart to the piano, he was. If this was Jake's first time eating pussy, Lauren thanked God the man wasn't a virgin. One thrust from his cock into her melting core might launch her to North Carolina.

When the world came back into focus, Lauren looked down her trembling body and saw Jake on the floor. The prominent bulge in his jeans told of an erection that desperately needed to be free, and Lauren wasn't about to waste any time, lest it suffocate.

She didn't give Jake a chance to move, but lunged forward and pounced. Palms bracing herself against the carpet, she crushed her mouth to his, tasting herself in the kiss, feeling rough denim slid over her sensitive, damp pussy. She could still feel where his fingers explored, touching places no other man had discovered. She needed to feel him inside her now, to complete the sensation.

"Now," she gasped when she finally broke free. "I need to fuck you now or I'll lose my mind."

"I don't fuck, Lauren, I make love," Jake said between kisses. "If you like, I'll make love with you, but I want to hear you ask. Ask me like you did yesterday."

"Jake, make love to me, please."

With one last kiss, Jake rolled Lauren onto her back and rocked back on his knees. With a practiced stealth that certainly eluded men half his age, Jake shed his clothes and kneeled before her. Lauren couldn't help but stare. Jake looked incredible; save for a few wisps of silver hair coiled on his chest and a silver bush nesting an impressive cock, Jake looked nowhere near his age. His body was lean and hard, sculpted from years of labor and, no doubt, a good life. She knew that body would feel even better molded against hers.

Jake grasped the base of his shaft and teased her pussy lips, stroking the tip over her folded and across her overworked clit. "Lauren, before we do this..."

Lauren felt her heart sink. *Now* he had something to say? Truly he had become an expert tease in this short time as well.

"I want you to know I'm a man of commitment," he was saying. "I was committed to making my business a success, and to making my marriage work. I don't believe in casual

relationships, either, which is why I want to know...what you said about being in love with me, did you mean it?"

"Every word," Lauren said. "I wouldn't have thought to pursue you if I didn't want to go for long haul."

Jake pulled his cock away; Lauren immediately felt the aching void.

"You love me?"

"I love you, Jake."

"I've loved you for years as a friend, Lauren, until you brought me out of my shadows," Jake said. "I want to love you as a woman now, and commit to you."

They locked gazes, and Lauren saw in Jake's eyes the sincerity behind his words as she felt the tip of his cock positioned at her core. All this time she had wanted him, it never occurred to her how big a step he perceived this moment to be. Nor did it fathom to her that this would be forever.

Forever felt wonderful.

"I love you, Jake."

"I love you, Lauren."

One broad stroke filled her to the hilt. Lauren cried out as her womb stretched to accommodate him, but she quickly adjusted and soon clamped her walls tightly around his cock to create the friction he needed to pleasure her. She twined her legs with his and cupped his bottom as he pumped hard into her, groaning with each stroke. She watched his face redden and contort as he hovered over her, his expressions revealing how much he missed the act of making love.

Though his eyes never left hers, he had this faraway, dreamy look, as if gazing into forever.

And finding it wonderful, too.

* * *

What the—?

He couldn't explain the sensation felt as he buried his cock deep inside Lauren. That it was wonderful was an understatement; Lauren was every bit the woman in love—soft and wet and a perfect fit. Jake hadn't felt this good since the last time he and Cindy made love.

Unconsciously, his body must have realized that, too, for when he looked down he saw Cindy's face twitching with pleasure.

He looked up briefly, and saw he was no longer in Lauren's living room, but back home in bed. Cindy lay underneath him now, the thin, pink turban slipping around her head. Vanity kept it affixed, even at night, despite Jake's protests that she looked beautiful regardless of what the chemo did to her hair. Yet, he obliged her that and the T-shirt to hide the mastectomy scar to make her happy. When they made love, she was still the same Cynthia Redding. Nothing changed.

Jake seemed to watch events unfold from his own body. He could feel himself inside Cindy, easing his cock gently in and out of her, leaning to one side so as not to irritate the scar. Cindy's breathing was shallow and warm, and it prickled his skin. The scent of wax candles and sex hung over them.

Why did this image have to appear now, as he made love to another woman? Was this survivor's guilt magnified?

"I love you so much, Jake," she whispered. "I'll take these memories to me to Heaven."

"I'm in Heaven now," Jake said, and bent low to kiss her.

"Promise me," Cindy began, then turned away to cough. Jake slowed his movement and waited for her. She prompted him to continue with touch to his shoulder.

"Promise me, Jake, you won't stop when I'm gone," she said. "Find another woman and make her as happy as you made me."

"Cindy..." How she could bring up such a thing as they were making love was beyond him. This moment wasn't supposed to be about anybody but them.

"Promise me." Her tone took on a strength Jake hadn't seen in her in months. "I can't bear the thought of leaving you knowing you're going to be miserable the rest of your life."

"Then don't leave."

The laugh that was to come instead escaped as a chest-rattling cough. "No, don't stop," she said, and Jake sped up his pace. "Just make love to me now, and promise me you'll save some love for another woman. Promise me that."

"I promise."

I promise...

He knew he'd said it only to appease Cindy. Perhaps she knew he had obliged her, but she said nothing more as they made love through the night, as her health allowed.

Two weeks later, she breathed her last.

Thirteen months later, he was here, fulfilling a promise that he realized wasn't completely empty.

"Jake..."

He blinked, and was back where he started. Lauren lay underneath him, moaning and sighing her approval. Jake pumped harder into her, sensing the buildup in his groin about to explode.

"I can't hold on any longer," he said, low. He was surprised to have held out this long. Before he could say anything more, he came with one last thrust that pushed Lauren several inches up the carpet. The sensation burned through his cock and up his spine, rendering him boneless as he collapsed on Lauren's sweating, shaking body.

"God, Lauren..." Lauren did this to him, that much he knew. His shell was gone forever now, replaced by a misty veil of afterglow that wrapped the couple tightly as they curled together on the carpet and sought to regain their breath. Cindy's voice no longer tickled the insides of his ears.

Cindy...I kept my promise.

"That was wonderful." Lauren wheezed, her body limp. "It's like I went to Heaven and back."

Jake nuzzled her neck and closed his eyes. "I'm in Heaven now."

Eleven

"Do you have to go?" Lauren stretched the words into several syllables, sounding like a spoiled child. Jake found the affect charming, and quite alluring considering how delicious she looked wrapped only in a bedsheet. They spent the rest of the morning in her bed; once Lauren pushed aside the life-size mandoll lying on the mattress—Jake thought better than to ask about it—Jake took the time to reacquaint himself with her pussy and improve upon his oral skills. Lauren gladly repaid his kindness with equal attention to his cock.

"Whoa." The sensation of Lauren's lips puckered tightly around his shaft was incredible, but the added bonus of watching his cock disappear into her mouth made the experience all the more erotic. He was going to enjoy doing this, watching this, for years to come.

Now, however, he had something to do, and it required him to take his reluctant leave. "I'll be back before you know it," he said, buttoning his shirt. "I just need to do this one thing, and I'm yours."

"For the rest of the day?" Lauren bounced in bed.

Jake eased himself further back on the mattress and leaned over to kiss her. "For the rest of my life, if you're willing."

"Very much so," Lauren said, returning his kiss.

Jake slowly tore himself away to put on his pants. Digging into the front pocket, he smiled at her. She was a sight to behold, tempting him back with a flash of breast. Any other time, he'd be naked and at her side again, and he would be, once this was done.

"Soon," he said, firm. "But I'll leave you with a small remembrance while I'm gone. Close your eyes."

Lauren offered a giddy squeal and held out her palm, curling her fingers around the small keychain he placed there. She fingered the ridges of the first key and her eyes widened.

"Is this what I think it is?" she asked.

"The key to the store." Jake nodded. "I had planned to tell you this morning, before...any of this happened, but I'd like to promote you and Debbie to assistant managers when Danny leaves for Suffolk. She will supervise the staff while you take care of inventory and finances. You've proven yourself well in the job...if you still want it. You mentioned quitting."

Lauren closed the keys tightly in her fist; a tear threatened to spill down one cheek. "I would hate to leave the store, Jake. I just don't want to be a point of embarrassment for you. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"More than ever now. I don't like the thought of you having to commute to some school in Norfolk or Virginia Beach, especially when I tell you that the other key is to my house. Our house one day, I hope."

The fist popped open and Lauren's jaw dropped.

"Now, this isn't officially a proposal," Jake said quickly. "I told you before, I believe in commitment, but I don't want to rush you into anything until you're ready." He sighed. "On the other hand, I'm sixty years old, and who knows how much time I have left."

"Don't talk like that," Lauren said sadly, "like you're going to die."

Jake held up a hand to quiet her. "It could be five years, it could be twenty. At this point in my life I don't want to waste any time. I love you, and I want that time with you."

"So do I."

Jake nodded to the key. "Then you have complete access to my house, which will be yours, too. When you are ready to take that final step, we'll set a date. Until then, you can come over any time you want. You can stay overnight, for the weekend, or move in. If you think you'd feel more comfortable being boyfriend and girlfriend for a little while," he chuckled at the notion of being somebody's 'boyfriend,' "I'm okay with that, too."

"I'll marry you tomorrow," Lauren said, and whipped back the sheet to reveal her nude body. "Let's get a head start on the honeymoon."

But Jake only laughed, took her hand in his, and offered a chivalrous kiss to the knuckles. "Don't make any rash decisions under the influence of sex, my love. Think about it while I'm gone. We'll talk more later. Or not." With a wink, he bade her farewell and started out the door.

He stepped over Bob on the way out of the bedroom and shot the doll a curious smile. "What are you smiling at?" he asked, and left.

* * *

J.J. wasn't lying, he did make trips to the cemetery on his own. Jake knew as much seeing the gifts left on Cindy's grave. One of the granddaughters, it appeared, had left behind a Barbie doll, probably when Red brought them up to visit their uncle. In the doll's hand was one of J.J.'s business cards.

Jake didn't know what to make of it. A joke, perhaps to celebrate Cindy's unique sense of humor, or a crass ploy to advertise to passing mourners? Whatever the motive, Jake didn't doubt Cindy would have appreciated the gesture.

Lowering himself to his knees, Jake settled the doll into a sitting position by the grave marker's bud vase and pocketed the card so it wouldn't eventually flutter away and litter the grounds.

"I just wanted you to know that I kept that promise," he told Cindy, fighting back the tears. "It may have seemed to you that I only said I'd find another woman so you'd be happy, and in a way I was doing just that. I dedicated my life to making you happy, and was happy in return. I can never thank you enough for those forty-odd years.

"I hadn't intended to look for love at all," he continued, "but love found me anyway. It didn't happen the way it did with you and me. You could say it was more gradual this time, and rather odd. You remember Lauren McKenna, right?" Jake shook his head, feeling silly for half-expecting an answer.

"Anyway, I learned she had sort of a crush on me, and these people were warning me about her. It was like how people warn you about not watching a particular television show, because it's violent or full of sex, and what's the first thing you do? You turn on that channel. Well, that's sort of how it was with Lauren. I saw all the warning signs but walked straight ahead...and I don't regret it."

He reached into his back pocket for the thick envelope from his dresser, and pressed it to his heart. "I think what helped me along was something she did for me, that reminded me of something you did. I can't help but wonder if, in some mysterious way, you had a hand in all of this. I wouldn't be surprised if you convinced God to plant a bug in Lauren's ear, but it's done and I fell and I'm happy. I hope you're happy, too."

He lifted the flap and pulled out the stack of weathered Polaroids, then flipped through the twenty-five-year-old snapshots of Cindy twisted in a variety of cheesecake poses. He stopped at his favorite one, that of Cindy in a halter top and shorts, turned away from the camera but peering over her shoulder with a seductive smile a la Betty Grable.

"I remember when you gave me these," Jake said, smiling, "and hearing about how you and Marcy cooked up this idea after a few bottles of wine." Jake had been feeling

low then, worried that his libido had faded in the wake of raising two young sons. It seemed Cindy could say nothing to console him, and a brief period of impotency did little to help matters.

One day, he found the pictures tucked around the house in his books, in the store ledgers, in the sun visors of his truck. That resolved any performance issues he had from there on out.

"Lauren did something like this, for me," Jake said, and flipped to the most revealing shot in the stack, that of a topless Cindy raising her arms high. This one he received privately, thank goodness.

"A bit more explicit than this, but I suppose that's par for the course these days," he said. "Anyway, it wasn't so much the pictures that attracted me to her, considering I've only seen one, it was the intent. You had these done to cheer me up, and I suppose in a way she was doing the same thing. It helped me to see that she had the same spirit as you, but of course she has unique qualities that endear me to her as well. She's smart, has a great sense of humor, and a good head for business, more than she realizes. I think we're going to be good for each other, and if the boys don't like it, tough. They don't have to live with her." He chuckled.

He tucked the pictures away and stood. A few months ago he was ready to lay down and die right here. Funny how his desires changed in such a short span of time. Now, he couldn't wait to get out this cemetery and get back into Lauren's bed.

The thought suddenly unnerved him. He turned back to Cindy's grave. "I won't leave you completely, and you won't leave me," he assured her. "I probably won't be here as often as I used to, but I have a feeling you won't mind that so much. I love you, Cindy Redding Marbury. Thank you for everything."

He was halfway down the path toward his truck when he was halted abruptly by a sound. He looked around, seeing nobody else in the yard.

He could have sworn heard a woman's light laughter carried on the wind.

Twelve

Two months later

Cal Briscoe waved emphatically, bringing the band and singer to an awkward stop midsong. He took the microphone from the surprised black woman and goaded the crowd in an exaggerated DJ patter. "Okay, all you freeloaders, let's give a warm welcome to the couple of the hour, everybody's favorite grocer and pin-up girl," he was rewarded with a slap to the shoulder for this, "Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Marbury!"

The automatic doors slid open and Jake and Lauren strolled arm in arm into the store to thunderous applause. Having the wedding reception at Jake's Organic had been a mutual decision, as neither Jake nor Lauren could think of anywhere else they wanted to celebrate their first day as man and wife. To their delight, Jake's employees fully supported the decision; getting a day off with pay most likely being the biggest incentive.

Yet, everybody had pitched in to give the store a festive, matrimonial look. Pink and white bunting draped every checkout station and back aisle. The buffet was set up in the meat department and the cake, prepared by Jake's bakers, waited in the bakery. The coffee shop was converted into the dance area, with The Cal Briscoe Four holding court.

Lauren smiled at it all and held on tightly to her husband's arm. He looked especially dashing in his black suit, the perfect complement to her ivory formal skirt suit. The church ceremony, though brief and informal, had been wonderful, and the reception would prove equally so.

Jake nodded to a few well-wishers and leaned close to her. "You're sure this is okay?" he asked, and Lauren batted him playfully with her bouquet. All throughout the planning, he questioned her desire for a small affair, and she had to constantly assure him.

"If you're thinking the honeymoon is going to be a small affair, think again," she joked, and steered him to the bandstand for the toast.

J.J. and Red, both appearing nervous and put-out in stiff matching suits, grimly took the microphone from Cal. They each raised a glass and the crowd followed suit. "I've heard tell that it isn't easy for the children of a surviving parent when he or she remarries," J.J. began.

Lauren felt Jake's grip on her hand tighten, and she hoped there wouldn't be a scene. His sons hadn't been very enthusiastic about their marriage, but didn't outright oppose it.

"I suppose it's because children want to think their parents will be together forever, and to see a widowed parent remarry somehow voids that destiny," J.J. continued. "When I see my father with Lauren McKenna, how happy he is with her, and how she makes him feel young..."

Lauren stole a glance at Jake. He was blushing.

"...I think perhaps my mother would have approved of this union. Cynthia Marbury was a woman in love with life, and a woman who lived for her family. I don't doubt that she is looking down on us right now and smiling, knowing that we continue to enjoy life and be happy. If Mom could approve of my father finding happiness with Lauren," he looked at Red, who nodded, then turned back to the mic, "so can we. To Dad and Lauren."

"Hear, hear." Glasses clinked, champagne splashed, and cheers followed a drumroll that ended with the happy couple's kiss.

The reception carried on happily and smoothly, with dancing in the aisles and socializing throughout the store. Jake enjoyed dances with his daughter-in-law and granddaughters, while Lauren tried her best not to joke with her new 'stepsons' as each asked for a turn about the floor.

J.J. held her close during one song, seething, "Let's make a deal. I don't call you 'Ma,' you don't call me 'son.'"

Lauren pouted. "Does this mean no Mother's Day breakfast at the Knights of Columbus hall?"

"Long as you don't try to fix me up with any of your friends's virgin daughters. What?" he added as Lauren snorted.

"Nothing," she said quickly, relieved when her maid of honor broke in to pull her away.

"Time to throw the bouquet," Sue sang. "You better get ready, too, J. Your dad's tossing the garter afterward."

"I'm on pins and needles," J.J. grunted, and stalked to the bar.

"Forget about him." Sue nudged Lauren as the two wove past the crowd to the bandstand. Her giddiness was contagious. "Can you believe this day finally came? I'm so happy for you and Jake."

"It's a wonderful dream. I hope I never wake up." Lauren held the bouquet to her lips. She couldn't wait to throw it, just one more ritual closer to the reception's end, and she and Jake could head home and make love all weekend. Her pussy throbbed just thinking about it.

"I can't help but think it might not have happened, either."

"Were you worried about that for real?" Sue asked.

Lauren nodded. "Well, somebody tried to sabotage it, you know. Jake told me somebody planted one of my pictures in his work computer, I guess to discourage him and get him to think I wasn't good enough for him." She sighed. "Luckily it had the opposite effect."

"Luckily so," Sue agreed. "If I'd known it was going to cause trouble, I wouldn't have put the picture on the hard drive when Cal and I got Jake the computer."

Lauren's heart stopped. She didn't! Thinking quickly, though, it did make sense. Sue had arrived with a delivery man, but Lauren didn't actually see the package arrive from his truck.

"You—?"

But Sue pushed Lauren onstage toward Cal and disappeared into the crowd with a cackle.

* * *

"Ooookay, all you single ladies, it's time to line up for the bouquet toss. Winner gets a stunning floral arrangement courtesy of Dareville Florist and Gifts and the honor of being the next single girl in town to be badgered with matrimonial-related questions. The losers, come talk to me after the reception's over."

Laughter filled the store, but J.J. thought Cal's banter rankled. He would have liked nothing more than to toss a well-aimed champagne cork into the musician's mouth.

Leaning against the coffee bar, downing his fifth longneck, he watched as a flurry of Dareville's most eligible ladies, and his young nieces, gathered around the bandstand. Lauren teased the crowd with a fake toss that revealed her hand still gripping the long sash that tied the bouquet, then turned around again for take two. In the distance, Jake sat at a table with Red and Brady Garriston, watching on and laughing.

He wanted to be there, too, enjoying the day with his father, but his heart just wasn't it. It had nothing to do with Lauren, either, though J.J. wasn't completely okay with the marriage. It had taken some time for him to be convinced that Lauren had no ulterior motives, and he felt a bit better when she willingly conceded to a pre-nuptial agreement. She only wanted his father, and J.J. supposed he could be happy with that.

What made J.J. unhappy now was that fact that his father had managed to snare a *second* wife when J.J. couldn't even get a second date with a woman. His sixty-year-old father, married to a woman J.J.'s age! The idea irritated him to no end.

More laughter, more patter, more teasing and cymbals crashing. Lauren faked the toss a second time to the crowd's mixed delight and annoyance. A raucous sound erupted from Jake's table, and J.J. saw his brother rear his head back, his mouth open like a PEZ dispenser's.

J.J. fumed at Red, perfect Red. Track star, fraternity president, successful career, beautiful wife, great kids, big house on the beach. How was it that his younger brother got everything before he did? The second son was supposed to come in second!

True, real estate was good to J.J.—he had the flashy Mercedes and a nice condo on the beach in addition to property in Dareville, but he knew he could be doing better in the current market. He had his father's handsome looks as well, and the attention of many attractive, willing women. So where was his wedding? Why weren't these people celebrating him? Why wasn't it his wife taunting a crowd of wallflowers?

He slammed down the empty bottle and barked for another. He knew damn well why: no woman in Dareville, or for that matter Virginia, excited him enough for him to pursue a second date. Only one woman could do that, could stiffen his cock with just a simple smile, and she was the standard by which all the other women he dated were judged. All those women had failed.

That woman, that one woman. Jake watched the cold mist curl up from his bottle's neck before taking a long pull. That woman broke his heart so many years ago, so badly he doubted it could ever be repaired. That woman was—

"Claire!"

J.J. nearly dropped his bottle. Somewhere in the course of his bout of self-pity, the bouquet toss was finally executed. Ellie Garriston stood on the cusp of the circle of bouquet helpfuls, staring in shock as the young ladies parted to either side to reveal a tall, slim blonde in a dark green dress.

Claire.

Claire Walker stood quietly, clutching the bouquet to her chest. She looked uncertain, as if wondering how the bouquet fell into her hands, and wondering what she should do with it. J.J. watched, along with everybody else, as she stepped carefully into space vacated for her. He twitched uncomfortably, and looked down at his himself.

Damn. She could still do it. After all these years they hadn't seen each other, and here he was with a hard-on at his father's wedding.

Claire stopped in front of her cousin with a slight smile. It seemed the entire wedding party and guests were hanging on this very moment. Claire and Ellie looked at each other as if they were the only people in the room.

"I-I just wanted to say," Claire said haltingly, and handed Ellie the bouquet, "that I'm happy for Jake and Lauren, and that I'm happy for you and Brady."

Sympathetic clucking all around. J.J. swallowed back a comment.

"And..." Claire visibly trembled now. Tears spilled, bangs moved out of place, and the woman practically fell into her cousin's arms. "I'm here," she said finally, "and I'm back."

Another thunderous cheer heralded the reunion between the estranged cousins. J.J. glanced at the bandstand and saw that Lauren wasn't put off by no longer being the center

of attention at her own wedding. Hell, she probably arranged it to look even better in front of her father, who the hell knew?

"I'm back!" Claire cried to the crowd, practically dancing in her cousin's arms. "I'm back, Dareville, and I'm never leaving again!"

The scene played like a movie ending. The band struck up a happy tune, and Lauren waved her new husband over to the bandstand. Jake rose gladly and approached, twirling the garter as he went.

And J.J. set down his beer and straightened his tie. What a day for Dareville. The farmer takes a wife, and the prodigal daughter returns.

Claire Walker was back.

And, J.J. thought with a smile, so am I.

About the Author

Having found moderate success in writing mystery and suspense, Leigh Ellwood decided in 2004 to try her hand (and pen) at romance. Her first two attempts resulted in shelved projects that, after some time away, were combined together to produce one full-length novel. This book would eventually become the Phaze release, MUSE. Ellwood's first attempt in the erotic romantic genre is Phaze's TRUTH OR DARE, the first of Ellwood's Dareville series. The inspiration for the contemporary romance TRUTH OR DARE evolved from many a day browsing a message board dedicated to one of Ellwood's favorite music groups...and the strong feelings of one particular member as evoked by his female admirers! The meaning of the name Dareville is two-fold: Dare is a name commonly seen around Virginia, as Virginia Dare is the first known born on US soil among the original Plymouth settlers, and of course each book in this series is quite daring, as you will soon read.

You are welcome to read up on the progress of this and Ellwood's other romances at her website: <http://www.leighellwood.com>. Ellwood also welcomes comments from readers at kspatwriter at yahoo dot com.