



**Rock  
Paper  
Scissors**  
**Deborah Boyer**

**Aphrodite Unlaced, Inc.**

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## **Rock Paper Scissors**

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To Andy B.

At the top of all my heart's lists,  
alphabetical or otherwise.

### **PART I**

No one can see their reflection in running water.

It is only in still water that we can see.

—Taoist Proverb

## CHAPTER 1—HAUNTS

Bloody textbook! Previewing fall's art class as an elixir for homesickness in July may well prove the epitome of poor choices.

With a seagull orchestra echoing his dismay, Alex Barnes plowed his feet into the New Jersey beach. In the human condition, surely an inspirational partner isn't too much for a bloke to ask. Yet emblazoned on the book's cover, the Medici Aphrodite insisted men had been searching for their perfect woman over millennia. And photo after photo of their failures sculpted in stone didn't inspire much hope for modern success.

Ignoring the familiar whisper weaving into his mind's ear, Alex traced the lines of a statute he knew too well. A reproduction of the Medici not only sat on Mum's dressing table for as long as he could remember, as far as he knew, Da's four-meter abstract interpretation still graced the barnyard.

As a boy, the Medici represented an ideal. As a man, she represented wishes without cures. Not for the first time, Alex wondered whether Aphrodite actually encouraged Roland Barnes or whether she simply served as a painful reminder that what he most wanted continued to elude him.

Licking salty contemplation from his lips, Alex reckoned turning thirty half a planet away from childhood had certainly compounded his discouraged melancholy. Surely a remedy for

it existed, rhetorical or otherwise, once he managed to suss out the requirements.

Sprawled at his feet, face-down on a sagging inflatable raft, young Leo interrupted the pity party. "Yesterday, I met this woman."

The statement further muffled by the expanding morning crowd, Alex squinted in his roommate's direction. "What did you say, mate?"

"I said I met a woman," Leo repeated, "at the boardwalk."

"Not a chick or babe?" Leo operated on vastly different criteria. He still expected to find what he searched for. Every day, in fact. "A new label for a new prospect," Alex observed, forcibly uncurling his toes, willing envy and pity into the sand.

"She's a teacher."

"Ah. You saw a prof. I thought you met somebody."

Rolling onto his back, Leo tucked his hands behind his head. "That's exactly what I did. She teaches fourth grade over at Wilson Academy. We talked for like, an hour."

"Well good onya. I'm certain she's a nice girl."

"Not girl, woman." The lad was definitely smug. "She's thirty-nine."

"Good Lord," Alex tried not to laugh, "for you, that's bloody old."

His protégé ignored the bait. "Wouldn't know it to look at her." Demonstrating his new appreciation by ogling a thirty-something stunner setting up next to them, he went on, "Besides, old or young, she was prowling the comic book store five minutes after we opened. Far as I'm concerned, that makes her damn near perfect."

Amused, Alex abandoned his book along with his brooding. "Perhaps she mistook you for a student. Reckoned your nappies needed seeing to."

"Oh shove it," Leo snorted. "Thirty-nine might be okay for you, but I never tried to pick up a woman as old as my mom. But she asked about early Dell art, and I couldn't stop thinking she adds whole new meaning to Woody Woodpecker."

"Best remind Woody to take it slow."

"Come on, Alex, knock it off." Freckled nose wrinkling, Leo turned a frown from the overfilled bikini into the sun's glare. "I know she did you damage, dude, but get over it already."

That observation trampled Alex's enjoyment right quick. He meant Miranda of course. The mere thought of that testicle collector sharpened the brine's bite in his throat. "Don't go there, Leo," he growled. As additional recollection stung his eyes, he slapped his sunglasses in place. "She's ancient history. I'm well over her."

"Yeah. Right." Leo sat up, shaded his brow, making Alex grateful for mirrored lenses. "You know, you always give me crap about letting women in. But you don't any more. And don't tell me you don't meet good prospects. Girls can't resist that bastardized accent. They think," his huff oozed disgust, "you sound exotic or some shit."

Feigning innocence, as if being reared in three countries hadn't left a mark, Alex summoned a perfect northeastern American clip. "An accent, you say? I do not have an accent. You, on the other hand, have a very broad one, my friend."

"Don't change the subject," Leo scolded. "Miranda made you afraid, you big wuss, afraid of getting back on the horse."

"Horse? What are you—oh. I do all right, mate. I've been back on the horse a few times." The sudden concern over the quality of his love life, from bloody Leo nonetheless, was disconcerting. He tried to brush it off along with the sand coating his feet.

"You never try to make friends with them, too," Leo pressed.

Alex regarded him suspiciously. A lot of what the bugger said sounded familiar, only he usually spouted it, not the laddie under his wing. "Just what are you getting at, Leo? Open your bloody mouth and say what's on your mind."

"Oh for God's sake. Miranda was a big mistake. So what. I used to think nobody lets things roll like you, but lately ... I mean, there's lots of women here. You never know, you might just find—"

A light flashed. "Wait one bloody second. Did you ask this teacher out?"

"Yes, I did."

So that's what he was on about! Alex had to grin. "I'm right proud of you. Not so difficult after all, yeah?"

"As if. I never feared rejection so much in my life. I thought I'd die if she said no."

"Reckon that part never goes away."

"Frickin' sea rat!" Leo threw sand at a too-curious gull. "She wants to go dancing tomorrow night."

Assuming he meant the girl and not the gull, Alex winced. "Dancing?"

"Dude. Let me tell you. I'd dance buck naked in rush hour traffic if she wanted. But, well, what I really want to talk to you about—see, she's here with her sister-in-law and I said you might—I mean, I told her..." As if it would make sense of everything, Leo mumbled, "They live in Harrisburg."

Other than Harrisburg, Pennsylvania being a pitch from Swatara Creek College, where he and Leo studied, Alex couldn't fathom what it had to do with him.

"Reckon if she teaches at Wilson, that's a shorter commute."

Leo opted for more non-information. "They own one of the big places at the top of the island, too." He fidgeted, inordinately interested in a broken shell. "She was just so smart and pretty and—Jesus, Alex, I couldn't breathe. I had to think of somebody and you were it."

As his mate's purpose dawned, Alex spluttered, "You bugger. You told her I'd come as well."

"Sort of."

"Not a bloody blind date?"

With a dip of his chin, the beanpole hugged his knees. "Not exactly. She asked if I had a friend to keep her friend company. I needed a wing man and, like I said, you're the first guy I thought of. Are you really pissed?"

"I'm not sure. Reckon I understand, but..."

"So you'll do it?"

Alex hesitated as the familiar lilt again tickled inside his head and this time, refused to be denied. Even on the other side of the world, Aidan never failed to add his opinion, particularly when he thought an arse-kicking was required.



*You know right well you want feminine company beyond your bed, the invisible lecturer admonished, and for certain you won't discover any goddesses if you don't stop playing bloody Byron, and get on with it.*

As usual, his unseen companion was bang-on, dead-cert, no-crap-here correct. The moment had come to take a deep breath and get back to business. Otherwise, he would end up a solitary old man who never touched the secret feminine essence, let alone held it dear, even once.

Decision made and determined to hold tight to his balls, he fortified his lungs like preparing to dive into the Atlantic in January, and made the leap. "Okay. I'll do it." Finding the water warmer than expected, he added, "At the very least, I can't be responsible for you not mounting your horse."

"Good." Leo dismissed the barb. "Besides, I wouldn't set you up with some prissy chick, would I?"

Sometimes goading the lad was simply too easy. "Now that you're ga-ga for an academic sort, you never know."

"Hey, smart isn't cold, smart's sexy as hell."

"That's fine for you, though what about this sister-in-law? If you've stuck me with some dim Barbie, reckon I might never forgive you."

"No, no." Leo's peeling brow lowered with concern. "At least I don't think so. She didn't seem to be."

Alex chuckled. "I'm teasing, you bloody sod. No worries, I trust your judgment. For now, anyway. Best ask me again when it's over though."

"There's one more thing. They want to do something before going to the clubs but I said you have to work. So Joan

wants to do the boardwalk and stop by Marla's. I think they want a look at you in your natural habitat."

"I can't blame them really." He pretended not to notice the way his thighs stiffened at having to pass muster. "I'm curious to see these paragons of intellectual beauty myself."

"And can you take a shower at the bath house when you get off? I couldn't get reservations at Lobster Luau later than seven-thirty and if you go home first, we'll never make it."

"Sure, mate. Sounds as though you have it well planned."

Alex applied sunblock a little too fervently, trying to warm to the idea of an unseen quasi-date. Yet Leo's happy face turned to the sun dissipated his frosty reluctance and he couldn't resist another poke. "Should I bother to ask what she looks like?"

"I think she's hot but beauty's in the eye, blah blah."

"Does she have a name?"

"Joan called her Lana or Laney or something. She's a teacher, too. High school, I think. And she's got a sexy voice, like Catwoman."

Alex ticked them off on his fingers. "Eartha, Julie, Lee or Michelle?"

"Julie."

"Thank God. I've never been too keen on the others. Eartha's a bit masculine for me. I suppose Lee's all right, and Michelle, but Julie—"

"Stop it," the demand drew a curious stare from their bathing-beauty neighbor, "I'm trying to remember details here!"

Alex avoided the tanned woman's smile aimed to garner his attention, not Leo's. "Sorry, mate. Carry on."

"She smelled good, like that purple crap at my Gran's."

"Wisteria?"

"That's the stuff. And," he paused for a sidelong glance, "I could tell she has a great sense of humor."

Alex groaned. "Ah no, mate. Kiss of death, that. It's the number one thing *not* to say about a blind date."

"I told you, it's not a real date." Leo gave their attractive eavesdropper a broad smile. "It's an escort."

"Escort?" Alex snorted and realized a more important question. "Leo, mate. If they're sisters-in-law, which one has the husband?"

\* \* \* \*

Helena contemplated the window above her bed. Constructed of small, beveled squares, it was well past its prime. The gouged frame bore souvenirs of mighty floods yet each individual pane, thick and lovingly embedded in lead, miraculously survived. Battered, yes, but it still speared the room with silvered, sunlit shafts, each casting rainbows onto the floor.

If she climbed up and looked close, as she took to doing every day since they arrived, she could see the tiny chips and imperfections creating the prismatic dance, as well as how an unavoidable film of sand added extra color. Which was good, because you couldn't escape sand on the Jersey coast. Purify, filter and air-condition all you want and still, indefatigable and relentless, sand drifted in.

Wondering what would happen once the inexorable gritty atmosphere began to pit the crystal, when Joan whipped open the door Helena bit off a groan.

Dressed to the casual hilt in a flirty sundress, her sister-in-law stopped short and looked her over critically. "Please," she said. "Tell me you're not wearing that."

"Wearing what?" The recent philosopher flapped her lashes like she had no idea her t-shirt could vote. "What's the matter with this?"

"Plenty."

"I'm comfortable."

Joan wailed, "You're not supposed to be comfortable, you're supposed to look nice."

"There's a new dress code for the shore?"

"Come on, I like this guy and next to that—that outfit, I look like a hootchie."

"He's a kid who couldn't stop gawking at you," Helena said. "He won't notice what I'm wearing."

"You are not going to act like some grubby girl his date has to drag along." Masses of curls surrounding an urchin's face, she was effortlessly attractive—a condition her intelligence found infinitely frustrating. "It's hard enough to find a guy who talks to me and not my boobs and this kid was charming and sweet. So please? Wear something else?"

Guilt sufficiently twinged, Helena conceded with a sigh. Making her old friend self-conscious wouldn't help anyone. "All right. But if his wing man thinks he's in for a score, he'll have another thing coming."

Satisfied, Joan tossed her hair with a haughty sniff. "No problem there. By the time you're done being a pain in everybody's ass, won't be a big shock if he bolts for the nearest door."

Helena stuck out her tongue. "You had to pick up college kids, for pity's sake. He's going to be what, all of twenty-two? What the hell am I supposed to talk about, skateboards and Hip Hop hits?"

"Leo said Alex is older."

"Wonderful. Probably some snotty grad student. So then twenty-four. Twenty-five at best."

Joan smirked. "Maybe if you're extremely lucky. There're hefty perks at that age besides being old enough to know better and young enough not to care."

"I don't have the patience to make chit-chat with some child who's got the world by the short 'n curlies." Helena narrowed her eyes in the mirror, more aware than usual of the tiny lines creasing their corners. "And if he bounces around all puppy-like, I might have to tell the truth about stuff—all those grown-up secrets sure to give him nightmares."

"Don't screw with him too unmercifully," Joan pleaded, "because I fully intend to get laid before vacation is over. It's been a long time since I had a lover, and even longer since one that's capable of swift encores." Flipping her skirt, the dark beauty crossed her eyes and did a little dance.

"Oh, right," Helena snickered, "like you need my help to get his pants off." Still, it required only a small favor and an argument got a person nowhere with Joanie anyway. She

threw up her arms in surrender. "Okay, okay, I give. I'll play nice in the sandbox."

"Swear?"

"I swear."

"Good." She helped herself to a pair of strappy flats peeking from under the bed. "Now get your butt in gear and put on something decent."

Helena replied from the depths of the closet. "Okay, look. I'll put on a different shirt." She emerged with several candidates. "But the jeans stay and sandals are as far as my feet will go. The ones you just stole, please."

"Fair enough."

She brandished a dark blue blouse. "This?"

Joan's grimace objected. "Boring. Where's the green one? It goes great with your eyes—and a smudge of liner."

"Are you going to hound me until I wear make-up, too?"

"Oh for—you want him to hate you, you brat."

"No, I don't want him trying to seduce me. Being pursued by some kid is not—this just isn't my idea of fun."

"Can it hurt to flirt a little? Young guys can be pretty interesting." Joan appraised her own make-up in the dressing mirror. "They tell you all sorts of things guys our age would rather die than admit."

"I have no trouble flirting," Helena said primly. "It's when it threatens to go beyond I get nervous. And by the way, I hate to break it to you, but men in their twenties will tell you anything they think spreads your legs."

Joan turned her face up in prayerful supplication. "God help me through the night. Lighten up, Helena. This isn't

going to kill you, I promise." But her brown eyes immediately softened. "Do I have to tell you how sad a celibate sex ed teacher is?"

"At least I can preach abstinence with conviction."

"He wouldn't have done it, Laney. The brother I knew would have moved on."

"Should I scream now or save it for later?" Under a deluge of memories she didn't want to recall, the past put additional cynicism into her caveat. "No matter how much you think I need to hook up, I'm in no hurry to try again."

"You've never tried, you only substituted. Once. Not that the substitute wasn't willing. It's just not the same thing and you know it." She opened a window and arched into the heat. "Empty is no way to live," she raised her voice as the wind's staccato breaths filled the room. "He would want me to be sure you're okay, so I'll stop bugging the second I think the real Helena's back. Until then, you better practice your primal scream."

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Seagulls shrieked and scattered as Alex blasted into the alley. Air conditioned or not, the pizza shop's internal temperature was never cooler than outside. Not to mention the odor of the dumpsters had almost become preferable to that of tomato sauce, even with the rubbish draped in a veil of humidity. Last year he worked in a Greek shop and while a gyro seemed edible lately, maybe next summer he could stand the thought of spaghetti again.

A homeless tomcat he had dubbed Rocky grumbled over the evacuation of his feathered buffet. An apologetic pat of the grizzled head earned only a swipe of accusation. "Sorry, mate. I'll bring you some chicken later to make up for it."

Chuckling at the cat's continued rumbling objection, Alex mounted the fire escape in search of a breeze. Not an ideal study spot, but the alley didn't offer the distractions the front of the shop did.

Kicking off his sneakers and stripping off his socks with a groan of pleasure, he lit a cigarette and tugged the textbook from his waistband. Last semester was more difficult than expected, the next promised to be the same and if he wasn't so anxious to complete his summer reading list, he would throw the bloody art book into the smelliest bin.

Placing it carefully face-down in his lap, he dug through the pages in reverse. There were enough worries chewing on his brain at the moment and staring at the Medici would only exacerbate their appetites.

The ravenous beast of the bunch, of course, was the impending blind date. Despite Aidan's background chatter regarding opportunity, his thoughts shied from settling on it. Instead, he scanned the cloudless sky and wondered how cold it was on the farm. As cold as Australian winters could be, Ocean City winters were colder, what with the wind whipping in from the sea with fierce glee. The first month of it only made him wonder why he hadn't found a warmer place to escape to, like Florida.

Not that he regretted the choice, about to embark on his fifth year back in the U.S. Once Mum decided to remarry,



there wasn't any reason to stay on with her and Carson. So news of an inheritance from a grandmother he barely remembered seemed the sort of sign a fella shouldn't ignore, no matter how cold he got.

*Perhaps she'll be the most interesting and provocative creature ever created,* Aidan's musing smoothly interrupted his host's, *and by some enormous, if not misguided good fortune, she won't mind your superstitious pap because of it.*

A raised brow accompanied Alex's muttered response. "I couldn't care less what she thinks." For a brief moment, he almost convinced himself. "I have eight more books to read and no time to worry about a fix-up."

He didn't. Deciding to study agriculture as a twenty-eight-year-old freshman based wholly on whim didn't prepare him for how much work a degree would actually take. Unfortunately, even farmers were best served by higher education in age of technology and he knew his father's methods were long outdated.

Academics aside, he had made more friends at Swatara Creek in a week than he did in two years in Ocean City. Arriving at the Pennsylvania campus, he quickly realized he was one lost lad among many and, as Leo so often pointed out, as soon as he opened his mouth, it was also obvious he wasn't any ordinary displaced student. Born in Jersey, transported to London at five and New South Wales at eleven, his speech contained a quirky jumble that made the other students curious, and talkative.

Of course drawing a room with Leo was a spot of luck, as well. He had reservations about the unshakeable rule

regarding freshman living on campus right up to the moment his assigned roommate appeared. He grinned, recalling Leo's reaction: 'The computer should tell people when they get an old dude.'

Stop. Stop. Stop. Being happier in New Jersey than Australia is what mattered—the very thing he clung to after Miranda, in those maddening months when he wanted to slink down under, hide in more familiar holes.

Ignoring the urge to run, he had stayed. And the only regret remaining was an inability to show his father what kind of man he had become—despite Da's oft-repeated list of shortcomings.

Being bloody apprehensive about a blind date was ludicrous. Leo didn't hire him out to stud, only needed him to keep a girl occupied. A bit of small talk, a smile or two, hold open a few doors and things would take care of themselves. There was nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

Yet, whether he wanted to admit it to Aidan or not, the lesson book's cover alongside the evening's agenda proved a dull needle using worry to penetrate his skull like butter. He took a deep breath and braved a new chapter's photo plate.

Thankfully, an un-goddess likeness of an ordinary woman, bearing the caption 'Helen of Troy'.

According to the artist, Helen had an interesting face but was no beauty. A legitimate argument. No doubt her appeal came from within. Any woman who inspired an obsession like Paris', with or without the Gods' help, couldn't do it based on visual appeal alone.

Splayed at the foot of the stairs and slit-eyed in the sun, Rocky offered an amicable meow of truce. If Leo weren't allergic, he would take the shabby cat home and feed him until he was glossy—and a tad tamer. "I have to read, mate," he said absently, "I'll scratch your ears before I go and I won't forget your chicken."

The restaurant's back door leapt open, crashed into the side of the dumpster, and spilled a well-rounded, thundering woman. With a yowl, she knotted her fists and stomped for emphasis—until she spied Rocky low-crawling into a bread crate.

Shoulders slumping, she called after him, "Don't run away, kitty, I'm sorry. Crazy lady didn't mean to scare you."

From his overhead advantage, Alex savored the lush dark hair caressing her shoulders before becoming acquainted with her buxom hippiness. He liked women that were soft, classically shaped, and her qualifications earned his undivided attention.

She crouched, extending a hand toward the cat. Quite the fine bum, dead-cert. One that made a bloke wish it were okay to go the grope, give it a friendly squeeze, and not be thought the worse of for it.

"You'll want to be careful," he cautioned as Rocky examined her wriggling fingers with suspicion, "the bugger's known to bite."

Startled, she squinted at him, then shaded her eyes, palm out. Bathed in the unforgiving afternoon sun, she was older than he first thought, with a striking, earthy allure: proud nose, sensual mouth, trace of cleft in her chin. The way she

carefully squared her shoulders before approaching the fire escape hinted at conscious armoring and Alex wondered how wrung out he looked. Having spent the better part of the day in a kitchen hotter than the Seventh Ring of Hell, he must appear in Rocky's league at present.

When she reached the foot of the stairs, his polite smile faltered. Like a tawny mountain lion, light green eyes, so laden with gold they were almost iridescent, peered through a thick fringe of lashes, making him even more aware of his bedraggled condition. He wet his lips, wiped at the sweat dripping down the back of his neck and ran a hand through humidity-spiked hair before meeting her eyes again. She tilted her head, looked him over with cool inspection. Oddly, he recognized something suspiciously like the primal fear the cougar tried to hide and held his breath, waiting for something he couldn't name.

Then she smiled.

Suddenly four stone heavier, soldered to the metal step by simmering green fire, her smile forced the trapped air from his lungs with a whoosh. Quite simply, when she smiled, she was stunning.

"Ah-ha," she crowed, "this is where the smokers hide out. Can I bum a butt?"

Warmth flowed from a voice as rich as her hair, slipped into his stomach and melted into his groin. Nervous as a schoolboy while she mounted the steps, Alex made a quick check to be sure his mouth wasn't hanging open. "Beg yours?"

"A smoke, a weed, a fag? God, I hate that one. In England—I went there once—I cringed every time somebody said it. Not so nice in our slang, is it?" She plopped at his feet. "I've only been here a week and I smoked a carton already. And as much as they rape us Shoebees per pack here in tourist land, I thought I'd try to quit—again—but honestly, I need one too bad to worry about that today."

He continued to stare and she grimaced. "Sorry. I have a habit of blathering. I didn't mean to offend—if I did, tell me to shut up."

"No offense," he said, surprised he managed it. There was something compelling about the way she moved. Along with the mesmerizing eyes, it made her intriguing. So much so, he couldn't look away and located his rumpled pack of smokes by feel, holding them out like a bloody chimp with an apple.

*Say something, Aidan snapped. G'day, the weather sucks, anything—but best string together more than two words.*

"Thank you." She accepted his offer with a curious frown. "You're a gentleman and a scholar, kind sir."

"You're quite welcome." Three words. Better.

She studied him while she lit the cigarette, then gave her bottom lip a tug. "Forgive me. I'm also being rude. Hello, I'm Helena. Who are you, my fellow-bad-habit-friend?"

He glanced at his book. Her shoulder grazed his bare toes, a contact he felt as a thickening higher up. Distracted, he leaned on his knees, tucked his chin, searched for the information. "Uh, I'm..." He had an excellent view down the front of her shirt. Complete with a bit of purple lace decorating the pale skin below her tan line. The thought of

freeing the weighty breasts from their gilded cage was enough to progress to semi-erect. Grateful for the book, he settled it in his lap and tried to concentrate on her face.

No help. Her scent wafted over him, musky and sweet, like sex and flowers. A peppery hint to it, as well, a familiar fragrance he couldn't place. And her hair was absolutely magnificent.

"Alex—I'm called Alex." His attention wandered back to her cleavage, to the flash of lace.

She snorted smoke. "I see. Yes. You would be Alex." Her faint smile seemed to hold a secret. "Are you enjoying the view?"

Snapping upright, it took a second to recognize the heat wave. To his horror, he blushed to the tips of his ears.

*Best go for a snappy response, Aidan quipped.*

As a result, Alex promptly said the first thing that came to mind. "Purple lingerie is lovely." Shite! Not what he meant to say, although he tried to look like he had.

"Is that right?" Her thumb traced her lips as if to squelch a new smile. "Well, I think hazel eyes are lovely, so look at my face when we're talking—if you don't mind?"

Still embarrassed, he met her eyes. "Apologies. Sincerely."

She nodded and her eyes slid over him with cat-like curiosity. "So..." Her thumb again teased her bottom lip.

A seemingly unconscious, thoroughly sensual gesture. He licked his lips and his tongue kept moving, formed words. "Do you realize you pet your mouth before you say something?"

"Do you realize you lick your lips before you say something?" she shot back. "That's only the second or third time I did it but you've licked yours a dozen times already."

The power of speech was a miraculous thing. "Are you keeping track then?"

"As a matter of fact, I am. You did it first when I looked up, and then when I was coming up the steps—"

"Not keeping track of me," he said with false exasperation.

"You do it justice," she shrugged, "hard not to notice."

"Perhaps we should compromise," he said, "and I'll lick your lips."

Whether her snort meant derision or amusement, he couldn't be sure. "I don't think so," she said, "I hate chapped lips."

"So we'll get Chap Stick. Mint flavored, if you please."

They snickered. He had forgotten how much fun flirting with a woman past the age of coy could be and suddenly realized how much he had been avoiding it.

*To your ultimate detriment, Aidan said, as I've so often tried to explain.*

Pizza Queen Marla bellowed from inside the restaurant, shattering Alex's reverie. With a disappointed sigh he quickly re-imprisoned his feet. "I'm sorry, Helen—Helena—I have to get back to work." If he meant to get on with things, may as well start straight away. "I'm off shift in a few hours. If you haven't any plans, perhaps we could go out—or if you'd rather, have coffee or summat—or would a drink be better?"

Like she was used to babbling idiots, she chuckled. "Thank you, that's very sweet. But I'm afraid my girlfriend's dragging me out tonight."

Aidan reminded him he also had a date. "No matter. I forgot my mate set me up for later—I'd call it a blind date, though he says not."

"No, really? Studmuffin like you, bet you plan to get laid."

He ducked, blushed again. "I hadn't thought about that." He had thought about it but her directness flashed a tiny red warning. Nosy question to a stranger.

Another raspy chuckle smoothed his feathers. "Just yanking your chain, boy-o. I've been thinking that's what my 'not really a date' will be after. I was just curious."

Without a thought as to why, Alex came clean. "Then I admit I've been wondering as well. I hope I don't have to deal with it."

"Interesting." Her eyes sparked with silent laughter. "So. You don't plan to get, I don't plan to give. Are you free tomorrow? Maybe we should compare horror stories."

"Yeah. All right, yeah!" He was a soaring bird, bloody red light be damned. "I work the morning but—meet here at one?"

"Perfect. I can give Joanie the slip after lunch."

Marla yelled from the doorway and with a nod, he trounced down the fire escape, again dispersing Rocky's fowl menu. Waving before he went inside, he thought about how good she smelled and how she didn't remark on his accent. Although it had become less noticeable and maybe he didn't say enough for his phraseology to glare. He made it as far as



the kitchen before his upper brain kicked, filling his head with a brilliant, green and lavender cloud.

Wisteria.

He ran to the door, surveyed the empty alley.

"Leo was here," Steffie, the waitress, called. "Said they'd be back when you're done."

Heart pounding, Alex nodded.

\* \* \* \*

Helena watched the tall, broad-shouldered man stride into the restaurant like he owned every acre of O.C. She had been wrong about his age, though not by much. The short 'n curlies part seemed accurate. Still, he was friendly enough to answer an off-beat question honestly. Also very attractive. She couldn't argue about that, not when her hands itched to smooth the chaos of chestnut hair sticking up every which way. And those hazel eyes probably stripped off panties with regularity. She should be relieved he had no motive for the evening other than assisting his friend.

That she wasn't relieved was almost too disturbing to think about, but she thought about it anyway.

Exactly why she didn't fess up to being his date, she couldn't be sure. Seeing him on the fire escape echoed a pulse in memory, even though the memory contained eyes of clear lapis and Alex's were a dark greenish-gray. Still, for a few unsettling seconds she had been seventeen again—dangerously untried, unjaded—and when she got close, sat next to him, something in his eyes beyond color invoked a vulnerability she thought long conquered. No, not

vulnerability. Quit equivocating. Desire, that's what it was. She liked that he liked what he saw—and that scared the spit out of her.

It could be her imagination. The morning's conversation with Joanie let loose myriad things she would rather not recall and every one of them had her mind working overtime. Fortunately, it's much easier to turn off your libido at forty-three than it is at seventeen and, resolve well-mustered by taking the long way around the block, Helena managed to meet Joan and Leo with a smile when they exited Pizza Queen.

"There you are," her girlfriend exclaimed. "I thought we lost you."

"I needed a smoke." She hoped her shrug appeared casual.

Evidently, it did because Leo checked his watch and said, "I don't know what happened to Alex, but he's off at six. That gives us three hours on the Boards."

"Cool," Joan said, "let's go to Irene's for snowballs."

As they set off down the boardwalk, Helena trailed behind, insulated by the throng. Truth be told, she wanted Alex to be too young, too cock-sure, not sweet, good-looking or kind. He was all of that, she suspected, and more.

She shouldn't have teased him, shouldn't have fished for motives. Not his fault, her suspicion. Past screw-ups were responsible, not him.

Damn it. If only she had stuck to the old self-promise to quit smoking. Then she wouldn't be waltzing down the

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

boardwalk, wearing nothing more than a shallow smile to mask the wings of need fluttering in her belly.

Wings that had quickened under hazel eyes, like an albatross headed for shore.

## CHAPTER 2—WING MAN

Alex spent the rest of his shift waffling between anticipation and anxiety. Helena was certainly talkative—they would have a brilliant time chatting. First excuse he found, he would touch her hair. Maybe he could get a better look at those marvelous breasts, as well.

Then again, probably not a good direction to consider. She obviously had a joke at his expense and he couldn't decide if she meant it in good fun or as a barb to back him off. *These are dangerous times*, Aidan mused, *perhaps she was testing you.*

Quite possible. Also possible she was a married woman playing tease to see if he'd bite. Bloody hell. A husband lurked somewhere. A bad sign. A very bad sign. Particularly when he wanted to know more about what went on behind those wary lioness eyes.

*Do you reckon that's how Paris felt?* Aidan whispered, hinting someone important may have arrived. But to trust that instinct—Alex didn't know if he could. Not after the hard-learned lesson that, when it comes to love, dreams are dreams and reality is a sight more painful.

The shop bell jangled like his nerves and as a fresh stream of saltiness relieved the cheesy-tomato stench, he shot an automatic glance at the door.

Helena entered first, stopping his heart for the instant it took Leo to usher in Joan.

The nymphet his mate scrambled to please scanned the dining room with friendly curiosity. Soulful dark eyes, an explosion of black hair, indeed beautiful. No wonder Leo was a goner and at the very least, watching the kid play Mr. Sophistication would be interesting.

"Hey! Alex!" Steffie's shout broke through his preoccupation.

Pizza dough stretched from his hands to the floor. Mumbling curses, he scraped up the worst of the gooey wad from the cracked linoleum and hit the oily spot with a mop.

Meanwhile, Leo and company sipped sodas. Helena threw back her head and laughed, her throaty delight floating over the crowd as Leo The Entertainer pointed toward the kitchen.

Alex froze. God help him if she was full of triumph. "Please, please," he hissed, child wishing on a star, "only teasing me, please."

Locating him, Helena smiled and added a broad wink that sent relief flooding his mouth. He laughed out loud and winked back, as the weight in his stomach headed south.

\* \* \* \*

Over dinner at The Lobster Luau, amid jumbled fishing gear clogging the walls, Alex discovered Helena and Joan adored bad horror movies as much as he did.

"I used to love going to the drive-ins," Helena said. "Not that there's any chance of that any more. Drive-ins are long gone at home—well, except one that shows only G-rated movies. But God, Christopher Lee is still too sexy for words."

"Just your type," Joan butted in, "tall, dark and lethal."

If looks could murder, the one Helena sent her friend would drop a body at fifty meters.

Words as stiff as her shoulders, she replied, "He's gray now."

Whatever nerve got pinched, Alex didn't care for Helena's stone-face at all. "Oddly enough," he said, attempting to relieve the tension, "there's a drive-in out past Tuckahoe that plays nothing but horror. It's Retro Friday—*Creeping Flesh* and *The House That Dripped Blood*."

It worked. Helena's frown smoothed. "Christopher's in both of them."

"Maybe," Leo suggested, "we should go there instead of dancing."

Since Alex had six left feet, sitting next to Helena in relative isolation rather than crushing her toes on a dance floor held irrepressible appeal. With a grateful nod, he concurred. "An excellent idea, mate. Ladies?"

"Yes," Joan said, "definitely yes for me. Have you ever seen those, Leo?"

"I've seen *The House That Dripped Blood*."

"Helena?" A fuzzy ball of acid plopped into Alex's stomach as she hesitated, thumb teasing her mouth. Holding his breath, he prayed his eyes didn't reflect the panic shriveling his grapes into raisins.

"Sure," she said, "sounds like fun. Is there a playground?"

Alex giggled relief.

Helena raised a brow. "What the hell was that noise? You sound like one of my students."

*Tell her the truth*, Aidan interjected, *say 'I'm relieved you said yes'*. Or maybe, Alex thought to his silent partner, 'I think you're interesting, sexy and no matter what I said this arvo in the alley, I want you'.

"What is it, Alex," Helena repeated, "am I too grown up for playgrounds?"

*Get hold of yourself*, Aidan said, *this will not make a good impression*.

Alex hastily cleared his throat, swallowed another rebellious giggle. "No, I didn't mean—only the dreamy way you said it, struck me silly." She looked at him like he was mad. He frantically searched for an adequate lie that wouldn't come back to haunt him.

He almost didn't catch the understanding Joan tossed across the table before she followed it with a float. "You did sound cutesy," she said, "like you were hoping for Xanadu."

Helena knocked over her water glass, sand crab ice cubes skittering across the table. "Damn," she muttered. As she scooped the renegade cubes back home, she and Joan held a silent conversation.

Well-versed in nonverbal discussions, Alex's curiosity grew. "Exactly," he said, "as if a playground equals paradise."

"We used to sneak off to the swings for a smoke," Joan explained. "Laney's a sucker for nostalgia."

Helena snorted. "Snuck off for more than cigarettes on double dates."

"That was you, not me."

"If you didn't always insist on getting the back seat..."

"Do tell a lie," Joan said primly. "I went for the movies, not the groping."

Helena nudged Alex and cocked her head towards her friend. "I should warn you guys. Joanie's not as conservative as she used to be."

Joan shrieked, "Helena!"

"Well," Leo said in a seductive drawl, "thank God for small favors."

"Down boy," his date patted his back. "Laney, I'm going to make you pay for telling tales."

"Just a tale?" Leo pouted.

"Well," Joan stroked his arm, "maybe not a tall one."

Helena shook her head. "A damn short one, if you ask me."

Alex wasn't sure if he laughed with relief, at Helena and Joan, or the blush spreading over Leo's neck. "You've known each other a long time, yeah?"

"Long, long time," Helena said. "Since high school."

"We were the only two girls within ten miles where we grew up," Joan added. "And from the second she got a look at the—"

Another frown creased Helena's face and Joan coughed, shifted gears. "Yes. Let's do it, let's go to the movies. I've never seen the *Creeping Flesh* uncut." Despite her light tone, there was another exchange between the women.

"I reckon you're guaranteed at least two nostalgic experiences," Alex teased Joan, wondering what forbidden territory she kept stumbling into, "because there is a playground and if I'm driving, it's the rear seat for you."



Joan fluttered her lashes like she had no idea what he insinuated. Helena snickered. Leo blushed again. Bemused, Alex wondered if Leo had bitten off more than he could ever hope to chew, let alone taste.

Plans settled, when the waiter appeared, conversation turned to more benign matters. While diving into a pile of steamed clams, they playfully parried a few times, but the way Helena studied him as he spoke, Alex began to wonder if she felt the same attraction. She did touch his shoulder and arm a good bit. Her hand seemed to linger, each contact a caress.

When the cappuccinos arrived, Joan and Leo were debating Wordsworth and Coleridge, an argument excluding their tablemates. Alex's stomach tightened when Helena pushed her coffee cup aside and when she teased her lip, the rest of the room disappeared. Such a bloody inviting habit that. Every time she did it, a ripe heaviness invariably trickled between his legs.

"Well..." He searched for a neutral subject to douse his lower brain. "What do you teach the schoolies then?"

"Sex Education."

"Not really?"

"Really. Sex is fascinating, physiologically and psychologically. Most people are uneducated or, even worse, misinformed. I'm very lucky to work for a private school that wants to give students a healthy outlook on its positive points, as well as prepare them for the pitfalls."

"That's quite admirable."

"Isn't it? But quick, we better not talk shop or I'll drag out my soapbox—and it's huge. So, let me see your hands." She held hers out.

"Going to read my palm? Or are you doing research?" He complied, sliding his palms over hers. "Perhaps a study on the ratio of finger length versus the length of..."

She snorted.

"Toes," he exclaimed. "I swear I was going to say toes."

"Mm-hmm, sure you were. I like to look at a man's hands. I think they say things you don't even know yourself." She tickled their backs and ruffled the fine hairs before she explored each finger. Moving to his wrists, she tested their girth before turning his hands over to study the lines. As she traced the crooks and creases of each one with deliberate concentration, she pursed her lips.

"What do they say?" he gasped as a xylophone shudder ran down his spine. There were definitely parts of her he wanted to explore with the same attention to detail.

"They say we're evenly matched." She deposited a kiss in the center of his palm. "That maybe I could trust you."

The moist contact traveled up his arm, hit his chest like a short-circuit zap, then raced downward, effectively halting a sly remark about what his hands wanted to say.

"See," she said and pressed her palm to his, "they're the same size. Your palm is larger but my fingers are longer. Different proportions but pretty much equal."

"Helena," he said in a sudden wave of protectiveness, "I don't think you should decide who to trust by their hands."

"Don't worry, boy-o, it's not rocket science, just something that speaks to me. We all have hidden talents."

"Suppose we do. I have a few hidden talents in the rocket department myself."

She laughed. "I don't know how hidden they are. You're like a puppy barking over his bone."

Perhaps innuendo should be avoided since Helena's responses left him feeling more like thirteen than thirty. Which wouldn't matter if his attraction didn't increase exponentially to the passing seconds.

And of course the more he was drawn, the more he worried, with and without Aidan's input.

A bloody husband existed somewhere. Sisters-in-law meant one of them married the other's brother. But. There wasn't a wedding band on either woman. Aidan reckoned different religions wore them on different hands or different fingers or summat. So Alex checked all rings. No simple bands or diamonds. Not indicative of anything perhaps, but still.

Joan had a single-minded interest in Leo. It must be Helena. He started to ask, but Aidan reminded him he was merely an escort. If she had a husband, absentee or otherwise, it was up to her to say. If she didn't, there was a reason, and a fella shouldn't pry.

*But then again, Aidan offered another solution, it could be a complicated, blended family. Or perhaps their siblings are married—wouldn't that make them sisters-in-law as well?*

Regardless, one thing was certain. He found Helena easy to talk to and he told her things he didn't usually share

straight off the line. Like how his existence owed to a whirlwind romance between an Aussie singer and an American sculptor. How, three babies in tow, they went off to tackle London's art world. And how his aging grandfather down under eventually needed assistance to manage his farm. The very same grandsire whose mouthful of a name, Alexander Beauchamp, was attached to Barnes and bestowed upon his daughter's first born son, ensuring a lifetime of residing at the top of alphabetical lists.

When the check arrived, Alex found himself on the verge of telling Helena about Miranda but a recollection of that misuser smugly telling him what was what stopped him. *No, reckon it's not a good idea*, Aidan agreed. *Sometimes the past should simply stay where it lives.*

On that note, Alex suggested if they wanted a good pozzy at the cinema, they should get moving.

### Chapter 3—Flying Solo

Dusk made the sandy lot gleam with a preternatural aura as they wound their way through the speaker pole forest. Spaces plentiful, it appeared the usual patrons preferred *A Nightmare on Elm Street* to campy horror. Alex parked his dated Oldsmobile several rows from the front, where they jostled around, hooking speakers to the doors. Snuggled to the center, Leo and Joan hooted as the previews rolled.

Yet even throughout the tinny dissonance of the short film warm-up, Alex fidgeted. Hyperaware of Helena close in, between the humidity and jitters, he could likely wring pure nervousness from his boxers. To make matters worse, she kept carefully to her side of the auto. Always bloody frustrating to wonder what women are thinking. It made a bloke's head feel as though it would explode.

Trying to squelch uncertainty, he turned his attention to the film—only to be interrupted by bouncing headlights from behind.

Watching a teen squeeze out of the battered Cadillac, wedged between posts meant to accommodate contemporary sedans, Helena laughed. "Look, Joanie, it's Dad's Caddy."

"God, it is!" She giggled. "The boat we tried to float."

"I drove it into the Susquehanna once," Helena explained airily. "Just drifted right off the bank and floated for two whole seconds. Luckily, the river was shallow that year."

"How did you manage that?" Leo asked.

"Laney hit the gear lever," Joan said, "and was too busy playing with her hair to notice."

"Well, if it was as gorgeous then as it is now..." Chuckling, Alex's hand came to rest on Helena's knee. He even went so far as to give it a squeeze before realizing she might not care for the familiarity. He snatched his hand away with a mumbled apology.

She gave no indication she even noticed. *Perhaps she is married and simply not interested*, Aidan said. *After all, friendly flirting wouldn't break any vows*. Alex reckoned kissing his palm went a bit further than flirting—and suddenly realized he had shared quite a bit while Helena hadn't revealed much beyond her friendship with Joan and how she made a crust.

Perhaps she did label him puppy and too young to contemplate, a situation he wasn't unfamiliar with. Leo teased him about a predilection for older women but it really amounted to simplistic need: Most women he encountered at school were much younger or a bit older. When it came to the younger ones, he could ignore dissertations on Britany Spears' latest CD in the name of a one-and-done boff but he found it difficult to talk—really talk—to them. And he liked to talk. Mum always said he was her fortunate exception to the rule, a male who loved to yabber.

Cognizant that the decade age difference could be the trouble, he knew it may not be personal. He was not a child but there remained a question of common experience. Like the lad in the car beside them. He didn't look old enough to

shave, yet probably old enough to buy his own beer. That must be it.

Perhaps if he were a distinguished, salt-and-pepper haired fella, it would be different.

Aidan chose that moment to suggest he simply run a hand up her thigh and see what happened. Alex cheerfully suggested Aidan go pound sand down a rat hole. Thankfully, the first feature got down to business and drowned his inner partner's retort.

Leo kept moaning at the silliness of the plot and Joan poked him every time he did. Soon her cheerful scolding, punctuated by low hummed extras, had Leo giggling like a girl. Then, during the obligatory scantily clad, soon-to-be-damsel-in-distress scene, there came a long whispered stream where Leo laughed nonstop.

Alex shifted restlessly and peeked at Helena. Her smile had disappeared, though she still watched the screen.

Completely understandable. By the time the good doctor discovered the aberration-filled laboratory and Peter Cushing held up a jar of 'creeping flesh', Alex felt the reluctant voyeur. Unfortunately, the Technicolor examination only exacerbated his discomfort, since what the beaker housed bore a strong resemblance to a pickled penis.

A tremendously large pickled penis, in fact.

"Oh My God," Joan screeched, "I forgot about this."

"What? The creeping crap?" At least Leo seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Yes! Doesn't it look just like a big di—"

"I need a soda," Helena interrupted. "Coming, Alex?"

No time to answer before she bolted. Hopping out with due haste, Alex caught up halfway to the snack bar.

"Are you all right?"

Walking backwards, she waved toward the auto. "All that whispering. I don't want to be there when they start making out."

"No, suppose not." Why did he feel like a boy trailing his auntie?

*Don't, Aidan said, it's got nothing to do with who you are.*

Helena stopped. It must be all over his face. The green-gold eyes studied him and her thumb tickled her mouth.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Drawing even, he tried to be casual around an urge to suck her lips while his body responded to her habit once again. "I'm simply trying not to let a picture of that get lodged in my head."

With a snicker, she continued to the refreshment window. Before he could scrape a few bills from his pocket, she paid for two drinks.

"I wanted to get that," he said as she offered him a can. "Not to be antifeminist, but I should pay for—"

"Shut up," she said amicably. "I can afford it and I'm sure you have plenty of college bills. I worked my way through school. I know how tight things get. Just take it and don't give me any crap."

He peeled the straw. "Cheers."

"Do you mind if we give them some time?"

"Good idea."



"Is there a merry-go-round on the playground? I love merry-go-rounds. Unless," she rushed on, "you just want to sit somewhere and watch the movie?"

She sounded as wistful as a girl at the circus, begging for a sweet. Pink and blue fairy floss would suit her. "No worries," he said, "I've seen this one a lot."

Under Christopher Lee's echoing pronouncement of doom should the flesh fall into wrong hands, they headed for the swings at the back of the lot. Helena skirted the sliding board and made directly for the rusty iron wheel. Clambering into the middle, she spread her legs and took hold.

"Come on, Alex, give us a push, will ya?"

He had to laugh. "So I'm not the only kid here, yeah?"

"Nope. Never too old to play!"

"Fair dinkum." He gave the wheel a shove, pushing it faster and faster, until she shrieked with glee.

When Helena eventually begged him to stop, he had to assist her to the edge where, head between her knees, she giggled until her world stopped spinning.

The uncomplicated activity eased his rangy imagination. Side-by-side, they sipped their sodas and Helena's enthusiastic rehash of whirling around until she could barely stand finally made him most comfortable. She wanted a bit of fun. He was a casual escort after all.

Sadly out of practice to think liking a nice woman meant serious attraction. Although he hadn't found a lover, he certainly found a friend.

Next thing he realized, he had launched into what happened with Miranda.

*So much for not going to tell,* Aidan said.

The early part was easy. It was the end that hurt.

"...I made a home-cooked dinner, held her hand, looked into her eyes and told her I loved her. She—laughed. Told me to stop being silly."

"God," Helena said, her first comment since he began, "that's terrible."

"Then she said, 'Just get that nonsense out of your head. My husband doesn't care who I sleep with as long as I'm discreet. I don't want to stop seeing you, you're a decent lay, but if you insist on pushing, we're done.'"

Alex paused, turned his chin up to study the movie, willing sudden salty waves to recede. "I was so shocked I don't remember leaving. I hope I did it without looking back. I never had any idea she—I suppose the signs were there, had I cared to look."

Helena groaned. "That is just—I want to smack her, hard."

"I was naive." His teeth refused to unclench. "If I had had any sense ... I thought—reckon I should've known. If I hadn't been so besotted, or if—"

"You can't spend your life storing up ifs," Helena said. "Take my advice. Don't save them like cherished possessions."

"But life always comes down to ifs. If I had thought with the proper parts. Or if I was more sensitive to what she didn't say, I could have saved myself the humiliation."

"Bullshit. They say men can be insensitive but gender has nothing to do with it." Sighing, she added, "Anyway, I'll bet she went way out of her way to keep her secret, the rotten

bitch. I'd hate you to blame yourself for that." She slid closer, hugged his shoulders, pressed her cheek to his. "You're a good man. You followed your heart."

Brows knotted, she held his eyes. Definitely serious, she didn't think he was a blooming wanker. He wet his lips. A kiss suddenly grew mandatory. Fortunately, although Helena flinched, she didn't try to stop him.

Her mouth as succulent as he imagined, an exploratory tongue parted her lips for a kiss full and deep. Teasing, tasting, Alex drew her bottom lip into his mouth, at last savoring its compelling fleshiness, discovering she tasted as good as she smelled. Her hand crept to his shoulder, shy and seemingly uncertain, and he did another thing he wanted to do so badly—he slid his hands through her hair, let it trickle through his fingers like Wisteria blossoms. Cinema, sound, salt and sand, all ceased to exist outside Helena joined to his heartbeat.

Flushed, slightly embarrassed by his impulsiveness as well as aroused by the result, when they parted, he didn't know what to say.

"Mmm, yummy." His new confidante skimmed her swollen lips over his. "That was delicious and I wasn't even ready for it. Dare to try me again?"

Absolutely he wanted to kiss her again, along with other things. But one question must be answered first. Alex put abrupt space between them. "Can I ask you something personal first?"

"Maybe. Is something wrong?"

She tried to hold his eyes. He examined his tennies. They were quite worn. He would need a new pair before school got underway.

"It's my age," she sounded disheartened, "isn't it?"

"No," he said softly. "I want to know which—you and Joan are sisters-in-law. Are you married, or is she?"

He didn't expect her to laugh. "See, I'm right. You are a good man or you wouldn't care."

She patted her pockets until she located cigarettes and took her time lighting one. She handed him the pack and he was horrified when, following her lead, the lighter's flame trembled. Then he realized she called him a good man.

Helena rubbed her legs, busily brushing sand from the denim while she gave the film attention. Finally, head tilted, she considered him through a veil of hair. "That would be me. I married Joan's brother." She blinked rapidly and scanned the night sky. "He died. Five years ago."

Prepared for any number of answers, that wasn't one. Mum aside, widows were stooped grannies in black. Searching for an appropriate response, Alex didn't miss the wry coincidence of the film's rising score.

Aidan wasn't happy. *Apologize for being a right nosy Nellie*, he said gruffly.

Helena continued to search the heavens. "Too bright," she murmured. "When I think about it, I like to look at the stars. They make us humans seem inconsequential, you know?"

When he didn't respond—simply because, once again, he didn't know what to say—she continued. "Things weren't exactly right between us when he died but that doesn't mean

I didn't—there will never be another one like Jared, that's for sure. Sometimes I wonder if—oh, never mind." She stretched with a huff. "Talk about your water bucket on a cat fight."

Alex still didn't know how to reply. Although relieved of one worry, her bare declarations and the way she gazed overhead with a trace of desperation constricted his chest. She must have loved her husband very much. Like Mum and Da, they had their share of difficulties yet never once stopped loving each other.

Eventually, Helena faced him directly and from her sad smile, he knew his eyes spoke the words he lacked. "Trust me," she said, "the past is not an issue. You were honest about—I'm only being truthful about the condition of my heart, too. I don't want to lead you on like Miranda did."

His nod was wooden. She spoke truth. She could have left out the details and he would be none the wiser. Yet the disappointment trickling into his stomach caused an ache he refused to identify.

"I'm sorry," she nudged him, "it's complicated. Maybe I'll explain sometime but right now, I don't want to think about it." Hesitantly, she stroked his cheek. "I want to think about—sweeter stuff."

Completely disconcerted, Alex nodded again. She didn't miss his attraction and wanted to let him down easy.

Helena sighed and examined her hands.

*At least she's being straight, Aidan consoled. You can't ask for more than that.*

Correct. "Suppose it's best to be honest." Ducking his head, hiding his traitorous eyes, he poked the sand with his toe.

After a few minutes, while the ingénue's terrified screams bled around them, Helena cleared her throat. "The thing is," she said loud enough to be heard over the din, "I haven't had sex for about four years."

His head snapped up, disappointment dissolving in shock. "Four *years*?"

"Four years."

The background screaming abated and he demanded, "Why?"

She opened her mouth but promptly closed it, concentrating on the film instead of him.

He studied her profile, digested the information. Then, to free her from his rash question, muttered, "Shit, even after Miranda, I was going mad in six months."

She smiled without looking away from the screen. "All those raging hormones. There's a reason they're legendary."

To comfort, he put a hand on her shoulder. She shivered but sat up straight, as if coming to a decision. "There hasn't been anyone I wanted to get close to. After Jared was gone, I tried seeing someone but it just made everything worse, like there was a glacier here," she tapped her chest. "Celibacy's easier to bear." Meeting his gaze, she veered in a new direction. "Until today. You put cracks in the ice, Alex. Tiny ones, maybe, but my heart thawed a little and I'd given up hope that I'd ever want to—oh for pity's sake," she ended gruffly. "I'm no good at beating around the bush. I'm trying

to say I'd like to have sex with you. Now, tonight, before I change my mind."

Caught off guard, he blurted, "Fuck."

"Exactly," she said. "For one night solid, no strings in sight."

The responsibility in what she asked gave him pause. But he needed to say something, anything, so he said, "A one night stand might not be your best answer."

"I don't have any answers. Only questions I want to blot out for a while."

As yet essentially uninformed, he backtracked. "How did your husband—Jared die?"

"Hit by a truck on the highway. Can we leave it at that?"

Understanding all too well, he winced. She didn't grill him about Miranda—or the darker bog of his years down under. Even Aidan agreed that insisting she explain was out of order.

"Sure," he said, "I didn't mean to pry."

"It's okay." A tenuous smile blew clouds from her eyes, and words from her lips. "What about it, Alex, want to help me break my dry spell? If you're not into an older woman thing I'll understand, but after that kiss, I thought maybe..."

There was a long silence while Helena waited for an answer he still didn't have. Her age happened to be the last thing he cared about, since whirling ideas invoked by her proposition had already raised a warm puddle in his groin—a puddle rapidly expanding its habitat.

"Great," she said with a raw chuckle, "I screwed up the signals. Look, don't spare me. If I've made a total ass of myself, say so."

Taxed as his brain may be, the single-minded head between his legs was up to the challenge. Being king of no strings never presented a problem before.

*Only before, you knew one night would be enough,* Aidan volunteered.

"Never mind," she said, "forget it. Sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

"Stop it," Alex said, harsher than intended. "You didn't make me anything of the sort, nor did you misread any signals. And I don't care how bloody old you are, you take my breath away. I haven't said no, I only want to be certain that you're certain, all right?"

"Oh!"

"As for that dare to kiss you again..."

"I guess I'm blathering for no good reason." She stubbed out her cigarette, gathered her wits. "So tell me," a flicker of humor returned, "what did you miss most in those long months of abstinence?"

His ears burned. She had an uncanny knack for making him blush like a virgin. Along with changing gears mid-conversation, it created a sharp interest in what she would say next. Flirting was one thing but a state of relentless anticipation was murderously seductive. He considered her question, examined several angles, and decided it would be prudent to pass the initiative. "All of it, I reckon."

"Yeah, well—look, we're about to have a sharing moment here, Alex, so pay attention."

"All right," he subdued his grin, "I'm all ears."



"I want to know," she enunciated, "what you missed most about sex when you weren't having any."

Welcoming the shift to less muddy water, he hooked a brow. "Is this a professional Q and A, Ms. Madison?"

She gave him what could only be a well-practiced teacher's scowl. "I'm just curious. I told you I think sex is an interesting subject, didn't I?"

"Should I remind you that curiosity killed the cat?"

"Maybe so. But satisfaction brought her back."

He had to laugh. "All right. What did I miss most?"

"That's the question. It can't be that hard."

"It's certainly getting there."

"Answer the question," she said, "and we can test that declaration later."

"I told you," he repeated, "all of it."

"You're no fun. Look, I'll go first. I miss the talking. You can imagine but it's not the same. Nothing is hotter than hearing what your partner has in mind. I don't mean sweet-talk, I mean down and dirty running commentary."

Aidan ventured her thoughts may be Cliff notes and Alex summarily sent the invisible sentinel into temporary exile at the same time he accepted his wisdom. "Yeah, I'll go along with that," he said to Helena. But her green eyes hinted she may still harbor misgivings, so he added, "It's certainly more interesting than 'left a bit' or 'right a bit'."

"Isn't it? My aural hot spot—the one some guys can't handle—are demands for confirmation of satisfaction."

"Such as?"

As if they were now conspirators, she lowered her voice. "I'm saying you better ask me if I'm liking it, boy-o, and no clinical words, okay? 'Does your vagina feel nice?' doesn't have the same effect as 'how's that cock feel, baby?'."

Light-headed as his blood hurried to his crotch, he replied like a breathless debutante. "Reckon I'd have to agree on that." Further pondering what sort of blokes couldn't handle a bit of rude talk, Alex decided direct participation in her game was required. He grinned—how could he not—and said, "Blistering, explicit, you-know-you-like-it stuff I can handle."

"And fuck-me-harder stuff. Can you handle fuck-me-harder stuff, too?" She flapped her lashes with precious innocence. "Because I seem to remember I can make a Marine blush."

Given he already blushed more in a day than he likely had in his entire life, Alex wasn't surprised. "What about the wind-up, reckon you have thoughts on that, as well?"

"Of course. Sexual Opinions 'R Us. Let's see, good places to start. There's the nape of the neck. That soft spot under an ear. The base of the throat. And nipples of course. Nipples are underrated erogenous zones for both genders, in my not-so-humble opinion. Although an amply endowed woman can," she smacked her lips, "take care of the entire list of their available stimuli on her own."

A flash of her self-pleasuring skipped through his imagination and Alex diverted appraisal to her breasts. Upon discovering her nipples visibly erect, his popped up in response. Sweet Christ. Simply talking, they were well into foreplay.

"And I really miss oral," she continued, as dreamy as she was about the merry-go-round. "God, I loved oral."

His tongue slipped out to wet his lips of its own accord. No longer caring that his cock also paid very close attention—even trapped against his thigh, the thought of her full lips sliding around it elicited another surge of ascension—he tried to match her banter. "And which oral would you mean? There're two kinds, I believe."

"So there are," she mused with a frown, chewing the soda straw as if she had to mull it over.

While various erotic acts cavorted in his head, Alex had no doubt Helena knew exactly what she was about letting him stew. And the wait made his mouth drier than the sand at their feet. Not necessarily a minus, since she appeared to be riveted on his futile lip-licking, as if considering his tongue's suitability for employment, and he barely managed to summon any real moisture before she continued.

"For a woman, giving has a whole set of very fine merits but there's ways of compensating. Phallic symbols, like cigarettes," she waved hers in the air, "aren't hard to find. Men are luckier, men can do themselves—or at least they can try." She sent a pointed look into his lap. "I know. I'm a professional. I've seen pictures."

The body part in question desperately tried to make itself known, insert its opinion into the discussion. He regarded his crotch, and wondered. "Ah, no. I don't suppose I could manage to—no. Definitely not."

"Hmm, that's too bad," she said. "Anyway, for women, getting it requires another person." Head high, she was

poised for his response, like they weren't talking about themselves or what the next hours had in store.

"Suppose so." He sipped his warm Coke, tried to appear unruffled, and made her wait.

"I hate to say it," she urged, thumb sneaking up to brush her smile, "but there's only so much a gal can do with a rubber substitute."

Alex spluttered but for once didn't blush. "Oh yeah, I know all about that. I've seen pictures."

She strangled, "I bet you have. Bet you even rented a documentary or ten on the subject."

He dipped his chin and blushed under a shy grin after all. Not embarrassment this time, more that she hit too bang on something he had high erotic regard for. Not that either of his heads minded. He shifted to give the smaller one some space. "Well..."

"Video porn. One of the most important discoveries of the last century," Helena stated like controversial theology, "and, I dare say, a single's best lay."

With that, laughter bubbled in unison until they gulped for air.

"Oh God," Helena cried, rubbing her stomach, "I needed that."

Breathing ragged with amusement, Alex held her eyes and knew his shone with the same lustful exhilaration. Lashes dropped seductively, he let inquiry purr from his chest. "Any chance I can get a demonstration of what a gal *can* do with a substitute?"

She brushed an open, inviting smile. "I'd say there's a damn good chance," her voice was charged, husky, and seared into his abdomen like a white-hot brand, "but only if you pass my oral exam."

Lost for long seconds in lurid images, heart pounding, mouth dry all over again, he licked his lips. It didn't help. Then he remembered where they were. "Crap. What about Leo and Joan?"

"There're taxis somewhere," she said, "we passed one."

"We certainly did."

"If you don't mind leaving your car, we could call a cab and make excuses. I'm sure they can find their own way home."

"Fantastic idea."

She stroked his cheek and without hesitation, he kissed her again. Having a bloody phenomenal time talking about it, what sex would be like when they joined defied imagination.

He barely left footprints as they headed back to the car.

## **Chapter 4—Finders Keepers**

Locked in a tongue battle, Alex still remained aware that the driver paid closer attention to his passengers than the road. But doing his best to ignore the audience, he nuzzled Helena's throat, stroked her hip, reveled in her scent.

If she noticed the surreptitious gawping in the rearview mirror, she gave no sign while exploring every inch of Alex she could reasonably reach, and a few unreasonable ones as well. Each time her hand trailed up the inside of his thigh, Alex was simultaneously thankful she didn't, and hopeful she would, touch his solid cock—because if she contacted the raging erection, for certain the cabbie would get a much better show.

When they arrived at their destination, he scrambled from the taxi open-mouthed, arousal fleeing on the salty breeze—even gave the pervert a generous tip because he was too distracted to ask for change.

Leo had mentioned a house at the head of the island. Nearest to the water and out-of-place in the exclusive contemporary neighborhood, it happened to be the house Alex admired most often from the other side of the dunes.

One of the oldest edifices in town, certainly the oldest along the beachfront, the rambling Victorian had weathered storms and time, though not without its share of scars. Noticing his interest, an ancient fisherman once regaled him with how a hurricane tore the balconies from the place in the '70's, explaining modern first and second floor decks. The

glaring mix of vintage and new gave the house an appealing, imposing face, reminding Alex of his grandpap on Sundays: regal, world-wise worn in his best suit, a fresh shave and carefully combed hair centering attention on the ageless happiness in his eyes.

Women who could afford expensive houses were out of his league. What in bloody hell was a farmer wannabe doing in front of a venerable mansion, fully meaning to bang its owner senseless—apparently while she begged him to fuck her harder?

"Hey," Helena took his hand, "you okay?"

Staring at the pointed roof, he mumbled, "I'm fine." A bloke couldn't simply jump on a woman like her, it required tact—a tact he wasn't sure he knew anything about. "I didn't realize you're rich."

She laughed. "I inherited the place, ya bohunk—Jared's part anyway. Joanie and her brother have a share, too. The Madisons have owned Windspray for generations. It's ugly," she said fondly, "but I like it."

"Are they rich then, the Madisons?"

"Their great-grandfather won it in a poker game. On a battleship in the Pacific."

"An entrepreneur." Strangely, he wasn't at all relieved. "What's a bohunk?"

"Handsome but not too bright."

He snorted. "Thanks ever so."

"It's an endearment," she said. "I'm from working class folk of middle European extraction. We call ourselves Hunkys—but I don't suggest you do if you're not one."

"I'll make note," he drawled, still mesmerized by the sliding glass doors peering over the sea.

"Would you rather go to your place, or Red Roof Inn, somewhere less flashy?"

That she wanted him to be comfortable made him able to proceed. "No."

She dug in her pockets for the key while Alex entertained a wild vision of her dropping to her knees and unzipping his pants. A knot of controlled panic welled. No bloody way he could get—or keep—anything up in this condition.

Pushing the door open, Helena towed him inside while he stifled an hysterical giggle. He wasn't in the least sure and thankfully Helena knew it.

She kissed him gently, a reminder of why they were there. "Close your eyes," she murmured and nipped his earlobe.

"Why?"

"Because you're about to die of nervousness. Close your eyes. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"I'll only be a minute or two. Close your eyes, and breathe."

He did as she asked and once her footsteps faded, his ears fine-tuned. The muffled pound of the surf and the quietly creaking house merged into a lullaby, easing his tension—until Helena's subtle scent returned a moment before her footfalls.

"Don't look," her fingers twined in his, "just follow me."

He went where she led, encountering thick carpeting and then stairs. She drew him along, made sure he found each



step before moving on. "You're not going to surprise me with a room full of people, are you?" he asked, eyes still closed.

"What are you talking about?"

"I have no idea. It just popped into my head."

"No big surprises, only an icebreaker. Open your eyes."

Next to a bed, candles softened the room while one thing shone quite clear. For all Helena sounded confident, she looked as nervous as he was. Yet she said reasonably, "I don't want you to feel like you're going to have a heart attack any second, because high stress doesn't equal great sex, I do remember that. Anything else I can do—would a beer help?"

"No."

"Don't think I'm expecting some kind of stallion display. A pony ride will do nicely."

Her teasing brought a smile despite his tight throat. "Ta."

"Relax, would you—I can't until you do."

"I'm trying," he went the dependable, honest route, "but I'm not certain how to proceed."

"Should we dive under the covers, cuddle up and see what happens?"

That did the trick. If she didn't know how to start either, there were no wrong moves waiting to happen. "Sure," he said, "I'd like that."

She nodded and set about unbuckling her sandals.

As he kicked off his tennies, he was filled with a strong sense of maleness. Age difference and social strata aside, she needed him, the man. If she had thought he was too callow, she wouldn't have brought him home. Although, when Helena unbuttoned her blouse and he realized she meant to start

naked, his confidence wavered. Aidan had a thought, of course, but Alex sent him packing with accusations of being a worse voyeur than the taxi driver.

The last of his silly fears stowed in their proper place, he took Helena's lead and peeled off his t-shirt. Too nervous to look at her directly as he unfastened his jeans, he quickly stripped off pants and jocks in a single swoop.

Candlelight bathed them in ambiguity as she crawled into the crisp linens. The sheets cool and smooth against his heated skin, Alex slid in next to her. Settling under his arm, Helena laid her head on his chest with a quiet sigh, while he concentrated on identifying even the smallest sounds, waiting for the right moment to speak.

The whisper of their breathing rang loudest, followed by the spit of burning candlewicks. A clock ticked across the room. The sheets susurrated as Helena rubbed her face on his shoulder, stroked his chest and stomach, adding the purr of her palm ruffling through his body hair under the thin blanket.

Then there were goosebumps that spread from her hand, tightened his nipples, reawakened his erection and made him forget all about listening.

There was nothing overtly sexual about her petting. Rather, she seemed to console herself with his presence. Despite the non-instigative nature of it, there were things no man could control and a response to a naked woman—her bare skin fitted along his length—qualified. The covers tented over his pole, standing out like a dog's balls on a cat, and he shifted onto his hip to hide the evidence.

"I'm sorry," her hand came to rest below his navel, fingers burrowing through thicker hair, "I hate a tease and I'm being no better than that."

"It's all right. It's nice holding you for now."

"You have no idea how sweet you are." Her hand slid to the base of his cock, circled him.

A squeeze produced a hiss of pleasure he couldn't contain and she began an even rhythm. Occasionally rubbing the sensitive spot under his cockhead, her thumb stroked the delicate perpendicular ridge much the same as it did her lips. Soon his neck braced against pulsations emanating from an erection quickly approaching granite status.

Abruptly sweeping back the sheet, Helena exposed them, the cool air against their radiating heat an extra caress. With a groan, Alex reached for her hair but she pulled his hand to cover hers. "Show me," she whispered, "show me how you like it."

His breath caught and he hesitated. He never assisted an all out wanking. A random stroke or two on the way to the act, yes. A performance piece, no. On one hand, pun aside, he knew what to do, he just wasn't sure how to demonstrate. Rising hunger finally urged him to mold her fingers to his firm flesh, begin guiding speed and pressure. Cheek against his working bicep, Helena murmured encouragement until he huffed amid the perfect hand-job.

Through the fog of sensation, he was aware of Helena riveted on their combined labor. Her interest so focused on his near-to-exploding phallus while her lips caressed his shoulder served a charged erotic thrill that speared deep into

his balls. When her tongue slipped into his ear, he shuddered, head arching into the pillow. In concert with nips to his taunt neck, her insidious curiosity then traveled under his ear, predicating an abdominal twitch that said no doubt about it, he was about to shoot.

Speech syrup-thick, he drooled, "God, Helena, that's—it's so—I'm gonna come"

"I don't think so." She pried her hand away, halted the fabulous fondling, leaving him confused and his abandoned member sticking straight up and pulsing objections. "Not yet anyway."

He gritted his teeth, willed back the threat of climax. No more waiting. Seizing her mouth, he fed on her lips when he really wanted to mount her without further foreplay. Instead, he concentrated on the curve of her shoulders, the dip of her waist, the meatiness of her buttocks. He tasted her throat under her chin, slowly moved lower until he could bury his face between her breasts. Cupping them reverently, he tested their weight, tongue exploring the soft skin, moving ever nearer the stiff peaks tickling his palms.

"Please," she moaned, "suck my nipples. They're aching for attention."

With guttural agreement, he trapped one, finding it as easy to manipulate as his hard shaft. Helena sighed, hands tangling into his hair. Kissing his way to the twin, he flickered over the matching bud. She pushed upward, her hands roaming over his face, neck and shoulders before tracing his spine, fueling a constant awareness of how much she enjoyed what he did.

Switching to and fro, Alex continued to fondle her breasts, tending to her nipples with eager enthusiasm.

"I love that," her voice hitched, as did her hands in his hair.

"A bit harder's acceptable then?" He filled his mouth with flesh, let it slide between his lips. Grasping the distended nipple lightly between his teeth, he rolled it with intent. Her answer was a groan, louder in the dark, and he paused long enough to murmur, "You said something about this before, didn't you? Just want you to know I pay attention."

Her answering giggle disintegrated into a sound light-years from laughter as he returned to his efforts, nibbling her nipples with increasing pressure until he was satisfied with her undulations. Her cries for more convinced him to back off, return to barely grazing them with his tongue. Although no sooner did her rolling hips begin to settle than he renewed his love bites.

Hard, then soft. Soft, then hard. Leisurely pace set, he aimed to give her a need as strong as his—particularly since, cock pressed between them like a burning column of want, her wriggling produced monumental anticipation with ongoing, agonizing, perfection.

Caressing her unattended breast, she said, "Damn, boy-o, you wouldn't believe how wet I am."

The sight of Helena tweaking her own nipple sent a trill down Alex's back, spasmed his ass. But when she cupped her breast, pulled the distended morsel to her mouth and suckled, he completely lost track of what he should be doing.

Admiration awestruck, he gushed, "Bloody hell, Helena, that's absolutely brilliant."

"Want some?" She offered the tender tip.

It took a second to realize she meant for him to suck it as well and he needed no further invitation. The nipple warm and slick with her saliva as it slid between his lips, he couldn't begin to describe what tasting it straight from her mouth did to his prick. Her tongue wrestled with his, tried to reclaim possession of the prize, and the throb in his tackle surged toward crescendo.

"Fuck," he choked, rolling onto his back, grasping the base of his shuddering organ like a tourniquet, willing semen back into acorns doing their utmost not to comply.

Helena languidly licked her lips. "Just wanted to show you I pay attention, too."

Quivering penis still in an iron hold, he wasn't sure if he giggled or moaned.

"But you were doing a better job on your own," she added.

What should have been words emerged in a congested snarl. He pounced, pinned her to the bed. Aroused to a point he had rarely known, he pressed the ample breasts together, brought her nipples side-by-side. Nipping and sucking, he alternated from one to the other. No more teasing. Instead, he went for maximum, merciless stimulation.

She gripped handfuls of his hair, pulled his face tighter. "Jesus-God-in-Heaven!" she rasped—and not quietly.

There had been a time when Alex didn't doubt his prowess. A time when he knew what he was capable of in bed. He went out of his way to treat his lovers with care and respect, and

that two-sided thoughtfulness always earned him horizontal ovations. Then along came Miranda. He employed the most skillful and selfless lovemaking a man could summon for a woman, yet it hadn't penetrated her cold heart even a centimeter. And that burrowed into his confidence until he questioned his ability to please, coloring even one-night stands with an unsatisfactory reserve.

In that moment, wrapped in Helena and her cries for more, he swelled with a pride to match his cock—pride he could give her gratification so easily—and experienced an extraordinary rush as his missing bravery returned. He believed, accepted, nothing would have changed what Miranda did. Faith in himself spread, took hold, melted into its rightful place in his psyche. Utterly conquered, he pushed Miranda into the darkest closet of his mind, wedged her in with the rest of his regrets, and barricaded the door.

Haunts summarily banished, with a joyful cry he fixed in the present with Helena and no one else. Man and woman locked in sweating, pulsing, glorious erotic labor, he was sharply aware of her rocky nipples between his lips. Heart racing, he laughed as Aidan said, *Stop lollygagging, mate, and put your back into it!*

"What's so fun—"

Her question was lost when he dove into a self-set mission. If she had been celibate four years, he would bloody well make sure this night made up for every last day of her sexual exile.

He traced the outline of skin untouched by sun, punctuated the oral drawing with random flickers over her nipples.

Accompanied by sobbing cries, Helena's hips pumped against his wholly wooden staff with fierce intent, until even his skin felt as erect as his cock.

Meanwhile, the recipient of his reborn confidence tried to speak, tried to urge him on—and sure enough, her whimpers contained the very language she warned him about.

"Fuckin' hell ... so fuckin' good I can hardly stand it ... oh yeah, harder, suck them harder ... God, when you use your teeth ... what that does to my pussy ... makes my clit throb ... makes me want your cock deep in my cunt..."

As her pleas continued, graphic and bold, Alex wondered what she would sound like when he buried his tongue in the throbbing parts she described.

Eventually she released a shuddering sigh and tugged his hair. "Better stop. If you don't, I'll end up coming like this."

In no way ready to concede the first round, he said, "And? Isn't coming the whole point?"

Her reply was sibilant, pleasure-drenched. "Yes."

"Well then..." Sucking a nipple, he pressed his teeth into it, continued the sweet tease.

"God yes—but I want to—I need to have you..."

"Do it." Lust-soaked as well, it came out a growl. "Come. Then we can start those oral exams."

Laughter exploding, Helena shoved him onto his back. Straddling his hips, her gold-green eyes glittered, her hands trailing over her breasts, plucking at a mouth-ripened raspberry. Her ministrations brought back his musings about demonstrations, along with how they had both sucked the nipple she was rolling. His currently proud prick twitched as



her slick sex caressed it with the barest touch, teasing his hips into a seeking bow. He would hold her to that show. He couldn't imagine anything sexier than watching the long-denied beauty satisfy herself. Perhaps while he rubbed his erection over her stomach, watching her swallow a fake cock as she begged for the real—fantasy shattered with a realization that, for the first time ever, Alex found himself unprepared.

"Bloody hell." Gripping her waist, he curtailed contact. "Helena, I don't have a condom. I didn't think we'd—"

"Oh no, I never thought—I'm sorry, I don't have any either."

Frustration made him harsh. "Where's the nearest 7-11? Wait! Isn't Wawa a block over?"

"Do you do this kind of thing a lot? Not judging, just asking."

"You have every right to ask," he said gruffly. "I'm always careful. I've never done it without one."

Still astride, she cocked her head. "Never?"

"Reckon it sounds like a line, but it's not. A rubber's always been required equipment, even my first time."

"I can't get pregnant. You'll have to take my word for it the same way I'm going to take yours. Jared and I were faithful for eighteen years. Other than that, there's only—well, there was only one and I promise he was careful, too."

"Are you sure?" he asked softly. "Not about the bloke, I mean about the condom?"

"I've been thinking about you being inside me since dinner," she complained in a raspy tone that carried a jolt all its own. "I consent or whatever I have to say."

He groaned with indecision. "I don't want to go but..."

She slid onto his thighs like a horizontal fireman's pole, leaving his cock feeling oddly exposed. "I think we've covered the questions but you have to decide yourself. Nobody should make decisions about your safety except you."

The thought of his first bareback experience brought a renewed rush of excitement and Alex answered by dragging her to his chest, stoking the readiness fire with a kiss. Heavy-lidded, glazed with sensory overload, he focused on her face. Helena smiled and—something else. Something that barely registered before she pressed her mouth back to his.

Through the heat of their melded lips he processed what he saw. Almost certain, she was crying. Wanting a better look, he rolled into her arms but she wrapped a leg around his hips, pulled his cock to her belly.

"You feel so good," she murmured into his throat, "so hot and hard. It's been too long. God, Alex, I need you so bad."

Coherent thought fled. Blindly following primality, he humped into the cushion of her abdomen, captured her ass and brought her tighter with every promissory thrust.

Yet her smooth flesh against his passion-purpling member wasn't enough. He wanted more. He wanted what she wanted. He wanted to possess her, fuck her strong and hard. He wanted to plunge into the center of her soul, wanted her writhing under him with the joy she had been so long without.

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

He wanted to feel her quiver and shake, feel her pussy milk his naked, spurting cock.

He wanted to hear his name on her lips when she came.

Under his greater bulk, her thighs parted. Locating her wet entrance, he slipped a finger inside and she moaned, pushed into his hand. Recalling her eyes filled with desire but brimming with tears, he hesitated, searched her face. She gazed steadily back, eyes moist in the candlelight.

He couldn't manage more than her name. "Helena?"

She smiled, seemed to understand. "It's okay. Don't stop. Fill me up, boy-o, right now, before I die from wanting it."

Her plea shot through the over-stimulated tool in question. Both to increase her pleasure and give his too-near climax a chance to subside, he sought the mysterious bundle hidden in her slick folds. Although she moaned against his lips, he wasn't sure he found the right spot until she wrapped her legs around his waist, opened wider beneath the yearning pulse of his readied penis.

Abandoning the search, Alex hesitated only long enough to position his heavy glans against her welcome passage, then speared as deep as their position allowed.

Helena cried out with the impalement and he stilled, savoring the silky, supple suction that accompanied unwrapped penetration. Solidly sheathed, the sensation left him speechless, surpassing years of hazy daydreams.

"Jesus Alex, you're a tight fit! Fuck me—give it to me good."

The guttural demand got him moving. He slid out and back, slowly, deliberately, punctuated each pierce with a

grunt. "There you go, sweeting, it's all yours," he growled, struggling not to summarily blast off. If she wanted explicit commentary, she would get plenty before he finished. "Is that what you wanted? To be full of my cock?"

"Yes. God, yes!"

Her cries made him powerful, sublimely dominant. "Mmm, you'd like a bit more, I think, a bit deeper." His responses less man than animal, he wrestled her legs over his shoulders, pushed her thighs high and used the leverage to wedge the last of his hard length into her famished depths. Control-roughened, his voice continued to rumble from his chest as he swiftly backed out and again drove deep. "That's better, yeah? Is your pussy full enough yet?"

Her reply was barely audible. "Jesus, yes—it feels like you're the whole way up to my throat."

"Lovely. Now a taste of what's to come." He presented a series of shallow strokes before burrowing into stillness once more.

"Damn boy-o," she was breathless, "you fit me fuckin' perfect. I can't wait to get that fat thing in my mouth."

"First things first."

Tempted to laugh outright at the silliness of sex talk if one were to take it out of context, Alex continued to tease with random depths and angles. A strange need to erase any who claimed her before arose. Arrogance be damned, he would use her fictitious appraisal to embroider the performance. "How's that," he drove full bore, "do you like my fat cock fucking you? Much better than a dildo, isn't it?"

The word no sooner out than he wanted to apologize for the crude description of what was likely a modest vibrator—though it did contain a naughty charge. But since Helena continued to moan, rocking her hips into his pillar as it staked her to the mattress, he didn't think she minded.

Arms beginning to tremble under tense supported weight, under the stress of being embedded so far that the heat of Helena's buttocks seeped into his overstressed plums, he rejoiced in the purity of their raw union. Being buried without a barrier carried such orphic intimacy! Moistly encased, it was as if he could foretell her every quiver and pulse, taste them with his soul straight through his dick. Better than any man-made intoxicant could even hope to be. Logical thought difficult, coherency even more so, he somehow managed to give her what she asked for. "Deep enough? How's that cock feel?"

"Fucking tease," she hiccupped.

"And you love it, don't you? Come on, tell me, Helena—tell me how good it feels."

"Yes, God yes," she whimpered, "love being stuffed, love being fucked."

Hoarse with effort, he threw out every delicious obscenity that popped into his head, used the endeavor to keep his orgasm at bay. "Is that enough filling up," another jab-and-still, "or do you want me to fuck you proper? Which is it, sweeting, do you want stuffed or fucked?"

"Fuck me," she groaned, "don't stop till I come."

"Oh, you're going to come." Moving anew, he increased speed while her palpitating tightness milked him, choked him with hammering hunger.

Arching and bucking as she strained to meet every thrust, her legs drove into his shoulders and her demands drove into his brain. "That's it," she got louder with every expulsion, "fuck me good 'n hard. Slam it home, boy-o. Damn, you know how to use your meat."

Such a simple word for an ample hard cock. Such an obscene word coming from any other woman, in any other place. Perhaps he should feel objectified, but he couldn't deny the perverse flash it carried—and that was all it took.

He couldn't leave off, couldn't avoid the peak. The way Helena relished his pounding, coupled with that coarse, unbridled cry tipped him over the edge. With a sputtering, choking howl, he climaxed—and as his body clenched under all-consuming spasms, he wondered if the back of his head had been blown clear across the room.

Helena's hips continued to rock, absorbing every jerk and twitch filling her with juice. "Please," she pleaded, "I'm close, so close! Harder, please—harder!"

Somehow he continued his assault, praying he would bring her off before his traitorous flesh became useless.

"Rub my clit," she hissed. Wide and glittering, all sign of tears gone, she held his eyes and guided his hand between them, to the spot he sought earlier.

Tongue dancing over lips that refused to stay anywhere near as wet as Helena, Alex stroked her button while he plunged erratically in and out. Not easy to perform both

actions in their position but if he stopped, he was sunk.

"How's that, good? Faster, slower, what?" He rubbed a little frantically.

"Yes, yes," she sobbed, legs trembling, "I'm coming, Alex. God, Alex..."

His name peppering her cries, the heartbeat of her pleasure compressed and released him. Panting, softening penis yet captive, he thrummed with satiation. Reluctant to let her go, he wanted to say something important. Too much clogged his heart and head.

Helena found the perfect words. "Thank you," she said simply. "That was wonderful."

Throat full, it took real effort to reply. "Fantastic. I never thought—"

"Shh," she hushed, "please don't. I'll cry if you say it."

He frowned, wondering how she knew what he meant to say when he had no idea. Their bodies slipped apart and a flash of emptiness was quickly replaced by the oneness of Helena's sweet-soaked body under his arm.

Content, he lay quietly wrapped in her until a strand of gossamer tickled his nose. Smoothing her hair, he brushed her cheek and found it wet.

"Are you all right? Did I go too far? Reckon I did get a bit carried away at the end..." He trailed off at a complete loss.

"God, no, you did fine—more than fine. It was perfect, absolutely perfect." Snuggling closer, she tucked her head under his chin.

But her icy tears continued to burn his chest. He stroked her shoulder, caressed her temple with his lips, and

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whispered soothing words. He wanted to ease her distress, but didn't understand the problem. "Helena," he said finally, uncertainty making him gruff, "tell me why you're crying."

After several deep breaths, she said, "It's a silly girl thing. I've been alone a long time. I'm crying because ... I'm alive."

Loneliness he understood too well. Aidan slipped back in to observe, *She's crying about her husband, I'll wager. As though she's betrayed him by being happy or summat.*

Alex had to admit Aidan might be right, and ached with empathy. "Shh-shh, now," he tucked the blanket around her like a shelter against grief, "you're not alone any more, and I'm not going anywhere until you throw me out."

With that, he rocked her like a child and simply let her cry.



## **Chapter 5—Moon Shadows in Gold**

Alex opened his eyes. The surf's pulse came from the wrong direction. Unless he was upside-down, not his bed.

Under his arm, a woman slept in a tight ball, her breathing metering the ocean. Grappling with the room's shadows, the peppery-floral of her hair tickled his nose and memory washed through his sleep-gritty brain like waves over dry sand.

Helena's bed.

Snug skin-to-skin, he snuffled the silky mass hiding her face. Her scent sparked in his abdomen, a clear announcement that all circuits were ready for another go. Unfortunately a different part of nature called as well, and it screamed.

Reluctantly, Alex slid out of bed and padded into the bathroom, thoughtfully closing the door before groping for the light switch. Blinded, he managed to find the appropriate plumbing by some innate bladder homing device.

A cavernous loo, the tiles were cold. A fluffy chenille robe beckoned, despite being covered with pastel rabbits. Rubbing chilled arms, he pulled it on—stopping short at the sight of himself in the mirror.

For the last year or so, the bloke who looked back startled him. He expected to see the eighteen-year-old he felt inside—not a man just west of thirty. Expected a smoother, less defined face, with an unmarred brow—not the tighter one, usually frowning in the glass, the one with furrows creeping

across its forehead. He expected sure eyes, not the guarded, moss-and-lichen ones narrowed with suspicion—ones with tiny lines decorating their corners. Even looking beyond the face peering from Alice's realm didn't help, since he expected a lithe boy's body and definitely not the reality of his shape settling into maturity.

Once Grandpap said looking in mirrors gave him a fright, because some wrinkled old man looked back. Alex always thought the old man had been teasing, until the day that he, too, discovered a fella in the mirror who wasn't supposed to be there.

He continued to study the imposter reflection, the unfamiliar-familiar man revealed in the unflattering clarity of fluorescent light. The doppelganger flexed his chest and arms. Lean and strong, muscular without being over-blown, the fella whose hazel eyes assessed him in the harsh illumination could never again claim kinship to boyhood.

Not that Alex objected to anything the mirror insisted was truth. And there were certainly perks. For instance, the arrow in the center of a hairy torso—the faint line that began between his pecs and vaguely strolled past his navel before pointing groinward with authority—grew more prominent every year. As had women before her, Helena traced the path with a sigh, calling it the sexiest freeway on a man's map.

Recollection of her ripe body, their slick joining without a franger to dull his dick, made the mirror-Alex's penis lengthen. Suddenly grinning like single-minded idiots, both of them climbed into the robe.

The soft cotton redolent with Wisteria's musky-sweet overtones married to an underlying crispness uniquely Helena, her smell alone sent a pleasant ripple through his stomach. Alex quickly glanced back at his reflection-voyeur.

Besides, stranger or not, unique or not, he had no choice but to keep it.

Full claim over his image melted into the expectations of his mind's eye and he once again saw himself without ambiguity. He ran a hand through sex-tangled waves before scraping long fingers over his chin and down his throat. Shadows from the day's growth mixed with the often unrecognized maturity. His eyes glowed amid the dark stubble. But that had nothing to do with the bristle of whiskers. That had everything to do with incandescent lights and the luscious woman waiting in bed.

As usual, emotion leapt into his eyes, his feelings boldly exposed in the murky hues. If he went to work in the morning, he would have to go without a shave. Unless Helena would share her razor. If she used one. If she went to some posh salon and got waxed or plucked or however those places made hair disappear, he was shit out of luck.

Thirsty, Alex abandoned layered reflection to scoop tap water into his mouth. Even allowing the faucet to run didn't produce anything more refreshing than tepid. Evidently, for all its glitz, Windspray wasn't any different than the rest of the island. Dimly recalling a peek of kitchen when they first arrived, he hoped Helena wouldn't mind if he helped himself to something cold.

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*by Deborah Boyer*

Back in the bedroom, he paused to listen to her sleep. She climaxed so strongly, moaning his name under frenzied stabbing! Proving its recumbency was all an act, his cock nodded agreement at his pride. Next time—yes, there would be a next time and it would commence just as soon as he got that drink—he would make it last much longer, no matter how much she begged him to pull the pin. Waking her with his mouth between her legs seemed an excellent way to begin. Yes. Bring her off before he considered sliding into the orally-prepared depths for a sweet and sound to temper their first and furious.

Another smile—he couldn't keep the bloody thing off his face—tugged along with his cock. Tongue shuffling through a mouth made drier by the notion of his new lover's rare flavor, he reckoned it prudent to bring an additional drink when he returned, because if his tongue's anticipated antics had any say, Helena would likely need one as well.

He made his way down the hall, continuing to idly plan. He would skip work, if she let him stay. It used to be he only needed an hour of sleep. More and more, however, anything less than six made for an extremely cranky Alex. He hated the bloody job anyway, so choosing between extra money and time with Helena was not difficult. Even exhausted, he could bear a day of really getting to know her, Biblically and otherwise. No, screw a day, he would hope for a week and if Marla didn't like it, she could bloody well bugger off and fire him. He licked his lips yet again. Right. That drink.

Enjoying the night-shrouded house while possibilities frolicked in his head like a slideshow of Bacchus' favorite

holidays, at the bottom of the stairs he headed for the kitchen. The fridge light presented bottles of water, one which he guzzled straight away.

Second container in hand, he wandered into the living room, part of the moon's painting. Dawn yet a few hours off by the angle of that artist, its glow neatly avoided the main deck. Covered by the porch above it, furniture boulders sat in pools of ink, as if he were inside a cavern looking out.

Muffled waves pounded, beckoned a closer inspection of their glow. Stepping from sterile central air into the humid sea breeze was like bathing in fresh sex. Immediately coated in a salty tang, Alex leaned on the rail, absorbing the surf's beat. He wondered if taking a shower would wake Helena and, if it did, whether she would be amenable to joining him.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

The baritone question overlaid images of Helena soaping her breasts and, used to voices from nowhere as he was, Alex twitched in surprise. Swinging to face the form concealed by shadow, he exclaimed, "Sweet Christ! I didn't know anyone was about."

"Figured I'd scare the shit out of you no matter what I said."

"You've got that bloody right. And yes, it is beautiful." Manners thoroughly ingrained, he held out his hand. "I'm Alex. Reckon you're Joan's brother?"

The shadow's grip was strong. "Yep. Sam."

"Nice to meet you, Sam."

"Likewise. Don't mind me, I'm here for the sunrise."

"It should be sensational."

"Always is. I take it you're my sister's newest conquest?"  
Alex chuckled at the apt description of Leo. "No, suppose I'm Helena's."

Sam's surprise a torch in the dark, he said, "Helena's?"  
"Helena's." Not knowing what else to say and aware he wore nothing more than her too-small robe, he edged toward the door. "I should see if she's awake."

More surprise from the unseen man. "She's asleep?"

"Yeah, I was about to—"

Sam hooked a chair with his foot and heaved it alongside his lounge. "Nah, don't. Have a seat."

Alex shot a glance at the house.

"Let her sleep, man. She doesn't get much of it."

"No?"

"Insomnia. Has a hard time shutting down her head. Something we have in common. Smoke?" A pack appeared out of the dark mass.

"All right then, ta." He sat, tugged the robe over his thighs and added another knot to the belt. A soft snort from his companion could only be interpreted as derision. Alex bristled. "Are you all right, mate?" he asked, digging out a cigarette.

"Just my never quiet brain speeding off somewhere. How did you meet Laney?"

A benign question as questions go, yet it increased Alex's defensiveness. "My mate's out with your sister. They set us up."

A louder snort. "Good old Joanie, taking an interest in everybody's love life."

"I like her."

"Joanie or Laney?"

"Joan. Helena as well, of course."

"Of course."

*What in bloody hell is with this bloke?* Aidan demanded.

Helena's self-appointed guardian went on, "Did you have a good time?"

Aidan sniffed. *I'd think the answer is quite evident, considering those bloody bunnies you're wearing.*

Ignoring his pseudo-conscience, Alex said, "We went to the drive-ins past Tuckahoe. And I suppose," he craned his neck to look at the driveway, where an enormous pick-up truck dwarfed a yellow VW, "since my auto's not here, Joan and Leo are still out."

"Well then, since your arse seems to be stuck here," Sam said in the fake-Brit accent Americans were so fond of adopting, "I suppose the night's been a smashing success all around."

Alex simmered, but understanding coalesced in the center of his irritation. Helena had been the bloke's sister-in-law. Naturally Sam would be protective, territorial even. But in the complexities of male interpersonal relations, Alex also needed to set a clear boundary, casually indicate he and Helena did more than fuck.

So he said, "Was Jared your older or younger brother?"

"I was born first," Sam snapped, rising from the dark like a ghost ship. The moonlight revealed Big Brother stood easily over six foot, with a powerful build that defied even the night's ability to diminish it. Clad in naught but ragged cut-

offs, as he leaned over the rail toward the beach, Sam's back was awash with an indistinguishable tattoo spreading from shoulder-to-shoulder and neck-to-waist.

Scanning the horizon, the painted man flicked his cigarette into the dunes. "Did Laney tell you about Jared, or did Joan?"

"Helena."

"She must like you." He straightened, ruffled his hair and abruptly headed for the door. "I'm on the ass-end of this sunrise," he tossed over his shoulder, "and I need a drink."

*Bloody hell! Aidan spluttered. Did you have to mark your territory with that squirt of information? The fella's only brother died too young. No surprise he might be touchy about it.*

"Bugger off," Alex muttered, "and torment Three."

Silence from Aidan said respite had been granted. However, it didn't keep Alex from feeling the right ocker as interior lights spilled onto the deck and he watched Sam shrug into a t-shirt.

He followed Sam inside. "Mate, I apologize," he said as the bloke produced a bottle of Jack Daniels. "I should have thought before I asked about your brother."

"It's okay, man." He downed a shot of amber fluid with a gulp and refilled the glass. "I usually don't—I was thinking about him before you came out. It left me a little raw."

Sam was huge. He appeared to be about Helena's age and his black hair contained just the random gray Alex wished for at the drive-in. Along with an imposing presence that had nothing to do with his size, he was ruggedly masculine, with startling blue eyes the polar opposite of his sister's.



Blue eyes which took on an extra shine as he fired down a third shot.

Not wanting to add to Sam's discomfort, Alex turned to a group of photographs and hand-colored sketches adorning the far wall. He scanned the pictorial history of the Madison family in Kodak moments as well as pastels and charcoal. The drawings displayed impressive skill. Easy to recognize a younger Helena and Joan at a fancy do. Another depicted them even younger, laughingly held by Sam. "Who did these?" he asked, tracing Helena's smile under glass.

"Me."

"You're quite good."

"Maybe once. I copy from pictures. Mom likes that, so up they go. I used to think I'd do originals, but I'm not much for the tortured artist role."

"Da was a sculptor," he nodded at the drawing, "though a piss-poor one by his own account. The art world did kiss his arse a bit when he was young." Understanding sincere, Alex followed the lines of the hand resting possessively on Helena's shoulder. "Eventually he took to farming to make a crust. Said it kept him honest about beauty if he fought nature's version every day."

Next in line, a laughing Helena, her head tilted to gaze adoringly at Sam. A Helena drawn ecstatic and happy.

"I did that one the summer I was eighteen," Sam said, "when we were still young enough to think we had all the answers."

Uncomfortably aware of being observed, a troublesome stone plopped into Alex's stomach. He moved to the next

frame, thought about Helena asleep upstairs, how warm she must be.

Sam read his mind. "Oh, go ahead, wake her up."

"No, not if she doesn't sleep as well as she should."

A frown flitted over the older man's face and evaporated. "Alex," his eyes filled with ice, the reverse-brand striking his meaning deeper than speech, "you be careful with her. She's not as together as she lets on."

"No worries, mate. I'll take very good care." He held Sam's stare, knowing his eyes would bolster his sincerity. He also used the opportunity to take full assessment of his challenger. Brave, he was. Stupid, he was not. No question the large man examining him like prey could incapacitate most blokes with little trouble, and a friendly acknowledgement of that seemed prudent. Although, if push ever did come to shove, Alex would stand firm. "Besides," he added, "for certain if I were to treat a woman badly, Mum would hear of it through the mother's grapevine, and make me repent in ways more painful than you can imagine."

Helena's watchful chaperone laughed, ice melting to reveal sparkling gems that insisted on a smile in return. "You and me both, man. I got a mom exactly like that. Does yours have a cast iron skillet bigger than your head?"

Alex grinned. "Walking stick as thick as your arm. Seriously, I know what you're saying. It took us an age to get over losing Da."

"I'm really sorry to hear that. But I'm glad you understand. Still, if you don't play fair with Laney, it's me you'll deal with. You clear on that?"

"Clear as thunder, mate." Despite an overly direct approach, Alex liked the fella's principled attitude. "That said, we're straight up then?"

Sam nodded and smiled—a bit sadly it seemed. "I know I'm an overbearing bastard. But I say what I think and I happen to care about Helena as much as I do Joan."

As suspected, a brother's proprietary claim. "No worries."

"I appreciate your being straight, Alex. If you ever need me to return the favor, just say the word, okay?"

"All right, Sam, I will."

Tense alpha-dog rituals settled, Alex returned to the gallery. Joan in cap and gown, some sort of graduation. "Helena's lucky to have you looking out for her," he said. "Brothers being what they are, I'm certain Jared would appreciate it." He stopped at Sam in military garb. "Which service were you in? I can't get American uniforms straight."

"Marine Corps," he said cheerfully, a slur now apparent. "I'm one lethal motherfucker."

"Yeah? What did you do?"

"Force Recon."

Half-expecting an answer designed to strike fear into the heart of any Romeo, the simple answer surprised him. *Sounds suspicious to me*, Aidan opined. Although Alex wasn't entirely certain what Force Recon encompassed either, he supposed the elite group explained Sam's Rambo stance right well.

"Anyway," Sam's whiskey-colored cheer stained his cheeks, "are you Brit or Aussie? I know some of both. Good grunts, all of 'em, fucking excellent men."

The ability to recognize the origins of his accent heaved respect for Sam up a notch, and Alex answered while he continued his pictorial trip. "American actually. I was raised over the Pond and beyond." He paused at Helena hugging a younger version of the former Marine in football gear and pounced on the common playing field. "Football, yeah? I'm learning. I played rugby. We use a bit less padding than you lads, but there are a few sim..." Words dissolved in the acid filling his throat. A photograph of Helena displaying wedding bands arm-in-arm with the man absorbing J.D. behind him, shocked Alex in ways few things ever had. Barely realizing he turned, he gaped at Sam—who had dispensed with a glass and drank from the bottle.

"What?" He wiped his mouth on his arm.

Alex gestured at the wedding picture and stuttered, "You and her—are you—what—"

"That's not me," Sam said bitterly, "it's Jared. We are—were twins."

"Oh!" Relief came with a rush. What should have been the most obvious explanation never entered his mind. "Threw me for a loop, it did."

"Even Mom couldn't tell us apart most of the time."

Alex wanted to run upstairs. How did Helena manage, faced with a walking, talking duplicate of the man she loved? His chest tightened under a vise that closed his lungs with the answer, an answer he had been on the wrong side of once: She did it with isolation. With a frozen heart. She used them to keep her soul in one piece, insulate herself from despair. Best find a polite way to extricate from the conversation and

follow the impulse to hold her tight. "I know what you mean, mate. My—"

A gurgle of water came from above and Sam interrupted, "It's now or never, man—she's awake."

\* \* \* \*

The candles threatened to puddle. "Where did you go?" Helena asked as low as the flames. "I missed you."

"I needed a cold drink," Alex responded just as softly. "There's wax everywhere."

"I was going to blow them out, but it got cold in the bathroom." She shook a finger at him. "And you took my robe. But I'll forgive you. You look great in bunnies."

"Ta, though I wager it looks twice as sexy on you." The swell of her behind teased him through the sheet. Alex licked his lips. "Don't move. I'll get the candles." Placing the water bottle next to the bed, he unlashed the robe and headed for the biggest pool.

Helena stretched with a feline growl, switched on a lamp and examined him with bright interest. Hair a ruffled mane, she looked like a kitten fresh from a nap, full of energy and ready to play.

"Mmm," she purred as he conquered the last tiny flame, "a little light on the subject makes everything much more interesting."

"It does at that." He made a show of dropping his eyes to the flesh swelling above the sheet and started to strip off the robe.

"No, don't." A husky request. "It's a beautiful tease. Come over here." She tossed the wrinkled sheet aside.

Alex feasted on the sight of her breasts, their dark nipples fat and erect. Without thought, he strode across the room. Cupping her face, he turned her eyes to his, understanding what he mistook for hidden fear. The touch of sadness, well covered or not, didn't diminish the impact of Helena's eyes. God, they were gorgeous, hypnotic—enigmas so deep he may never fathom their depths.

She lowered her lashes and ran a palm across his stomach. "Beautiful," she murmured, "I love a tight tummy." The other hand slid between skin and chenille while she rubbed her face over the furry stretch of his abdomen. Single-minded bugger that it was, and obviously not wanting to be missed, his penis rudely announced its presence by butting against her neck.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" She dipped her head and, ignoring the blooming erection, cupped his balls.

"Move over, sweeting, I'll show you." Armed with illumination through Sam, Alex wanted to cuddle her, ease back into their intimacies. However, she neatly circumvented his intention by tonguing his dangling gems.

With a hiss, he shot fully upright in the space of a breath. Yet another awkward moment averted by Helena getting straight to the point. It seemed as though, blood kin or not, the entire Madison family had a habit of being brutally direct.

Helena grasped his saluting member, drew her tongue upward from the base with excruciating deliberation. In a sing-song that hinted no intention of doing anything of the sort, she asked, "Do you really want me to stop?"

Breathless with anticipation, he groaned when she reached the head. "Perhaps," he said as she lapped him cattishly. "I wanted to go first on the oral exam."

Her words brushed his swollen flesh like a second pair of lips. "Oh well. Early bird gets the worm."

Laughter bubbled in his chest—abruptly corked when her lips slid around his greedy glans. Sucking gently, her tongue explored its tiny opening, filling his balls with a yearning tidal pool, urging the pleasant ache to spread from his groin and trickle down his legs.

Bit by bit, she took more of his length inside, until with every swirl of her tongue, his abdomen became a rigid pulse of need. He slid his hands into her hair, resisted pushing into the sucking moisture as she drew him so deep, his cockhead encountered resistance. The passage narrowing around the tip of his instrument sent an unexpected shudder through his burdened sac.

Not humping her face like a lunatic was difficult. Helena continued to knead his arse with one hand while the other massaged the semen-tightened spheres between his thighs. As she again attacked the end of his prick, he groaned, spilling the first drops of excitement onto her tongue. Worried he may be pulling her hair, he pried his pleasure-knotted fingers loose, petting her instead.

But when she finally began a quickened pace, the throbbing in his privates spread, coating him in a sweltering blanket of yearning. Finding his hands once again tightly wrapped in the thick mass of her hair, he tried to concentrate

on caressing her shoulders with a bit more delicacy. "I'm sorry."

She peered through her lashes curiously, though her hands continued their work. "Sorry about what?"

"I didn't mean to—" She interrupted by squeezing out yet another groan. Rapid movement, perfect pressure, she hadn't forgotten what he liked. Best keep his mind on things or he would shoot much too quickly. "I thought I was pulling your hair," he tried again, "and I don't want to grab your head and shove my—" Explanation dissolved as she compressed his tender knob, firmly rubbing the ridge on the underside, setting pleasure pounding in mimicry of his heartbeat.

"Sweet Christ, that's good," he growled. "Do it again?"

Her laughter trilled, bounced off his abdomen. "I'm doing several things. Which one exactly?"

"There," he directed when she touched the appropriate area.

"That's your sulcus," she said. "Where the glans meets the restraining membrane left after circumcision."

Reminded of her profession, he chuckled. "Ta. For the lesson."

"You're welcome. As for my hair, you weren't hurting me," she continued in her matter-of-fact way. "Go ahead, hang onto my head, if you want." She paused to run her tongue over his hard-pumped flesh and bestow a second of extreme suction. "I'm definitely not adverse to aggressive blow-jobs and I'll damn sure let you know if you go too far."

The casual suggestion shot a surge through Alex's aching rod. This say-precisely-what-you-think without worrying



about a negative response was bloody brilliant! Arse clenched in agreement, he swore he went even harder. In the name of full compliance with Helena's open mind, the best—the only—way to proceed was to join in to the best of his ability.

So he promptly announced the first thing that came to mind. "I'd love to, but if I do that," he drew a thumb over her generous bottom lip, "I'll end up treating your mouth like a pussy."

She groaned, pressed him against her cheek, skin cool against the sensitized meatiness.

Desire made him rasp a caveat of honesty. "Not that it wouldn't be interesting. I've never tried an all-out face fuck."

"Mmm, you have the sexiest voice when you're worked up. You sound like dripping chocolate. Saying stuff like that makes me gooey-wet but when you go and growl it out—I think I just made a puddle on the bed." Kissing and licking his fingers, she captured one and gave it a nip. "C'mon, boy-o, don't be shy. Go with the flow and do it."

With no further ceremony, she slipped his column between her lips and waited. Alex's thighs promptly spasmed, forcing him to lock his knees. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't simply start ramming. He carefully pushed a bit, judged his depth. Helena moaned encouragement and the vibration sent the quiver in his thighs abroad.

If he did it, he bloody well wanted to see his erection do it, too. Discarding the robe, he grasped Helena's head, took a deep breath, and pushed his prick firmly into her expectant mouth.

Her prolonged groan carried an even stronger bolt of electric lust. Bloody fucking hell, she felt good. Wet, tight as a pussy, with the added extra of her tongue. He couldn't get too carried away, though. He must remember to make it last. No matter how great any of it felt, he wouldn't come until after he set her off with his tongue.

*Explicit commentary!* Aidan scolded, cheerfully ignoring his exile. *Stop thinking, you bloody wanker, and give the girl what she wants.*

"Your mouth is sweeter than raw sugar," he murmured. Edging his staff a bit deeper, he reckoned he had an idea of how far he could penetrate without causing discomfort. "I'm really going to enjoy this, Helena. Here goes." He held her face still, slowly unsheathed. "Harder—suck hard when I pull out." She instantly responded, cheeks collapsing, making him growl with delight. "Yeah, that's the way—that's exactly the way."

Lucky she liked how he sounded worked up. With the increasing sensations radiating from his triple package trickling up the crack of his arse, speech was anything but easy. "Ready for me to fuck your mouth proper?"

She tightened her lips, accompanied a nod with a muffled, unintelligible grumble.

"Mmm, that's lovely. The vibration makes my cock twitch."

Initially, he set a slow, steady pace. Slide in smooth and wet, slide out against the suction. He liked to be sucked hard and strong, until it felt as though he would burst. But her tongue had stopped adding its viewpoint. He knew his smile stretched lewd, but not every day did a bloke receive free

reign and be expected to direct the minutia as well. "Tongue, sweeting, use your tongue."

A groan trilled from his toes as Helena again complied without pause. Pressure threatened to boil into steam. Pumping faster, his crimson cock disappeared and reappeared, sparking a yearning so encompassing, even his nipples throbbed their agony. And the way Helena carried on, her cheeks sinking as he pulled out, bulging when he refilled her obvious hunger!

A forecast tension spiked from his over-filled balls into his stomach. As it crawled through his chest and legs, he found his thighs hard-locked, his arse clenching and releasing in rhythmic sympathy with his penis—until the hummed tremors of Helena's muted moans spurred him towards the pinnacle. Abdomen convulsing, at the present pace only seconds separated his determination from a spurting cock.

Every inch the rutting male, as his pace grew more insistent, Helena's continued willingness amazed him. Lungs struggling to breathe, sheer force of will the only reason he hadn't started firing, he forestalled the inevitable by wandering the farm in his mind, concentrating on the details.

Aidan, unfortunately, was no bloody help whatsoever. *Didn't Da say 'find a woman who's a whore in the bedroom and an angel in the street'?*

Alex's answering laugh a groan, he caught Helena frowning up from her work. Attention again centered on what she was doing to his body, he realized the head of his cock not only plowed through her saliva-lubricated hand, but also wedged briefly into her throat with each thrust. The sudden

compressions were mind-boggling, and damn near ball-draining.

"Fuck, Helena, you're swallowing it," primal lack of restraint made it a snarl, "you're taking every centimeter of the bloody thing!"

Although muted, the pride in her laughter rang clear. Her thighs trembled against his knees. Desperately trying to focus, he realized she stroked herself while he pummeled her mouth, getting off on his prick practically violating her. "Oh yeah, so you like it well and deep, do you? Yes, rub your pussy. Reckon it's sopping wet now—let me taste it. Give me some of that sweet cream."

He was prattling. Most of it nonsense. Not that it made a whit of difference because without hesitation, Helena shoved her soaked fingers into his gasping, babbling mouth. He sucked and licked, the moisture spreading over his face in the frantic tics it took to match her blind rhythm.

Yet she never stopped diddling, simply used her other hand while he continued to guide her and absorb every one of her moans. Hovering on the sane edge of reason, he threw back his head and growled. Sweet Jesus, he never so much as fantasized about using a woman's mouth so thoroughly!

The double input of fucking her face and gobbling liquid sex from her fingers blurred reality, until his brain believed he licked one woman while penetrating another—a powerful psychic shift. Wallowing in the fueled fantasy, he fought not to fall, to eke out a little more before he must cease, or risk his priapatic condition.

Then Helena swapped hands, brought fresh juice to his tongue, and the fruitless dam crumbled with no further notice. He roared under the onslaught, flooded her orifice. Gasping, swallowing, licking, Helena accepted what she wrought, her groans becoming an unbroken keen.

Falling back onto the bed, spreading her shaking legs wide, she continued to caress herself. "Holy hell," she panted, "that was great!" She arched, pushed her hips off the bed, and plunged several fingers into her hungry tunnel. "I'm gonna come. Dear God. Am. I. Ever. Going. To—"

Before she reached her goal, he dove between her legs, pried her hand loose and attacked her clit like a straight-jacketed, gibbering lunatic. So much easier to locate the important bits when a bloke could see what was what.

The fleshy bundle of her clit trapped between his lips, once he had the hard morsel appropriately pinioned, he set about giving it a tongue lashing while sucking for all he was worth. Helena grabbed his hair, pulled him solidly against her flooded apex.

Although she yanked hard enough to sting his scalp, in the midst of her growling commands, he didn't give a bloody damn.

"Oh fuck yes, lick that clit. God, yes, suck it, too—curl my toes, boy-o!"

Her writhing made it difficult to keep his place. Using his teeth for better control, he urged the sensitive center from its hood, carefully locking his jaw. Couldn't chance biting the delicate thing. As much as Helena seemed to enjoy a touch of the raw, he didn't think she would stand for pain.

Clit properly pinioned, he sucked it hard, tongue whipping it again and again. Groping for her breasts, he found a stiff nipple to tug and squeeze.

Helena cried out, hips heaving as he drove two fingers into her body. There could be absolutely no doubt about the state of her passion. Copious lubrication begged for more and with no little astonishment, he discovered she readily, even greedily, accommodated four.

Her moaning string of demands continued while his willingness to follow orders produced increasingly arousing results. "God yes, Alex, do it. Fuck me with those long fingers, 'cause I'm gonna—fuck, Alex, I'm—"

Body rigid for the space of a heartbeat, Helena broke into a shuddering climactic seizure. Even as she quivered and jerked, he gave her no respite. Pinching and pulling her nipples, he sucked the ribbons of pleasure from her cunt and passed beyond, searching for another orgasm.

"Stop, stop, please," Helena pushed his head away, "I'm too sensitive!"

He purposefully ran his tongue around his mouth, savoring her flavor. No delicacy in the world came close to the taste of a fine lover—and as a vintage, like cane-sugar caramel in scotch, Helena was buttery, musky and sweet.

"Only for a moment then. Because I think you can come again, sweeting." What did she call it when he talked like that? Melted chocolate? No, dripping—dripping like she was. He dropped his voice further into his chest, let it rumble from below his diaphragm. "Actually, I know you can come again because I'm certain I can make you come again."

Still catching her breath, she laughed. "Not too proud of yourself there, Mr. Barnes. Remember that old saying: be careful what you wish for 'cause you just might get it."

In response, he slid over her, trapped a nipple in the snare of his teeth.

"No, no, stop, I mean it," giggling, she shoved his shoulders hard, "I can't—have to—bathroom."

He laughed as she jumped out of bed. "Shook things up a bit, yeah? Can't it wait till I've finished with you?"

"Patience," she said, "we're nowhere near done." Hesitating long enough to press a still-hungry kiss on his lips, she scurried into the tiled cave, and closed the door.

Despite the aftermath of his own ripper climax suggesting he close his eyes for a bit of a nap, Alex remained adrenaline-jacked. The only appropriate utterance he could summon was one of Leo's favorites: Fucking-A Skippy, that was fantastic! Helena was bloody brilliant! And they weren't done yet!

Popping out of bed, he switched on another light while his imagination listed all the available flavors contained in the phrase 'not done', racing from Vanilla to Tutti-frutti to Royal Chocolate Fudge, with nuts, and back again.

Trying to be patient, he burrowed back under the blanket, into the warm smell of their bodies and their sex, and fired up a post-coital smoke. He sighed, hoping she wouldn't be gone long. Baffling, why females and bathrooms were always a time-consuming combination.

To keep from rudely following her into the loo, Alex gave the room a curious once-over. Neat, Helena wasn't. Pieces of her scattered everywhere. Perfect. His housekeeping skills

leaned toward organized disaster as well. In fact, neat-freak Leo complained about it daily.

Then he spied the framed photo on her dressing table. Helena and Jared. At least he supposed it was Jared. Sam well on his way to supremely plonked came to mind and he itched for a closer look. The urge to touch things to see them more clearly was a habit developed in childhood with his father's sculptures, but he didn't want Helena sailing out of the toilet to discover her lover caressing a photograph of her dead husband—even less find him trying to decide which twin it depicted.

Squinting at the thing, he studied it as best he could from the bed. She obviously still mourned Jared, even after half a decade. In a parent-child situation, he could understand death might deal unrecoverable blows, but not husband and wife. Married people had to think about those sorts of things, didn't they? Had to talk about their ends, plan for it. Mum had no doubts what Da wanted when he died. 'Because one of you has to go first,' she said, 'fact of life, that.'

So what was it? Had the accident been unusually horrible? Or like Mum and Da, simply an honest-to-heaven soul mate thing that left Helena reluctant to grow past his death?

He suspected the truth lay passed out somewhere in Windspray at that very moment. Sam served too keen a reminder. Sad that, for both of them. Sam couldn't help an accident of birth any more than Alex could, and neither could Helena.



Whatever her reasons, Alex only knew a desire to banish her grief. And if they connected so simply, so wondrously, in bed, no reason their hearts couldn't do, as well.

Optimistic, perhaps. But then optimism was a trait he inherited from his father, even though his sire's had worn thin in the end.

Aidan agreed. *Even a simple abiding friendship could be grand. At the very least, it would erase the last of Miranda's bitter tang and perhaps ease Helena's heart into acceptance.*

Indeed it could. As Alex well knew, there was ice, and there was permafrost.

To remedy Helena's emotional isolation, he would remind her what a cherishable person she was. Being treated like a rare individual boosted a woman's self-esteem. Mum said so and Alex reckoned she knew what she was talking about.

A happy giggle startling and loud, he stifled its followers in the pillows. Helena shattered Miranda's power and set him free. He would do nothing less than return the gift.

\* \* \* \*

An urgent tapping invaded Alex's sleep. Before his eyes were fully open, Helena had pulled on her robe. Door cracked, she mumbled, "Joanie? What'sa matter?"

"I'm really sorry, Laney," Joan sounded exasperated, "I didn't want to wake you, but Sam's stumbling drunk. And if I don't kill the asshole, Mom will. Can you help me, please?"

Helena muttered a oath. "When did he get here?"

"I have no idea."

"Sonofabitch," Helena fired a glance toward the bed, "let me get dressed."

"Put shoes on," Joan's voice headed toward the stairs, "whatever you do, no bare feet."

Alex retrieved his jeans from under the bed. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. I'll be back in a few minutes. Joanie's brother's here."

"I know."

She stopped dressing, jaw so tight her lips bled white. "You know?"

"He was downstairs when I went. Seems a decent bloke."

"Yeah," she shook her head despite the affirmative, "but sometimes he's hard to handle. One of these days I'm going to tattoo 'cantankerous when intoxicated' on his forehead."

"I'll come down as well."

"No, really, he listens to me. You just—"

"If he needs managing, he's twice the size of you and Joan. At least I'm able to look him in the eye. Be sensible, Laney."

"Don't call me that," she slashed, sharp as a razor. Then blunted with control, "Please."

"Sorry. I heard them—"

"Them I can't stop, you I can. Jesus fucking Christ," she snarled as her fly jammed halfway up. "Swear to God," she muttered with pure venomous conviction, "if I ever so much as *look* at another twin, I hope somebody strangles me or shoots me or cuts off my head, just to save me the trouble of killing myself."

Alex froze. Aidan cooed, *Uh-oh, mate.*

Jeans finally fastened, Helena caught his deer-in-headlights impersonation and her question dripped annoyance. "Don't tell me you're a twin."

"No, I'm not a twin," he stuttered, "but I—"

"That's a relief. What was that idiot doing when you came upstairs?"

*I don't think now's the time to explain me,* Aidan said.

Alex couldn't agree more and decided to handle one difficulty at a time. "Pounding through a bottle of JD." Heeding Joan, he pulled on his sneakers. "He shouldn't be drinking without supervision then?"

"Not whiskey," Helena snorted, "whiskey makes him stupid."

Joan's scolding reached them at the bottom of the stairs.

"Stop it, Sam, I'm begging you! Leave the rest alone."

"I'm fuckin' sick of lookin' at 'em, Joanie—fuckin' sick."

Rounding the corner into the living room, Alex stopped short even though Helena surged ahead.

In an overstuffed chair in the corner, Leo pretended he wasn't concerned by Sam lurching around, evidently intent on destroying the Madison gallery. With the sort of methodical, deliberate bullishness only those full as a chook can summon, the bloke ripped his art from the wall and ground both glass and frame into the carpet. A single, unlaced shoe served evidence that Sam had employed some inebriated premeditation. A bloodied bare foot, however, attested that his logic hadn't gone further than the immediate goal.

"Samuel Joseph Madison!" Helena marched straight through the mine field and hauled her brother-in-law from amid the carnage. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Laney," he howled, "tell her! I can't—can't—"

"Knock it off. Right this second."

"Nope, not done."

"You're done!" She examined the tattered gallery with chagrin. "Your mother will cry when she sees this. You know that, don't you?"

Her remark seemed to stun enlightenment into Sam's fog. "Oh," he mumbled thickly, "I didn't think—"

"No, you didn't think," she snapped and gestured at the only drawing that remained. "The least you could've done was start at this end. You know I hate that one."

Like Vegemite melting into gravy, a grin that dared Helena to try and stop him spread across Sam's face. In a flourish of swift grace right surprising for his condition, he reached past his blocker, snatched, dropped and crunched the last sketch.

Helena wasn't amused. "You're such a bastard."

"My Madison curse," Sam said with merry pride. Joan appeared with a first-aid kit and he winked at her. "But that's why she loves us, right, Little Sister?"

Muttering disgust, Helena none too gently shoved his bulk onto the sofa. Peering at the bottom of his foot, she scolded, "Serve you right if you need stitches. They'll make you sober up before they do it, too."

As Sam's verbal spanking got underway, Alex sidled up to Leo. "Hiya, mate. What happened?"

"I'm not sure," Leo lowered his voice a notch, "we were just having a beer and talking. Then Sam—he's Joan's brother—said something about their brother who died. I go to the can and when I get back, he's got a shoe on and, well..." He shrugged, indicated the family crime scene. "You got me, dude. I don't know why the pictures. Do you?"

"Maybe. I'll explain later. Where you been, have any fun?"

"For sure. I won fifty bucks in Atlantic City."

"I'm sorry, guys," Joan interrupted. "Here's your keys, Alex. Do you mind?"

"Oh, certainly." Privacy was clearly needed, though he wasn't about to leave without speaking to Helena. "But—"

"It's okay," she said, "Leo has our number."

"All right, Joan. I'm sorry."

She patted his cheek. "There's no need to be sorry, Alex. It's not your fault."

While Joan and Leo exchanged good-byes, Helena continued to murmur sternly to Sam, her attention fixed on the bleary face cupped in her hands. Alex tried to get her attention to no avail. The two of them may as well have been alone.

About to walk across the room and physically intervene, when she pressed her forehead to Sam's with longstanding intimacy, Alex's heart tumbled into a suffocating cadence. Husband's twin or not, a woman doesn't touch a man the way Helena touched Sam unless they know each other inside-out, proverbially and literally.

Aidan launched into excuses. None of them could erase what Alex bloody well knew to be the truth. While his gonads

attempted to crawl into his stomach, his self-berating thankfully drowned out Aidan's hollow reasonings.

He had missed the mark. Again. They had their friendly romp as far as Helena was concerned, and he couldn't stand around waiting if she didn't want, or care, to say good-bye.

In the driveway, he was halfway in the car and readjusting the seat when Helena called from the deck. "Boy-o?"

Alex faced the execution, ready for the crushing kiss-off.

In the early light, she looked brittle enough to shatter with a single word. "Tomorrow at one," she said thickly, "remember?"

Dread dropped and hope rose, making him giddier than fifteen rides on the Wild Mouse roller-coaster did. Heart aching from its confusion workout, he nodded. "Of course. One o'clock sharp."

"Because we don't have to." She tried to smile. It barely held.

"No worries. I'll be there."

"I'm really sorry, Alex. This isn't how..."

Her face crumpled and he closed the gap in three strides, hugged her over the rail. Kissing her forehead, he smelled bourbon. "I don't have to go. Do you want me to stay?"

"No, I'm okay. First thing you need to know about me," she mustered her shield into place, "is I cry a lot. But I've also got thousands in Kleenex stock."

He laughed because she wanted him to. "All right, straight up."

She rubbed her face in his hair. "Thank you."

"There's nothing to thank me for," his twitching lips belied his solemnity, "it's me who should say thanks."

"Go home, ya bohunk, get some sleep." She headed for the sliding doors, where she stopped and added more forcefully, "Something tells me you're going to need it."

As they drove through town on Central Avenue, a humming Leo fiddled with the radio, until he broke into song and promptly drowned the chipper DJ. "K-I-S-S-I-N-G, Alex and Helena sittin' in a tree. First comes love, then comes marriage. Then comes Alex in a baby—"

Alex aimed a friendly whack to the side of his head. "Don't be too pleased with yourself there, mate." Almost exactly what Helena had said to him a few hours ago. No doubt his grin appeared just as insolent as Leo's.

"Hey!" Leo punched his shoulder. "No beating on the Matchmaker. It's been a long time since you did better than me, dude. I can't help if that makes me happy."

"You're an unholy girlie brat."

"Yep, yep, yep," Leo said, his mocking ebullient, "and enjoyin' meself immensely, mate. Seriously, I took one look at that ass and I knew you'd like her."

"Fancy yourself a psychoanalyst now?"

"Maybe. Just may be."

"Then what do you make of Sam, Dr. Freud?"

"What the hell was that anyway?"

"Helena's husband died. Apparently, he and Sam were twins."

"Oh. Well. That explains everything. Not."

"Remember Dr. Clark?"

"The psych prof who studies twins."

"Remember why she was there?"

"Oh! Yeah. A different reason but sort of the same. Is that what happened? Did you say something?"

"I didn't, actually."

Leo responded with perfect aplomb. "I don't know. Maybe it's just another great example of how my family's not the only fucked up one in the universe."

"Too right." Leo's wry humor made sense. To think Helena's family dynamics were less complicated than average bordered on stupidity.

First, he knew all about ties that bind in baggage, especially the bags siblings packed for you. Secondly, of course Helena and Sam shared a bond with Jared's death at the center. Wife and Twin. Along with parent and child, Alex reckoned they were the strongest of bonds. Simply his bloody imagination to believe any relationship needed to exist beyond that.

Many perfectly normal things seemed wrong or even completely mad from outside looking in. How many strangers stopped in the road to gape at his father's sculptures? The graceful, curved monoliths dedicated to nurture and nature dotted the farm's wheat fields and, in the middle of nowhere as they were, it must certainly appear insane to the unsuspecting.

Driving along the dawn-deserted road leading home, the sand-blasted beige macadam seemed smoother than usual. All speculation aside, Alex cared about only one thing, and for certain the only one thing that mattered:



Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

Helena wanted to see him again.

## **Chapter 6—Cassidy and The Kid**

Tortured by the brutal morning sun, Helena groped for her sunglasses, dipping onto the road's rough berm in the process. Punch-drunk tired, she struggled to get the glasses perched over bleary sockets, excruciatingly aware of every year she racked up on earth.

Despite the forecast of temperatures in the high nineties by noon, the beach beckoned with a false breeze. After a shower she would settle into a sandy womb, drift blissfully on the melody of the waves and sleep under a mantle of sweetest exhaustion. Six solid hours and she would be fresh as laundry hung out to dry, with plenty of time to get ready for the party.

Laughing, she wriggled like a smitten teenager. Insomnia lately cured, the advent of sound sleep was almost as tasty as thoughts of the stamina-ridden lover she reluctantly left in bed.

To think it all started when she examined Alex's hands at dinner. They were perfect. Solid, broad palms. Thick, graceful fingers. Hands that struck her as masculine, intuitive. She had immediately wanted them to cup her face, explore her breasts, slide over her stomach, and prepare the way for a meatier appendage.

Kissing his palm hadn't been an impulse, it had been a requirement.

Then at the drive-in, after he told her about his broken heart, she wanted to comfort him. A passionate interlude that

would mean little to either of them beyond confirmation of being alive—even if it meant breaking her self-imposed vow.

Their age difference made her initially hesitant but from the second he took sleeping with her as a matter requiring serious consideration, everything Alex did made him all the more attractive. He was so cautious after the intensity of their kiss, so concerned about the semantics of the situation. Not to mention his dismay when she tried to explain her discomfort. She had mistaken him for an awkward youngster searching for emotional footing. She thought sex would be good simply because she could give him back whatever confidence that evil woman took away.

With, of course, 'took away' being the operative phrase. Just because a boatload of fearlessness wasn't immediately evident, that didn't mean it never existed, nor wouldn't return if invited nicely. Should have known better. She was old enough to know better. To assume he was an unsophisticated boy just because he was a dozen years younger screamed arrogance. Idiocy at its finest. That Alex turned out to be a considerate, accomplished and sexually mature man shouldn't have been a surprise, but Alex in bed was like coming home to a houseful of friends throwing you a birthday party.

And, God! The way he jabbered away, not only during the main event, but before, during, after, in between. Jared had been a talker, too, although his words were usually aimed at satisfying his own kinks. Nope, when it came to pleasing her brain, nothing her husband or anyone else ever spouted could compare to Alex's tenacity and enthusiasm.

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

The first thing Helena noticed when she pulled up to Windspray was Sam occupying her favorite blanket on the sand. So much for a solitary slouch. As she emerged from the car, slug-heat drooled by, siphoning her elation out to sea.

Like all good parties, a month from now Alex would be a fading memory and she wished that didn't make her want to cry. Bad enough she allowed herself to care about him. Reprehensible that she let him care about her. He was just getting to the point of really rolling in life. He didn't need a woman already dragging a wagon train of excess steamer trunks. He needed to find a nice girl to build a fresh Conestoga with, set off to catch up with those going Westward Ho, not join them in the middle of the wild lands.

By following impulse, she would wound someone else. Again.

When would she stop storing up if onlys like they had value? If only, after Sammy's destructo spree, she hadn't caught Alex desperately reaching with his eyes. If only she hadn't swallowed the lump his silent plea raised. If only she had stayed focused on teary blues, instead of thinking about how she might never see those hazel eyes again. If only that thought hadn't filled her with panic—with a welling desperation that consumed common sense.

If only she could have let Alex go without so much as good-bye.

Shoulda, coulda, woulda. She didn't think anything through. She didn't consider the consequences of her actions. She once again counted on the future being as easy to

manage as a change of clothes, and Alex would pay the price for her voluntary blindness.

And that was not her imagination. Because he dropped hints about continuing their relationship past summer's bright optimism every chance he got, while she knew anything budding would only wither in winter's reality. Alex had no inkling of the perverse depths she was capable of, and if he did, he sure wouldn't be so hot to hang onto her.

She dumped her purse on the kitchen counter with a soft snort.

"Damn," Joan handed her a cup of coffee, "I was going to say 'look what the cat dragged in' but even a starving one wouldn't bother."

"Thanks. Love you too. Do I really look bad?"

"Terrible," her friend tsk-tsked, "like you've been pummeled within an inch of your life."

"I have." It had taken such effort to leave Alex—Alex's begging eyes—in bed. If her bones didn't ache like any self-respecting matron's should, she may have let him entice her into another round.

"Oh man," Joan moaned, "go ahead, rub salt in my wounds."

"Still haven't bagged Leo?"

"Nope, but we talked about it and I let him off the hook. I think he was relieved. The poor kid seemed to think he aimed too high or some horseshit."

"That's a shame."

"Nah." Joan's shrug said it really wasn't. "As friends we're having tons of fun."

Helena's mind wandered back to Alex. She watched the sun rise with her head on his chest, listening to his heart. Was he thinking about her while he got ready for work? "Kind of switched places, didn't we, Joanie? I got the fling and you got the friend."

"I'd say 'lucky you' but then I'd have to turn an appropriate shade of green." She sighed like a Prom Queen. "Are you going to admit you're falling head over ass for him? You have to know he's crazy about you."

A chill reminder Helena shoved impatiently away. Things were the way things were and she was well past the point where they could be fixed. To change the subject, she said, "He quit the pizza place, you know."

"How come?"

"Said he had enough saved, wanted to enjoy the last two weeks of freedom." Not a total lie. Alex actually said he wanted to spend every second together they could.

"That explains it. Leo says he's scared to use his own bathroom without knocking." After a pause which reaped no gossip benefit, Joan tried a dainty bait. "Something about not expecting to find you both in the shower?"

"Nosy."

"Leo or me?"

"The pair of you."

"Have you talked about September?"

"He's circling, I'm side-stepping." She didn't want to think about September. Picturing herself in her classroom, the sex ed teacher who practiced only the abstinence she preached was too depressing to contemplate. But allowing Alex to

believe they had a future would lead to an even more difficult position: If she gave him what he wanted just to make him happy, he would end up hating her for it. And that thought couldn't be contemplated either. The first scenario she could deal with, the second, she could not.

She said to Joan, "It wouldn't be a good idea anyway."

"Why not?"

Helena wanted to snarl, 'because I'm paying for my sins'. "Look," she tried to sound reasonable, "he knows where I stand. He knows I'm not looking for a relationship. It's been great but I'm going back to real life."

"Just because you're not looking doesn't mean one hasn't found you."

"Stop right there."

"SCC is barely a half hour from us."

"Leave it, please."

"You can't think his age is a problem or you wouldn't be—"

"Age is immaterial. He's a nice guy but next week we go our separate ways and it's over. Just," she said with resolve, "the way I want it." As her sister-in-law fully divined the lie, Helena dropped her eyes. "You just don't understand."

"No. I don't. Look at yourself." Brown eyes narrowed, she pointed to a mirror inside the front door. "I mean, really *look* at yourself. Then tell me that like you mean it."

"What? Dark circles and ratty hair means I'm in love with him?"

"No. What I mean is—"

"Because all that means is I'm too fucking old to be boffing buff babes barely beyond boyhood!"

The accidental alliteration hung in the air before dissipating into burgeoning grins.

"Whoa." Joan snickered. "Try repeating that five times."

"I don't mean to be pissy. I'm tired, that's all. I like him, Joanie, I do. More than that..."

Back to the matter, Joan stubbornly continued, "All I'm trying to say is, as much as I loved you and Jared together, I never saw you like this. You're really happy and it looks good on you."

"There are too many complications," Helena said with a catch. "He has every intention of staying in Jersey after college, for one."

"The only complication is you. You're being offered a second chance and you're too afraid to let go of the past long enough to grab hold of it. And I'll be God-damned if I understand."

"Because love died hard," the closest truth she could offer her friend, "and nobody can force me to get over it. Nobody."

"Listen to what you just said: Died. Past tense. It's been five years, Helena."

"Why don't you get all over Sam like this? He's no better off, but you leave him alone. We can't all be as practical as you, Joan, and just turn our hurt off."

"Pot shots won't work. We're talking about you. Not me. Not Sam. Who, incidentally, I understand. He lost his mirror self."

"And I lost my life as sure as if I'd been in that fucking truck, too."



"Maybe," Joan said reasonably, "but maybe not. Jared was your friend, then your lover. This time it's the other way around. I can't explain it, but Alex has more of you showing than Jared ever saw."

"Don't," she pleaded, at a loss to explain how backward the statement was, "I can't, Joanie. I just can't."

"Yes, you can. You never know, it could be everything you had before was preparation for something else that's meant to be."

Knowing the unadulterated truth of Joan's second unintentional blow, Helena couldn't find enough strength for an argument that left her searching for cover. As much as she loved her sister-in-law, she couldn't explain anything to her satisfaction. None of it. She couldn't bear to lose Joanie, too. "Yes," she said miserably, "it is something else entirely. It's two people who can't maintain anything past a fling."

Joan's sharp retort made her wince. "Only if you're stupid enough to believe that, because you fit like kid gloves. Everybody can see it. Hell, even Leo thinks so."

"Please tell me Leo isn't badgering Alex."

"I don't know what Leo says to Alex, but I'm saying you better think long and hard before you turn your back on this man, or you will regret it."

Helena steeled. No reason to be angry at Joan's ignorance. "Then there will have to be one more regret added to my list, and one more won't make much difference."

"What if it's number one?"

"Can't happen, Joanie," she choked, "number one's already written."

"God honey," Joan wrapped her in a hug, "let it go or it's going to kill you, I swear. Shit happens. It hits the fan and—"

"Sprays you so thick, daylight's a dream," Sam finished from the doorway, tearful eyes proving he heard a good deal of their conversation.

"Oh Sam," Joan cried, "Sammy, come here." She wrapped him into their bundle. "Jared's gone. He's been gone a long time. There's not a thing we can do about it except learn to live without him."

Helena held onto her friends, hoping to absorb some of Joan's practicality. Of course it didn't work, it never did. Because whoever the author of her life was, they obviously did a really lousy job. Maybe there was an oracle she could petition to get the cosmic writer's ass kicked. Or, at the very least, get the twisted scribe to stop making a habit out of dousing the happiest of Helena Madison's mornings with emotional acid.

\* \* \* \*

Alex arrived three hours late to find Windspray a flaming shrine to Thomas Alva Edison.

*No wonder the phone went unanswered,* Aidan mused as his transport took a quick look around the packed living room. Not spotting Helena, Alex popped into the kitchen like a slice of toast and, finding it relatively empty, heaved a sigh of relief. Crowds weren't on his list of favorite things.

Rescuing a beer, he greeted the other two occupants, "How's it going?"

"Yo," a fella in a shirt proclaiming 'Goose Man' nodded, "frickin' lousy."

"Sorry to hear that."

"It'd be a better party if most of the chicks weren't taken."

"I'm Keith," the second man said. "Don't mind Goose. He's after the mythical sure thing."

"Alex," he said, accepting the proffered hand. Eyeing Keith's glowering companion, he said, "Not a one you can chat up, eh, Goose?"

*Not with that shirt, Aidan observed, may as well read 'Wanker'.*

"Not a hungry beaver in sight," the lanky man muttered. "I wanted a closer look at Joan's friend but it's kinda hard to do when she's got some Robert Redford lookin' motherfucker hanging all over her."

"Ain't it the truth," Keith commiserated, "those green eyes go nowhere but him."

Alex swallowed a bubble of suspicion. "Robert Redford?"

"Shame, too," Goose added, "she's a prime piece of ass."

"Tits out to here." Keith demonstrated a measurement defying both physical and biological law.

The jealousy monster fell under a charge of anger yet Alex managed to keep his face neutral. "Is that all that's stopping you fellas, some pretty bloke?"

Goose snorted, "Well I'm no movie star with an ego."

*No, said Aidan, you're a dingo's dong with an ego bigger than his bullocks.*

Ignoring him, Alex said, "There is one sure way to overcome that difficulty."

"How's that?" Keith asked eagerly.

"Be Paul Newman."

Goose shook his head. "Huh?"

Keith laughed. "Butch and Sundance!"

"What the hell are you guys talkin' about?"

"Where is she?" Alex said. "I'll show you what I mean."

"Oh, I get it. Right. Got'cha now." Goose gave a derisive snort. "Lotsa luck. On the deck, man, you can't miss her. She's the one wrapped in the big dude."

Alex waded into the throng and forged his way to the deck. Furniture removed and lit with paper lanterns, it had been transformed into an impeccable dance floor.

Obviously, the kitchen wankers didn't know tit from tat. The bloke dancing with Helena looked as much like Robert Redford as she looked like Katharine Ross. Sam, of course, and he did have her quite cuddled up.

Despite heat thickened by a dozen couples, Alex went cold. Goose had followed. "See?"

"You might think of women as people, not cows. You'd get a bloody sight further if you did."

"Oh, yeah, like you're an expert," Goose whined, "looks like you—"

Not wanting to hear the rest, Alex headed for Sam and, as the music faded, patted his shoulder. "Hiya, mate. Can I cut in?"

Helena beamed. "Alex!"

"Hey, bud." Sam clapped his back. "We wondered where you were."

"The Pizza Nazi showed up late," his nickname for Marla, "I had to stay."

Helena's green eyes searched his, coaxed the knot in his stomach to fray. She hugged his arm, kissed his cheek. "I'm really happy you made it."

"Me, too," Sam chimed in, "or she'd make me dance all night."

"Oh shut up," she thumped the twin's broad chest, "and get lost."

"Yes, ma'am." He saluted smartly. "The music's my post and it needs changed anyway. Something romantic for you kids?"

"Something slow would be brilliant."

Watching his bulk disappear into the house, Helena said fondly, "He's such a goober."

Possessive snapping teeth rose above the fallow knot and before he realized it, Alex snipped, "You looked the right perfect pair."

"Jealous, boy-o?"

"Suppose I am."

"You're a goober, too—c'mere." Her eyes spoke more comfort than words as she scooped his face into a kiss.

Uncertainties forgotten, Alex sucked her tongue, filled himself with her taste until the background faded into the oblivion of their bodies in a single heartbeat. Nuzzling her ear, he teased its lobe with a nip. "That's how I wanted to kiss you good-bye this morning. And this," he captured her mouth, barely grazed her tongue with his own, "is how I've wanted to say hello all day."

"Mmm, this is the best one night stand ever. Or is it a thirty night stand now?"

"I'll stand as many nights as you want. Days, even."

"I bet you would."

"I'll start directly, if you like."

Her throaty chuckle trickled into his abdomen. "Later. But I'll hold you to that."

"Hold me to what, precisely? Something warm and wet, I hope?"

"Pervert," she said mildly, scrutinizing him like she could read every molecule of his thoughts.

"What?"

"Nothing." Emerson, Lake & Palmer swelled in the speakers and she groaned. "Nitwit. Not the best choice CD."

"Should I tell him to change it?"

"No, he thinks he's being funny." She pillowed her head on his chest as the song oozed quiet melancholy.

Alex couldn't get over how intoxicating her feminine aura continued to be. Melting into her eyes created an undeniable draw and it remained a force containing such compulsion that, silly as the thought undoubtedly was, he would slay a dragon or any creature who so much as dared to menace her. Not to mention the same compulsion led him to enthusiastically perform all erotic tasks that came to mind, a few which were almost as silly as dragons.

Gliding across the well-worn wood, he delighted in their combined grace. He always hated dancing as a rule. Yet not so with Helena. What used to feel awkward had become foreplay. He hungrily considered her mouth while her eyes

tugged a heaviness into his abdomen. His lips floated seductively near hers until he tore his eyes away long enough to press his nose into her hair, inhale its heady scent.

The wooing angle appeared to be going very well. So well that, no matter how many times she avoided the question, he would see her after September, even if he had to stalk her until it bordered on illegal. That she had reservations he understood. However. In no way did any of them equal a death knell for the possibility they had something worthwhile brewing.

Ebbing and flowing on the sea's breaths, other couples passed, susurrating beneath the music. And when the song ended, Alex brushed Helena's parted lips with the tip of his tongue, a feather light caress that invited so much more.

Sam evidently took his request to heart with a compilation of love songs. Barely changing rhythm between the melodies, they went from one tune to another without parting until he couldn't resist any longer and consummated their kiss—a kiss so long it left her panting.

"God," she murmured, "I wanted that so bad."

He kissed her again, his tongue inviting hers over to play before his lips danced away to nip her neck. Grinding his growing erection into her stomach in harmony with the musical swellings was an afterthought—dead cert it turned out to be a bloody good afterthought.

"Let's split," she suggested. "Nobody'll miss us." When he chuckled but didn't respond, she pushed harder. "Come on Alex, I want to taste that superb thing you're poking me with—somewhere, anywhere."

He pulled her head to his chest, whispered in her ear. "A bit of revenge for making me sit around all morning, thinking about fabulous it would be when I got my cock in you again. And since I'm not through making you pay for being a tease, you may as well stop begging."

She stifled a sobbing laugh against his neck.

"It's very fortunate that you were already dancing." He continued to taunt with words that rumbled low and, he genuinely hoped, chocolate-thick. "Because I wanted to lure you onto the beach, put you in my lap and set you off in full view of anybody who wants to look." Pleased at her mewl of frustration, he grinned like a boy with a tree frog in his pocket—a squished one, at that. Half the time, it was all he could do not to laugh when he baited her, although the serious response he received turned every last silly comment to gold.

"Spoil sport," she grumbled and pressed herself solidly against his crotch, "taking all the fun out of a little wood."

"That's me, Axeman Alex."

"All I aim to do is add some polish to your plank."

"Using some of your special wax, no doubt." Tongue exploring her ear, he whispered detailed descriptions of exactly how they could produce said polishing fluids in abundance. Naughty talk certainly wasn't the most difficult request he ever encountered. The hardest part with Helena was nailing the correct tone—the tone she claimed caressed her ears like his tongue did her clit.

He tried practicing. Bloody embarrassing, even with no one around to hear. Also distinctly arousing. Which, in turn, led



him to believe he knew what he sounded like when he got heated up. Yet he wasn't entirely sure, since the only times he for certain hit her aural-nail, he was much too preoccupied to take notes.

But as they swayed through song after song, he strove to master the art, searched for the gravel-in-satin growl that finally set her quivering in his arms. While he stroked her imagination, his leg slid between her thighs under its own volition. Rhythmically rubbing against her drenched center, as evidenced by the amount of warmth seeping through shared denim barriers, he made a quick inspection of the other dancers.

No one seemed to pay them any mind. If they were paying attention to anyone, they stared at a couple in the corner, where the bloke's hand roamed well inside the back of his partner's shorts—and if the girl's tongue wasn't choking the lad, it would be a miracle.

Helena stretched tip-toe, pressed her wanting anatomy against his staff, neatly extinguishing any discomfort Alex had with a mob of voyeurs. They were consenting adults. If they wanted to grope in public, so long as they didn't strip, it was no one's concern. Gripping her behind, he held her immobile and pressed harder, remaining motionless until Helena groaned in defeat.

Tongue-tip investigating her ear, he hissed, "I wish I could lift you onto my cock right here."

Lips skimming his, she again suggested, "We can still skip out. Or go upstairs. But if we keep this up, swear I'll go off right here."

"That sounds interesting. Manageable even. Go on, do. Then I can tell you all about how you looked while I'm fucking you later."

Her sharp shudder started with her midsection, not unlike the current trilling in his stomach. Watching her eyes as she publicly climaxed would be mouth-watering. He cupped the curve of her backside, kneaded it, fingertips tantalizingly close to her pussy as his teasing thigh slid between her legs. "If you're half as wet as my prick is hard, this won't take long."

Tracing his back and down, over his hip, Helena wedged a sly hand between them. "Do it, boy-o, make me come. I promise you won't be far behind." She patted his rising bulge. "You might even be first."

Hot coals of awareness, his eyes traveled every inch of her face. Helena deftly manipulated his now-rigid rod through his jeans and no amount of self-control could mask his need or want. Having dressed commando in preparation for sand maneuvers, Alex wasn't prepared for the way his fly ground not unpleasantly into his naked erection, producing a zap that made him lurch.

Helena laughed softly. Grasping her wrist, he brought the offending hand to his lips, kissed her fingers. "No more of that, sweeting, or I'll have to hide the spot. But I think we can manage you without revealing any evidence." His lips twitched when she shoved her crotch hard against his thigh. "Keep your eyes here," he urged along with his leg, "because I want to see the second it hits."

"Tease."

"Did you just now figure that out?"

With a strangled moan, Helena began a clandestine ride, her ambrosia obviously building in earnest. As requested, her eyes remained locked with his as the precipice loomed, as she reached for it with full intent.

"Yo, Paul!" An expectant Goose tapped his arm.

Helena turned her face from the stranger, hid the sob welling from a thwarted orgasm.

Alex dearly wanted to grab the drongo by the throat. "What do you want?" The curt question should have been enough, but he underestimated Goose's graduate work in cluelessness.

"Can I have this dance?"

"No."

"Oh, uh..." The interloper made no move to leave.

"We're talking," Helena said and dismissed him by putting her head back on Alex's shoulder.

Alex continued to glare at the knob, to no avail.

"Oh, talking, uh-huh," Goose sneered. "Have fun getting those rocks off, Mrs. Sundance."

Helena's head snapped up. "What the hell are—"

"Nick off, fucking wanker," Alex snarled. "In future, use some care in what you say about a bloke's girl in strange company."

At least realization raised a glow in the dimwit's bulb. "Aw s-shit."

"Why are you still here?" Alex took a menacing step, backed the fella off.

"How was I supposed to know?"

"Respect should go without saying. And if I hear you're bothering anyone else who doesn't welcome the attention, I'll be pleased to give you what for on their behalf."

Their tableau easy party entertainment, Alex wasn't surprised to see Sam wading in their direction.

Helena announced, "Let's go for a walk."

Casting a final glare of malevolence at Goose and wishing he could whack him proper, Alex allowed her to drag him towards the dunes. He would rather stay and teach the dolt a much needed lesson, but he didn't want Sam's input. Not in light of what he and Helena were doing prior to the interruption.

Revelry soon faded and the surf's ageless beat took over. "That jerk followed me around for half an hour when he got here, trying to light my cigarettes like he was wielding a blow torch," Helena said. "What the hell was that Mrs. Sundance crap, and who the hell is Paul?"

"He wants in your knickers, sweeting." Alex supplied a quick synopsis of the conversation in the kitchen. "Wanker's been leveled though," he summed up, "so no worries."

"What a bozo," she muttered, trying not to laugh.

"Yeah."

"Asshole."

"For certain." Thankful her anger wasn't directed at his declaration of possessorship, Alex breathed a sigh. Perhaps she hadn't noticed.

"And just what do you mean, your girl?"

*Reckon not*, Aidan helpfully pointed out.

Alex said, "Nothing. Seemed the most expeditious solution."

"Fucking men," she grumbled, flopping onto the sand. "Like rutting bulls."

"Who, me?" He sprawled next to her.

"No," she waved her hand, "you're—oh! Bastard!"

"Ta."

Indicating a scant inch, she said, "God, I was this close. A few more seconds—pow!"

"And you'd be begging me to act like a rutting bull now."

"The difference is, you rut with the greatest enthusiasm and skill." She straddled his hips, the tidal breezes turning her hair into a riot of frayed silk. "That makes all the difference."

Before he could prevent it, troubled thought became words. "And Sam, is he skillful as well? The way you two are, a fella can't help but wonder."

Her lashes narrowed dangerously. "How is that any of your business?"

"It's not really."

"No, it's certainly not. Just because I'm fucking you doesn't mean I owe you every detail of my life story."

More confirmation than denial, it stuck in Alex's gut like a scythe. "Bloody hell." He struggled out from under her. "I'm not asking for details. It's a perfectly reasonable question."

She turned to the sea. "Look. My heart is not open for analysis, and neither is my past or a list of who I have or haven't slept with. Whether they've been safe, yes. Who they are, no."

"I've told you about me," he countered.

*Well, perhaps not every detail,* Aidan said peevishly.

Alex ignored him, though not without a twinge. He would stick to the present difficulty without letting Aidan complicate it. "I don't understand the problem in asking questions about your friendship."

Aidan began to list precisely what problems the question raised and Alex abruptly turned him off. No matter what the pesky seer had to say, he wasn't about to share their secret before he understood what Helena's relationship with Sam had been. Or was, since it seemed far from over.

There were no excuses left. Even blind, he would still sense there was Something between them. Maybe he shouldn't care. But he did care. So much so, in some quiet moments when he held her, the breadth of what he felt was more frightening than a burning death.

"You don't understand because there are things you don't know about me," Helena said finally, "and I prefer to keep it that way. You can either accept that, Alex, or you can leave right now. This is a fling, remember? No strings means, no strings."

"You can't honestly believe this is still a fling."

"Yes. A few humps equal a fling."

Few the understatement of the millennium, no sound could carry more disgusted derision than the one he made.

"Alex," she said reasonably, "sex does not entitle you to unquestionable intimacy."

"You came looking for more, Helena, I didn't force you. Even when friends do what we do, there's not much division

between sex and intimacy." He wanted to rage, stomp, throw a bloody tantrum. "Oh, no, so sorry. I forget we're not friends, that you only fuck me to pass time. Though I must say if you expected to play at the organ tonight, treating me like a gigolo isn't the best way to go about it."

"Stop it. Of course we're friends. But I've got a little more life under my belt. Trust me, the divide between intimacy and sex is wider than the Grand Canyon."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuckity-Fuck. Miranda all over again. He swallowed a salty wash of bile as the surf pounded in his ears. No. He would not accept that. She was stubborn because she was fragile, and their current person of contention said as much.

*Tread carefully, me old mate,* Aidan returned in better humor. *It doesn't matter if they had a go. Grief has put better people in worse places, as you well know.*

"So," her casual tone was forced, "since you're not stomping away, I guess you accept my boundaries?"

"All right," he tried not to sound terse, "for present we'll call truce."

Her eyes snapped from anger to teasing in a flash. "Then what say we blow this Popsicle stand and go to your house?"

Pulling her to her feet, Alex wrestled uncertainty, curiosity and frustration into submission. How Helena managed to flip her moods so easily confounded him, but he would get beneath that polar shelf only by keeping his wits, not pushing too hard. He would get under it. Even if it killed him.

Grin tenuous, he said, "Come on then, I'll race you to the car. Although I believe I was parked in before I had my seatbelt unfastened."

"No problem, Joan's on the street. Let me grab a couple things?"

"Get whatever you need, sweetie. If you're going to drive, I'll have another beer." A loose plan began to form. Simply because Helena refused to listen to reason didn't mean Sam wouldn't either.

She clung to his arm as they walked back to the house and when Helena skipped up the stairs to gather her belongings, Alex he went in search of her brother-in-law.

\* \* \* \*

Alex decided the next entry for weird things that happened on summer holiday would be the way Sam hugged him.

"Mate," he huffed, patting a hardwood shoulder with manly affection, "I can't breathe."

Giving him a last hearty squeeze, the twin shook his head and held Alex at arm's length. "You're doing a great job, man. A really great job making Laney smile!"

"Cheers. I do my best." Whiskey might make Sam unmanageable. A slab of coldies in the form of Yuengling lager, on the other hand, made him right happy as a pig in mud. "So listen, mate, I only have a tic. You said when it comes to the duck's guts, you were the fella to ask."

His host replied with confused enthusiasm, "Man, I have absolutely no fuckin' idea what's inside a duck."

"No, that's not what—I'm in need of a straight answer."



"Oh, okay." Sam cast a dubious look at the crowd and pronounced, "In the bathroom."

"Wait—" Alex started.

Sam cleared the powder room with a curt order. "Out of there, kiddies, on the double." In response to a chorus of objections, he bellowed, "I don't care what Laney said. Put that fucking joint out or I'll make you eat it."

As they scrambled to vacate, without further ado, Sam grabbed Alex and shoved him into the water closet.

*This may not be your brightest idea ever*, Aidan observed. Alex was hard pressed to argue as Sam cursed the lock.

Assured of privacy, the older man inquired, "Wa'sup?"

Time being short and certainly not wanting Helena to find them huddled in the dunny, Alex went directly to the point.

"Are you sleeping with her?"

"Sleeping with who?"

"Helena."

Hops-bright eyes studied him, revealing nothing and wasting precious seconds. "Oh man," Sam muttered finally, and dropped heavily onto the toilet.

Suspensions aside, not what Alex wanted to hear. "Balls up, I knew it."

"You might know balls, but you don't know dick. No, college boy, I am not presently banging the object of your affection."

"What do you mean, 'not presently'?"

"I mean not presently," he snapped and in response to hearty banging on the door, roared, "Go the fuck *away*!"

Alex plowed forward. "Before or after your brother?"

The blue eyes cleared though remained unreadable—a talent Sam excelled at to an annoying degree—and his mouth tightened into a sober line. "Straight answers I'll give you, details, I won't. You better ask Helena about me and her."

Prepared for a wave of nastiness to break, Alex was surprised that knowing didn't raise any antagonism after all. Jealous, yes. Hate Sam for it, no.

So he stuck with bald truth. "What if she won't tell me?"

"You asked her."

Not a question, but one he answered anyway. "Too bloody right I did."

Sam brusquely scrubbed his face and ruffled his hair. "You want to keep seeing her at home." Also not a question. "She say no?"

"She won't even discuss it."

"Stubborn broad."

Taking a deep breath, he said, "I'm in love with her, Sam. I dare say she's in love with me, too, but she's too distracted by you to admit it."

"I'm not fucking distracting her from anyfuckingthing."

Having pinned his hopes on the bloke's proffered forthrightness, Alex suspected disappointment would arrive momentarily. "Well," he employed one of Da's favorite observations, "you two are up to Something, and I don't need an Indian guide to prove it."

Sam snorted, full of wry amusement. "Well you're wrong. But the most you'll get from me is we have a friendship that's hard to explain without breaking promises. Other than that, I

think she's just reluctant to move on. You'll just have to take my word that she has her reasons."

Disappointment never quite made it, but self-disgust made up for the lack. "Then I am simply a summer fuck-toy."

"C'mon. You know there's more to Helena than offhand screwing. If the past matters that much to you, man, you've got to keep asking until she spills. Because unless she says otherwise, her secrets aren't mine to tell, even ones I'm part of. Can you appreciate that?"

"Yeah," Alex swallowed the bitter straight answer, "suppose I understand better than I want to."

"I can talk to her," Sam offered, "see what she thinks."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"I won't say we talked. Unless you want me to tell her—otherwise, I won't mention it."

"All right," at a complete loss, Alex conceded, "if you think you can help, have at it."

"Jared's death scarred both of us," Sam likely revealed more of his relationship with Helena than he intended, "and I don't know if she'll listen, but I'll damn well give it my best shot."

"Actually," Alex said, grateful Sam introduced the topic, "I want to talk to you about Jared, from one brother to another. Do you mind if we do it outdoors? Helena finds us in here like a couple of girls, mate, I don't reckon she'll believe we're powdering our noses."

## Chapter 7—High Tide

While Sam loaded his bags, a curious seagull stood guard on the truck cab. Helena hugged his broad shoulders hard.

"Be careful."

"I will. You know, Laney," he said so casually, she frowned, "you really should give him a chance." Sam hitched his chin towards Alex on the deck, pretending not to watch them.

"Don't you want to go to SCC's winter formal?"

"Don't start with me, buster."

Barely narrowed eyes projected nothing and he changed the subject. "I'm going to see a doctor. Some psychologist who works with twins."

"And?" There was a time—so many years ago, the recollection was brittle and sepia—when a boy named Sam had eyes as readable as the man pacing the porch. But this Sam wasn't easily opened and she had to look for other signs.

"And I'm sick of guilt. Now I'm mostly pissed off."

"Okay." She brushed the week's worth of stubble which couldn't conceal the hard jaw demanding his eyes remain neutral. "I hope you get more out of therapy than I did."

"You didn't oust our demons without filtering them," the jaw snapped and he tossed a glance at their audience of one. "It's time to accept that Jared always did charm honey from bees for his own gratification. He just never considered how bitter honey can get when it's engineered."

Not a statement she could disagree with. Before she could shrug off a response, a surprising ache darkened Sam's eyes like oil on the sea.

"That's what killed him, Helena, nothing else."

Old argument, new platform, same conclusion. She wanted to wrap her arms around him, transfer her fear into his strong frame. With Alex looking on, she had to stand there with her arms dangling. "This bee doesn't know if he would have forgiven her, Sammy. I haven't found a way to live with that."

"Maybe he wouldn't have. We'll also never know if we would have forgiven him. Either way, we go around like it's all our fault and he had no hand in it."

"Betrayal is betrayal."

He frowned. "And there's no consideration for degree or circumstance?"

"No. Yes. I don't know. Maybe."

"That's bullshit."

"God, Sam, don't. I can't—cry about it any more."

"Don't cry," he said and granted her wish with a hug. "The truth is, you were manipulated. In the beginning and in the end. Jared got off easy, he doesn't have to fix anything. I have to be the bigger bee and send you off to the hive that's right for you. And if you never believe me again, believe me this time and start building your own honeycomb."

She wiped tears on his shoulder. "You and your frickin' metaphors."

"Promise you'll think about it. Think about how bees sting because of their nature, not because of their malice."

"I'll think about it."

"And how no bee can make even bitter honey without help."

"Okay already," her smile was genuine, "enough with the bees or I'll start buzzing."

"I'm talking about Alex. Jealousy is pouring off him like a heat wave. He pretends he's not but he's a hell of a lot more open than you or me. Maybe if you let him in, you'll find he's survived a few battles, too."

"What are you getting at, Sam? Spit it out, whatever it is."

"I'm telling you nicely not to fuck it up."

"Joan's been coaching you."

"Joanie hasn't said squat. Talk to the man, Laney, explain yourself. You know he's in love with you. Have some faith in that. Because I'm going to tell that doctor everything. Confession's supposed to be good for the soul and I want to know if it's true."

She gaped, knew her mouth hung slack—not that it helped form words that way.

"I know, I know," he rumbled and turned her loose, "the last thing you expect to hear from me."

"No, it's just—"

Strained but sincere, he laughed. "Alike as we were, I'm not Jared. I guess I've finally realized I don't care that I'm not."

"Aw, ya big bohunk."

"Maybe yesterday. Today I'm feeling pretty smart. I never thought I'd—"

The screen door slammed, footsteps crunched in the sand, forestalling whatever Sam intended to add.

"Is everything all right?" Alex called.

"Yeah, Alex, it is. I was just telling your girl I'm better than I've been in a long time."

"Good onya. You won't forget to call Dr. Clark?"

"Got her number right here," he pressed his shirt pocket, "I'll make an appointment first thing. See ya, Laney," he patted her behind affectionately, "remember what I said."

Blanching, she nodded. When did the two of them talk about doctors? More importantly, why did they talk about doctors, and a twin doctor at that?

As the pick-up drove away, an arm just as strong as Sam's circled her shoulders. "You know," Alex said, "he really is quite the decent bloke."

The small kindness twined her fondness for Alex a little tighter. She examined his profile, wondered what confessions were made.

He turned to look at her and the hazel eyes clouded with concern. "What?"

"Nothing." She felt strangely translucent as they walked toward the ocean, like a jellyfish—a jellyfish whose heart lay exposed in the sand.

"Not nothing. What is it?"

"Really," she said, "just thinking about Sam. I think he's finally going to be all right. But you know that, don't you?"

"Yeah." He squinted at the ocean. "We had a talk about brothers. My brother died when we—when he was twelve."

"God, Alex!" He had revealed his father's declining health and subsequent demise, but seemed well adjusted about it. He even divulged how his brother, Aaron, left home at fifteen,

never to be seen at the farm again. "Your poor Mom and Dad," she said, "and you and Aaron."

"A shock to be sure," he said almost too easily. "Also a long time ago. With distance and perspective, you realize everyone's life contains a certain amount of loss."

"That's true," she said, peeling away yet another layer of Alex's deceptive simplicity. "What happened?" She was curious, yet somewhat reluctant to prod his sorrow, no matter how deeply buried, and even more reluctant to acknowledge how close his loss statement came to hit-and-run truth.

"He jumped off the stable roof and broke his neck, simply a lad doing a dumb kid thing. We drew Odds 'n Evens to see who jumped first. If I had won, it could've been me. But," a wave dismissed the past in favor of the present, "you care about Sam, he's having a rough time. I know Doc Clark from SCC and she's great. If anyone can help him get sorted, she can."

In companionable silence, they watched the waves wash away an abandoned, precariously constructed sand castle. Alex talked to Sam because she cared about the big mook. They had a man-to-man and nothing more. Alex was, as usual, nothing other than who he appeared to be.

Revelation hit with the next wave, overwhelming her even as the ocean lapped her toes. Dear God! From different worlds, more than a decade apart, against all her denials and self-flagellation to the contrary, she was hopelessly in love with him. What the hell should she do? Her first impulse was to tell him.



She opened her mouth, ready to gather every shred of bravery she could.

Unfortunately, Alex hadn't finished with earlier business. "You know, Helena, I'm not stupid." Fear not fully hooded, he looked away, wet his lips as the last trace of castle melted into the forgiving shoreline. "You and Sam have more history than you being married to his twin. I simply want to know if it's in the past or if it's still going on. I think you owe me that much."

Hysterical giggles threatened to take over. *I want to scream 'I Love You' and he wants to know if I'm fucking Sam!* She almost blurted the explanation in a rush. Almost lost all reservations in an insane urge to tell, speak, spew everything. Just to see Alex's face as the information unfolded, watch love melt like the castle into the sand.

Long-practiced prudence overcame the compulsion. Once upon a time, in a pit of despair, she swore she could never love again without lifting the masks necessary to create abiding intimacy. And if an adulterer's chance in heaven existed for them together, Alex deserved to know the basics.

Nevertheless, the bald facts lined up were too much like an episode of Jerry Springer.

"There's nothing physical going on," she said finally. "Emotionally—can we sit on the deck? It's a long story and a beer to smooth the way would help."

Like he was about to face a drought, Alex said, "I'm okay."

"Not for you, for me."

He squeezed her hand. "Then sure, I'll have one as well."

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

Contemplating impending exposure while she gathered two bottles from the fridge, Helena almost lost what little courage she had. Until one look at Alex's earnest face waiting patiently, if not nervously, for her to settle in made it clear there was no turning back. Besides, if she didn't start putting her trust in him now, history would only repeat itself.

"I won't judge you, sweetie, no matter what happened." Elbows on spread knees, body language confirmed his sincerity.

"You say that now, boy-o, but I won't hold you to it."

Heart on the verge of dying all over again, Helena took a deep breath, and slipped into the past.

## **Part II**

No river can return to its source,  
yet all rivers must have a beginning.

—Native American Proverb

### **Chapter 8—Blue Mountain**

When I was sixteen, growing up wasn't accelerated like it is now. Back then, standing on the rim of the volcano we call adulthood, although our bodies prepared to descend into the magma, our minds weren't nearly as ready as we thought.

Now, by the time an adolescent reaches their teens, they understand relationships are intricate. They accept life is painted in huge swaths of gray. Perhaps because of the divorce rate, remarriages give them front row seats to adult mating rituals. Or perhaps it's simply better information, what with the Internet and a zillion cable channels debunking tales before they enter the realm of myth. Whatever the reasons, I sometimes look at my students and wonder: if I had known half of what they know, would I have tread more cautiously when I stepped off the trail? You know, like the Bradbury story about the prehistoric butterfly. I'm not so sure. If nothing else at this stage of life, I'm convinced everything happens for a reason.

I don't mean to switch into teacher mode and present my philosophy of life. I'm simply trying to pinpoint my place in history, explain how, thanks to the freedom-seeking '60's, I came of age in a decade notoriously without restraint. We claimed the benefits of the Sexual Revolution as part of our American heritage—our parents were pioneers, and we the first settlers.

As a result, my contemporaries and I had a plethora of surface information about sex. And while many parents may not have explained the ins-and-outs, they embraced its new acceptability by reading steamy bestsellers no longer hidden from young eyes—*Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, *The Story of O*, *Fear of Flying*—not to mention the nonfiction peppering the New York Times' lists, like *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex, Any Woman Can*, and that still pertinent bible, *The Joy of Sex*.

Unfortunately, as we set out to explore the uncharted territories, no one told us the Catch-22: puberty hits your body long before it invades your brain.

We didn't think we were emotionally unprepared for ramifications, of course. And only several decades after the fact, do I truly understand how naive we were.

Adolescents undoubtedly need to know that sex, like food, is good for you. They also need to know too much of any good thing is likely to give you an ache deep in your gut.

I'm lecturing, aren't I? It's no wonder I choose to teach sex. All right, before I digress entirely off topic, I'll get to me specifically.

My father built a love of carpentry into a successful construction company. While we weren't rich, I lived a comfortable middle class existence. My mother chose to be a trendsetter and put her teaching degree to use by educating me at home. To be sure I didn't lack socialization, she also insisted I take classes at the Art Institute and Miss Mae's School of Dance. Even so, at fifteen I still wasn't as socially adept as I should've been, despite dating, thanks in no small part to Boys & Girls Club dances.

Yet I only had one close girlfriend, Ann Reilly. Ann, too, was home schooled. Our mothers had been friends since college and shared many of the same ideals.

In fact, I ran into Annie last year. She had just received the Decree ending her second marriage. I helped her drown relief and sorrow in a couple dozen rum and Cokes, while we commiserated over deficiencies in our inner children. Although we ended up laughing so hard we could barely talk, it served to remind me how serious socialization is.

Still, I realized I had been luckier than Ann in one respect. Sex, drugs and rock 'n roll gave most parents cause for worry and her parents dealt with it by ignoring it. Mine did their best to instill a healthy self-esteem and comfort with my blossoming body. Along with encouraging my mind to expand as quickly as it could, they also made me understand that while sex should be undertaken only with responsibility and mutual respect, it's natural for every human being to eventually participate. They also underscored the message with their behavior. I remember the first time it dawned on

me that when they showered together, they weren't trying to save time!

Granted, even then they were more liberal than most. I took pride in their unconventional attitudes, and that I had been present when their ideals began to flourish. To this day I have a crystal-clear memory of chasing a garter snake through a wildflower field on the communal farm where I was born—the place my mother always talked about returning to some day.

That being so, when their old stomping grounds went up for sale—sans the crop fields, to my infinite relief—it shouldn't have been a surprise that Dad waxed ecstatic. Mom could have her dream and he could stop worrying about two-legged predators, whose favorite pastimes involved trouble, when business took him out of town.

Having promptly purchased the rambling house at the foot of Blue Mountain, they told me it would take at least six months to renovate to Mom's satisfaction—no easy task, since she had years to think about it—but when the changes were complete, we would move.

These days, kids get to have an opinion about those sorts of things. In my day, opinions on big decisions were adult provinces. No ifs, ands or buts I came up with could stop my life from being turned upside down. Not that they were monsters about it. Quite the contrary. They spent exhaustive energy trying to illustrate all the reasons it was Best—with the added notion that spending time in a public school would prepare me for college.

Now about that time, I also learned something I suspect influenced my future as much as the change of venue would. One morning I came downstairs and heard Ann's mom crying in the kitchen. Not unusual, since Mr. and Mrs. Reilly were getting a divorce and fighting tooth and nail over every last dime. Renee turned to my mom for talking things out, the same as I turn to Joan or my friend, Ronnie. And when a girl shows up because she needs a friend, crying is to be expected.

Anyway, since Mrs. Reilly was obviously in the middle of a painful expulsion, I hung back in the den, giving her privacy to finish her thoughts. If not for that knee-jerk etiquette, I might still be blissfully ignorant of the circumstances behind my conception.

"They can check it so easy now," Renee wailed. "What am I going to do if he's not her father?"

Mom replied in the forceful-yet-kind way a friend uses to convince you things aren't as bad as you think. "You gather every bit of evidence there is to prove he damn well knew she might not be his."

"What about Ann? How can I explain it to *her*?"

Mr. Reilly not Ann's father? Thunderstruck, I immediately wished I hadn't heard. It was the kind of grown-up knowledge I didn't want to process. I half-wish I had fled back upstairs, but like you do with a fender-bender on the highway, I stood frozen in my lane, stiff and a little frightened, while the rest of the scene passed by.

After blowing her nose, Renee continued. "God, it's such a mess. What would you do, Jeanna, if Max decides he wants to know for sure? What if Seth or Brandon is Helena's father?"

"Max never cared, then or now," Mom said. "And even if he hated me, he wouldn't risk losing Helena." An afterthought, she added, "Besides, I'd cut his balls off if he so much as tried to find out—hey! I have a new meat cleaver. What say we give it a try on ol' Vince's equipment?"

Renee spluttered and Mom laughed, but the tension wasn't alleviated for me. I remained dumbstruck. Absolutely flabbergasted. Thoughts moved through my head like mud and I wallowed slow-motion through the muck: Dad might not be my dad either? What in Heaven's name was going on?

Before I found enough sense to make myself scarce, Mom went to the counter for more coffee and spied me standing in the den.

"Shit," she muttered and in response to a questioning look from Renee, motioned toward me, staring at them with a mixture of horror, surprise and, truth be told, some disgust.

Mrs. Reilly echoed Mom's sentiment. "Oh shit. Helena, honey..."

Mom sighed. "Sweetie, why don't you go up to your room? I'll bring a cup of tea after Renee leaves and ... we'll talk."

Still unable to speak, I nodded and with no little relief, found my feet could move after all. I don't remember making it back to my room, but I remember sitting on the edge of my bed, staring at a picture of me and Dad. I was confused. I was scared. Because I was Daddy's Girl, through and through.



Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

I won't repeat my mother's explanation word-for-word. I still cringe on her behalf, recalling her confession among the pink and white frills of my innocent retreat. Surprisingly, as I look back at it now, I don't believe she was embarrassed. Uncomfortable over having to explain complicated relationships that her daughter may not be able to grasp perhaps, but in no way ashamed or regretful. But it was that morning, as I learned the truth about events I didn't recall with anything more than childish pleasure, that I took my first steps toward being an adult.

It's actually quite simple and, during the time in which it occurred, on its way to being vogue within a handful of years. Seems harvests weren't the only cooperative activity on Blue Mountain, and Mom explained that the eight members of their group—she and Dad, Renee and Vince and two other couples, Cecily and Brandon, Mae and Seth—practiced Free Love. She assured me, I suspect in an attempt to remove some of my discomfort, that although she had sex with Dad, Brandon and Seth, since she was pregnant when the Reilly's moved in, my sire had been one of the original three.

There followed an exhaustive recital of her times and mores, much as I've just done. And while I didn't comprehend it then like I do now, it's a story I've grown to appreciate while seeking passage through my own good and bad choices.

But that's neither here nor there. Upon Dad's arrival home that afternoon—I'm sure within seconds of leaving my room, Mom was tracking him down—he knocked on my door, desperate to explain and reassure me of his love.

Consequently, while my parents' admissions left me confused about the way adults behave, I took from the experience a solid belief that it really made no difference where the sperm that created me originated. My parents loved me. They did their best never to steer me wrong. I was theirs and they mine. I had a little mystery in me, even if one I wouldn't proudly proclaim. Within a short time, it simply became part of who I was, as it might have done if I were adopted.

So it happened that we did eventually move, and while I could have found fault with my parents' past, I could in no way criticize our new home. What began in the early 1900's as a sturdy farmhouse had been added to with abandon by many, resulting in a spontaneous hulk of wood and glass. In an excellent example of why Mom and Dad are perfect together, her vision and his skill produced a glittering bi-level diamond, tastefully mounted in a green-grove setting. It's a little too Brady Bunch for my tastes but they're still proud of it and have every right to be.

Then, our modest acreage felt pretty isolated. Beside three houses on the lower slopes, the mountain had once been home to a fishermen's retreat—a string of long-abandoned man-made ponds, where Mother Nature stayed busy assimilating remnants of a dozen ramshackle cabins.

The nearest real hive of activity was Indiantown Gap, maybe ten miles away. The Gap is a quiet outpost now, but it boomed during my youth—literally, I might add. On artillery practice days, like trapped and propositioned maiden aunts,

our windows and mirrors soundlessly shuddered after every unheard strike.

It wouldn't be until they built Penn National Race Track within spitting distance of us that Dad realized his modern squire dream may be in danger. Unfortunately, the Track did signal urban development truly a-coming. The yuppie exodus in the '80's proved to be the death knell to pure country living.

There's a strip mall at the main road now and developers surrounded their six acres with bourgeois mansions. Still, not a one of those fancy houses has ever held a candle to my parents'. I dare say it's the love they put into it. Well, it's either that or because they have the most enviable, richly-shaded, double hammock set-up anybody's ever seen—Dad always worked with landscape, not against it, and it shows in his backyard with comfort and grace.

There's a funny story about their trees. In '89, this snotty couple tried to get Dad to sell his trees. If you can believe that! They didn't want to wait for saplings to grow, they wanted big trees next to their prefab immediately. You can imagine, beyond being irritated to hell and back by their audacity, Dad wasn't too keen on digging up his yard for any amount of money. But later, when they tried to sue him for blocking their satellite signal with the trees they wanted to buy, well ... it's the only time I ever heard him say the F-word in my presence to this day—and he said it a lot.

I'm procrastinating again. It's difficult to decide what will shed the most light on the all things I need to explain. What's worse, when I try to think about it chronologically, it unfolds

in a shattered jumble—some views bright, others muted, like looking through a dime store kaleidoscope. And as much as anybody says there's no big deal in a decade age spread, so many of life's intricacies change in ten years, I can't be sure what stayed the same and what didn't.

Explanations aside, I really am working up to where I unequivocally know I should begin—but, as I say, I think it's important to understand how I arrived at that start line in the early summer of a locust year, where I did my utmost to hate the country as much as my mother loved it. She adored the absence of smog. I thought the trees smelled funny. She enjoyed the whirring cicadas. I missed traffic's muzak. She liked going outside in her jammies without nosy neighbors around. I hated having nothing to do.

Any kid who grows up in a rural area knows there is plenty to do. But I was used to entertainment being within easy reach. I never had to work to find fun. So in that bullheaded way only a teenager can fathom, instead of finding something interesting to occupy my time, I honed righteous angst over the injustice of my situation instead. I missed the Saturday night dances at the Club. I missed Ann—the finally-divorced Mrs. Reilly had packed her up and moved to Colorado, a double stake-in-the-heart as far as I was concerned.

I had a moment of hope when Mom took me to register at school. A lady told us the bus would stop where the dirt lane met the highway. 'It's a good walk,' she had admitted, 'but all Blue Mountain students get picked up there.' That meant there were other kids somewhere. Where they got to, I had

no idea, but harbored a sneaking suspicion they were having more fun than me.

Meanwhile, I continued to demonstrate enormous displeasure by skulking around, the irreparably maligned child. To Mom's great credit, she put up with the nonsense for almost a month. Then, on the morning of, pardon the expression, the first day of the rest of my life, she handed me a book and three apples in a bag.

"Outside," her tone brooked no disagreement, "get the stink blown off you. I don't care what you do or where you go, I don't want to see you until dinner."

I had already discovered the two nearby homes contained old couples by the name of Buchinsky and Redding, so I wandered aimlessly around the yard—until Mom hit the porch, hands on her hips and frowning. That's when I decided to climb the mountain and see what the other side had to offer.

Scaling Blue Mountain wasn't really a difficult proposition. Our sedimentary ranges aren't like the Rocky Mountains, more like giant hillocks. I'd estimate the distance between parallel valleys measured, at best, two miles.

On a youngster's indefatigable legs, it took ten minutes trudging up a very old, very rutted logging road to get to the top. Surveying the view from the peak, my idea seemed sound. Below, beckoning with possibilities, a peeling white barn offered a coy glimpse of hex sign, once-vivid colors peeking over a tree-trimmed décolletage like a faded tattoo. Clothed in patchwork finery fields, the barn sat just above the valley floor, offset by a shimmering jeweled pond spilling from the forest.

A narrow deer trail made downhill easier going. Minutes later, I broke from the woods to find the farmhouse revealed in neat, picturesque glory. The cherished debutante flanked by two ancient sycamore chaperones, a mighty walnut guard stood to the rear. Tidy flower boxes adorned a deep, three-sided porch wrapping the house like a colorful shawl, making it appear prim next to her rowdy big sister barn sporting the painted hex.

To my dismay, despite its well cared for appearance, the place seemed deserted—free from even the myriad blue jays that give Blue Mountain its name. No people. No cows. Not even a stray dog to bark warning at a lonely stranger.

Grasshoppers and locusts serenaded me in the midday sun, while wild grapes tempted my nose. The thick fruitiness gave me a thirst and I decided to return home at the risk of suffering punishment.

Until music tickled my ears.

So faint I would have missed it if the breeze blew another direction, I locked onto the sound, followed where it led.

Entering the barnyard, I lost the tinny strains finally identified as *Lucky Man* amid a crow's alarmed caws. The barn loomed enormous and unlike the house, had seen better days. I frowned at the hex, two bluebirds with necks intertwined, and wondered if I imagined the music.

Oblivious, a scraggly ginger cat slipped from the nearby corn and mouth full, head high, trotted across the hard-packed dirt sloping to the cattle door. Concerned for the still-wriggling prey, I began to puss-puss the cat when a higher

flash of movement caught my eye. Suspecting the crow braved closer inspection, I looked up.

A man stood framed by the dark interior of the hay loft. Magnetic blue eyes belonging to the most gorgeous creature I had ever seen galvanized me even at the distance. Deeply tanned, he leaned on a slab of plywood like a human puppet. A vest of dark hair did nothing to obscure his muscular torso and when he impatiently shoved a tangled mass of black waves from his face, the shock of hair under his arm sent a flutter through my belly.

Vision sufficiently cleared, he cocked his head and silently studied me.

God, he was hypnotic. My mouth went dry under his scrutiny and I only vaguely comprehended it hanging open. We stood frozen for what seemed like eternity but eventually I managed to dredge my voice from under my feet, past my thumping heart and shouted, "Hello!"

He rewarded me with a tentative smile, increasing his attractiveness hundredfold. I felt its impact with every fiber, too, like an electric pulse surged between us. How do you describe the first time you're awakened by an attraction deeper than hormonal curiosity? I felt as languid as the June sun yet buoyant enough to rise like bread dough. I felt female. I felt feral. I felt, above everything else, alive.

Aware how territorial some country folk are, I rushed on, "Sorry if I'm trespassing. I'm new around here."

Still no verbal response but he hooked a thumb to the right, then disappeared. *Rude*, I thought, though curiosity and an extra dampness in my panties took me around the corner,

where I discovered a people-sized door—and the source of the redolent grapes. The entire side of the barn bristled with burdened, curling vines, the pollen-glazed harvest enticing every bee in the county to frolic among the fruit.

The sunlight didn't penetrate the interior more than a few feet, yet despite the barn housing a strange man and therefore going against every caution a mother ever gave a daughter, I sailed right in. Whether pure loneliness propelled me or those hypnotic eyes, I'm still not sure. I only know I stepped over the threshold without hesitation, into scattered rays of sunshine that pierced the cool, dusty gloom the same way those eyes had pierced me.

Inside, hammering accompanied the music and Blue Eyes appeared at the top of the loft's rickety wooden ladder. "You've got to be the girl from the old Straub place," he called. "If you're looking for my sister, she's at the shore."

"Hi! Yeah, I am—I mean no, I was just wandering around and saw the barn." On closer inspection, he didn't appear much older than me, and had a superb body. The boys in my experience had virtually hairless chests and for some reason his subtle furriness stirred excitement. And, I have to admit, the way sweat plastered it between his pecs and smeared it across his abdomen compounded my interest.

"Mr. Redding said you were a mega-fox," he announced, that smile flashing under thick-lashed eyes, prodding at the desire coiled in my stomach, "and I gotta say he's right. You're very pretty."

Much to my embarrassment, I blushed. "You, too. I mean, you're not pretty, but you're ... uh ... oh, never mind."



His laughter scattered a handful of birds from the rafters, including a Jay that matched his eyes. "Handsome. You mean handsome." A raised brow playfully dared me to disagree. "Thank you and you need to learn to take a compliment, too."

"Yeah, yeah. What's all that hammering? Are you building something?"

"A fort—sorta."

"Need some help?"

His insinuant invitation dripped opportunity. "Sure, if you don't mind a couple of sweaty guys."

"Course not!" Not only had I discovered semi-mythical kids but a mission which suited my talents, since Dad taught me to be an accomplished carpenter. Bubbling excitement obscured libidinous musings. I hastily deposited the apples onto the ground, wedged my book in my hip pocket and scrambled up the ladder.

"Careful." Strong and sure, he hauled me up the last few feet, his long fingers wrapped around my forearm producing a lovely tingle which, while it paled in comparison to the sensation I felt upon first sight, still plastered a stupid grin on my face.

When he let go, I had an insuppressible urge to touch him again. I patted a sweat-soaked shoulder, imagined how salty he must taste. "Thanks."

"No problem. I'm Jared." He looked at me expectantly.

Musky male laced into aromatic grape, his scent invaded me, made my heart pound with more than simple exertion.

"My name's Helena but everybody calls me Laney."

The hammering abruptly ended with a thud, immediately replaced by the most colorful cursing ever heard.

Jared chuckled, filling my belly with napalm. "Missed the nail again. C'mon," he waved me along, "we better make sure he's not bleeding to death."

He headed deeper into the barn and I trailed behind, admiring his long legs and the tight backside enhanced by well-worn cutoffs.

Like I said, I wasn't very worldly, but I was no stranger to the lure of the opposite sex. The boy I dated the year before got serious enough for one of Mom's infamous talks about men where I had to assure her my virginity remained intact. And right then, mesmerized by my new acquaintance, I knew as soon as Mom saw my new, copper-skinned friend, I would be in for an even longer cautionary lecture.

If anything smaller than a Volkswagen had blocked my path, I probably would've run smack into it. Fortunately, Jared ducked through a precarious door frame, neatly breaking my trance. Daylight escaped from the gap-happy wall to dance at my feet. I grimaced. Both wall and doorway could be easily improved, if the boys would let me have a say.

I skipped through the entrance to their sanctuary just as Jared called to his companion, "Are you okay, Sammy?"

I blinked, adjusting to unfiltered sunshine. Against the far wall, half-hung double doors flanked an opening leading to nothing but sky. Another dark-haired teen in sneakers and camouflage pants examined a mangled nail protruding from a hinge. "Fucker won't go in," he muttered.

"Watch your mouth," Jared said, "we got company."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"That's Sam," Jared said. "This is Laney."

When the second builder turned, I was presented with a carbon copy of Jared, right down to the sweat-slickened pelt and electric-pulse eyes. If not for different clothes, I wouldn't have been able to tell one from the other. "Far out," I exclaimed, experiencing the unfamiliar fascination for the second time in as many minutes, "you guys are twins!"

"Yep," Jared enjoyed my reaction, "identical except for our fingerprints. Well, that and Sammy likes to wear his ass on his face."

Sam seemed to have trouble looking at me, but had no difficulty pounding his brother with a dark scowl.

"Don't mind the Colonel's little soldier," Jared went on, "he's just in a bad mood. His ASVABs weren't as good as he wanted."

Amidst a full second's eye contact, Sam mumbled, "Hi, Laney."

"Hi," I said as he hastily dropped his eyes, and prompted, "ASVABs?"

"It's a test for the military. I'm going to be a Marine."

I regard shy people as a challenge, so I pressed gently. "Can you take them again, like the SATs?"

"He can," his brother replied with disdain. "He just didn't get a perfect score the first time."

Sam growled, "Shut the fuck up, Jared."

That exhausted the line of conversation as far as I was concerned. I tried to change the subject. Still addressing the bashful twin, I asked, "Do you always curse a lot?"

Sarcasm broad, Jared gestured regally. "Don't you know? That's what Marines do!"

"Quit showing off," Sam said. "At least I have a plan."

"What, no swear words? Are you trying to impress our guest?"

"Asshole."

"Wimp."

"Pud."

"Dork."

Their girlish spat made me giggle. "You guys crack me up. I thought twins are supposed to get along."

"They do," Jared said, "when one of them isn't a spaz."

Snorting amusement, Sam returned to the troublesome nail.

"Looks like it's blocked," I offered.

He shook his head. "I can't see anything but it won't go in."

"Can I look? My dad's a carpenter."

"Knock yourself out." He handed me the hammer. I dumped the book from my pocket and crouched to examine the offending spike. The paperback caught more of Sam's attention than I had, and he scooped it up like a silver lode.

"Is this any good?"

"Don't know, haven't read it yet." I yanked the nail free and used it to poke at the plywood. "Here's the problem—

there's a nailhead flat between the layers. You might want to drill pilot holes and use screws."

Jared looked at me like I went crazy. "Drill?"

"Yes, drill."

"We got two hammers, a box of nails and a crowbar," Sam listed helpfully, "and that's it. The Colonel would bust a gasket if we borrow any of his electric stuff."

"Well, if it can wait till tomorrow, I can bring my drill—and some screws."

Jared's sing-song swirled friendly seduction through my ears. "Lovely Laney has a thing for power tools, huh?"

Although his veiled compliment filled me with more sun than the barn ever held, I sniffed haughtily. "You got a problem with a woman who knows tools?"

"Nope," he rubbed his dust-streaked chest, raising goosebumps down my back, "no problem with that at all."

Despite the lack of equipment, we spent the afternoon reseating the wall panels. I found common ground with Sam in books and, the subject catapulting him out his reticence, we chattered about favorites as only bookworms can. Still, even knee-deep in Heller and pounding nails, I couldn't ignore the way his brother watched me.

Twins, yes, but it didn't take a genius to realize they were different as can be. Jared was the Actor. He dramatized. He demonstrated. He proved. He showed off his prowess at every turn, lifting, tearing, heaving. Even with my mind on literature as the quieter twin offered surprising sapience, I remained hyperaware of the bolder one, the delightful

seducer who's every smile burrowed into my chest, and every laugh dug lower still.

I should explain Jared's physical presence always held enormous impact. Not so much his good looks, but what he projected. He could fill a room with one grin. He radiated a vibrancy that captivated. He was at ease no matter where he was and equally comfortable in the company of men or women, adults and children. That being so, he applied charm like oil paint to canvas, regardless of your gender or age. Yet, his flattery was never insincere and always heartfelt. I don't know precisely what 'It' is that makes a man irresistible, but whatever the recipe's main ingredient, Jared got more than his share.

Sam was the silent type. He would rather blend and observe. Solid mind in that solid body he shared with his twin, he spoke with thoughtful deliberation and strove to be insightful and mentally provocative. A brooder who played at being a bad boy, he had—and still has—his own brand of presence. Where Jared shone in a crowd like a cut gem, catching your attention almost immediately, Sam has the depth of rare stone warmed by the sun, like polished lapis lazuli drawing you into its glow.

Then, what Sam was most was dichotomy, with his artist's heart and a desire in juxtaposition: more than anything, he wanted to wear United States Marine Corps Blues in the tradition of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather.

Despite radically different personalities, they often finished each other's sentences and at times talked in stereo. They

also had a habit of answering questions that hadn't been asked, a quirk they identified as 'twin talking'.

"Makes Mom crazy," Jared said, "we've always—"

"—talked without words. It got us held back in First Grade—" Sam continued.

"—'cause we wouldn't talk to anybody but each other," Jared finished.

"And since we don't—"

"—have to say anything to talk—"

"—we got in trouble."

"But that teacher—"

"—wasn't very nice—"

"—and an idiot." Jared snorted.

"She thought we—"

"—were being smart asses."

"And," Sam shook his head, "when he got Scarlet Fever—"

"—in fifth grade—"

"—we got held back—"

"—again—"

"—'cause I wouldn't go—"

"—if I didn't go."

I felt like a ping-pong ball. I also knew they would be juniors come fall. "Wait, so you guys are eighteen already?"

"Just turned," Jared replied.

My enchantment doubled and I examined the military-minded twin curiously. "How come you don't just join up?"

"The Colonel—" he started.

"—says no son of his—" Jared frowned.

"—is signing up without—"

"—graduating high school."

"How old are you?" Sam asked.

"Seventeen. Since April."

Jared tsk-tsked. "And you're only a junior, too. What grade did you flunk?"

"I don't know. I had to take a test and it said I'll be in eleventh grade. My mom's really pissed. She says she's going to file a grievance, 'cause I should be a senior."

Sam flopped onto the floor and propped his chin on his arms. "What grade were you in at your old school?"

"I'm home educated."

Astonished, he said, "You mean your parents teach you?"

"My mom does. She's a good teacher, I think."

"Lucky you!" Jared exclaimed. "Wish I was home watchamacallit. Because, you know, sometimes school—"

"—really sucks," Sam finished.

"I hope not. I've never been."

"Never?"

Jared sat cross-legged next to me. "Not even kindergarten?"

"No."

"Don't worry," Sam said, "we'll make sure you're okay."

"Yeah," Jared added, "nobody'll mess with you."

"Thanks," I said with heartfelt gratitude. "I am a little scared."

Sam dismissed my fears. "There nothing to be scared of."

"Nope," Jared grinned, "not with the Madison twins around."



Basking in new friendship, the day quickly evaporated. As the sun slanted toward the dinner hour, Sam went to the bathroom and Jared seized the opportunity to stalk me down.

Wolf pawing a willing rabbit, he pinned me to the wall with ease. Close in, I inhaled his juicy aroma until it seeped down the back of my throat. My lips riper than the responsible grapes, as is my habit when I don't know what to say, I traced my bottom lip with my thumb. When his face descended, I felt as though I submerged into the womb of the pond. Moist with excitement, my palms pressed into the rough wall at my back, a trill of longing narrowing awareness to Jared's lips hovering inches from mine—and a tantalizing glimpse of tongue when he wet them made my breathless objection sound lame, even to me.

"Knock it off, Jared, I have to go."

"Not yet." He toyed with a strand of my hair, gentled me like a sparrow in his hand. "You can't go without a kiss."

And kiss me he did. In a way I had never been kissed. In a way I never dreamed of being kissed. A kiss that overshadowed all other kisses, made them pale and insignificant. His lips sparked an unrecognized fire, every caress of his tongue another poke at secreted embers, until I stood strapped to a stake in the middle of a conflagration, welcoming every flame lick seeking to consume me.

When Sam returned, I made a flustered, graceless exit, promising to return. I would have gone back even if they hadn't invited me. Because I would have cheerfully followed Satan straight into his personal boudoir to kiss that audacious twin again.

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

To this day, the smell of grapes takes me back to that afternoon, where I wonder if the rest of my life wasn't written the instant Jared kissed me.

## **Chapter 9—Braiding Hearts**

The Madisons welcomed me into their midst, giving me a taste of things I never experienced as an only child. Within weeks, they referred to me as 'our Laney', branding me a member of the family.

I met Joan when she and her mom returned from Ocean City. It wasn't hard to adore her because—well, you know Joanie. She's straight-from-the-hip and, despite a touch of cynicism that's come with age, always been a sweetheart. In those days, she fancied herself a fledging poet. When she could, she disappeared into mystical hollows for hours on end, where she scribbled line after line after line of truly bad verse. Ask her about it, she gets a huge kick out of dragging some out.

She likes to say you never know how far you've traveled without a little baggage to remind you.

Our friendship forged a little less quickly, through circumstance, not desire. Along with academic pursuits—she was and still is a brain of the first order—she worked for a family in Annville who had a deaf son. Other than a month with her mother at the shore, she spent weekdays and every other Saturday at the Bryson's. Lonnie Bryson was one of her classmates and simply needed a hearing companion while his folks worked. Originally, Joan learned the sign alphabet just so she could communicate with Lon and, with his help, by the time they hit high school, she was fluent in American signing.

Still, with three years between us, Joan and I eventually became the sisters we always hoped for. Our bond, however, remains put to the pale by our mothers—Mom and Margaret are close friends, too.

As an inveterate serviceman's wife, Margaret Madison is a force to be reckoned with. She ran the show with great success in the absence of her husband. Getting a little forgetful now but still a rock. She sold the farm eight or nine years ago and moved in with Joan—who welcomed the better cook with open arms.

We badgered Margaret into attending local senior's dances last year. A few months ago a dashing gentleman by the name of Hubert started dropping by. Hubie's a good guy and in light of the act he has to follow, very brave.

Because John Madison is irreplaceable. A stereotype if ever there lived, he was every inch the retired Marine one son so idolized. Principled, honorable, kind and courageous, there is also absolutely no question about where Jared got his charisma.

Then there's Sam. What can I say about Sammy. He could be sweet, considerate when his heart didn't get in the way, and like his sister, smart as they come. He and I both read so much, we eventually read the same books, at the same times, in the same places, so when we wanted to comment or discuss, we could.

While our brains always seemed to beat in intellectual time, the gender gap was a little more difficult to bridge. For instance, when it came to the slightest hint of competition, he let me win without a thought. Another trait the Colonel

passed on, I'm afraid, that compulsive habit of treating females with more solicitous respect than even orchids deserve.

It's a wonderful quality, don't get me wrong, but back then I had self-important opinions about equality. A woman can't appreciate pedestals until she's fallen off a few.

Yet the way I felt about Sam isn't easily compared to what I felt for his twin. There's not one rational argument for why I professed to be in love with one and not the other. Not when they were genetically identical. The same voice, same walk, same way of standing still—even the same smell so long as they ate the same food.

Scientists have tried to prove why we love who we do for a long time. There's fascinating studies with the mates of identical twins which indicate when it comes to attraction, genetics don't mean squat. For humans it seems love remains the eternal mysterious bitch and that's all there is to it.

Which leads me to Jared. Feeling how I felt about him is one thing, explaining it a different matter. Sometimes he acted so simple, I would have to laugh, even if I was royally pissed. He had a knack for divining tender spots and for knowing how to bolster someone's mood. His sharp humor glazed a fragile taffy center and I think he feared someone might find out just how soft he was inside more than anything.

Later, by the time he hit thirty-five, he had honed his natural divination and wit into superior salesmanship. His sense of humor underwent a metamorphosis, too, with silliness whittled into rapier-pointed arrows that could pierce

as well as please. I accepted his changes, he accepted mine and as we aged, sometimes I wore blinders about Jared and sometimes, I didn't. So the things I feel now are apt to be colored by twenty years of experiences versus the black-and-white headiness of the first months. So for the purpose of my story, I'm inclined to let events speak for themselves. Like when, come that first August, I got the flu.

The day hot and sticky, Jared and I were timing pond laps, trying to beat our personal speeds. Flopping into the grass, a stiff and painful throb settled at the base of my neck, my stomach lurched with sympathetic nausea, and I knew I was sick, not tired.

Standing over me, Jared frowned. "Maybe we should rest. You're white as a ghost."

"I don't feel so good," I bit biting back the roiling, bitter brine, "can you take me home?"

Supporting me when my legs wouldn't, he wrapped me in my towel. "Is your mom home yet?"

"Went to Aunt Carolyn's," I gulped, "back late."

"Okay, hold on, my keys are in the car."

He took the long way around, avoiding the rutted mountain road. Halfway there, words swam through my flooded mouth, sending drool into my lap as they escaped.

"Stop. Gonna puke."

Without slowing down, Jared said, "Do it out the window."

"Your car..."

"Can be washed easy outside."

I barely got my head out of the window. Hair streaming like a Labrador's ears, I spewed a trail along road and Riviera

with full equity. He loved that car. If I hadn't felt as shitty as I did, I would have been horrified.

With attentive efficiency, Jared led me into the house and straight to the bathroom, where he eased me onto the floor in front of the toilet. "Will you be okay while I get a towel?"

I nodded, motion renewing the nausea. He patted my back while I retched and waited for me to catch my breath before he left.

The world whirling, I groped for distraction and arrived at the moment I looked up to find Jared standing in the loft, watching me. I savored the buzzy warmth that spread through me as our eyes met, the breathless flutter caused by love at first sight. I reviewed the details, repeated them over and over in my mind until the spinning slowed.

I was concentrating so hard, I didn't realize Jared had returned until he touched my shoulder. "Can you sit up?"

Pulling my head out of the toilet, I gasped at the dancing earth. Jared my clearest point of reference, I focused on him while he wiped my face with a cool, wet cloth.

His care in removing my bathing suit and replacing it with a clean nightie rivaled any mother hen's. Like a rag doll in his hands, it didn't dawn on me to be modest—he had already groped everything revealed in the light of day anyway.

Finally snug in bed, I managed to murmur appreciation for his nursemaid duties. "Thanks. I'll be okay until Mom gets home."

"Sleep. I'll stay till she does."

"Don't have to," I said as the mattress began to merge with my brain.

"Go to sleep."

Quiet bathed the room. While my rising fever searched for unconsciousness, I was faintly surprised when Jared picked up a book and opened it. The red and gold cover clearer than his face, I remember thinking, 'If Bradbury doesn't hook him, nothing will.'

"Thank you," I whispered, reaching for him even though the movement disrupted my level edge, turning it into a dizzy spiral. "I couldn't have..."

He dismissed it. "What, do you think I would've left you by the pond?"

"No, just—just for being so nice."

"Laney." He took my hand and pressed it to his face. "I love you. I'm no good with fancy words like Sammy, but I'd do anything for you. This is easy. Thank me when we're ninety like Nana and Pop and I have to wipe your butt."

Despite my stomach, I smiled. "I love you, too."

"Good. Now go to sleep."

That's where Mom found us: me murmuring my love and twitching with febrile dreams, Jared fast asleep on the floor, still holding my hand. He must have left at least once since my swimsuit had been rinsed and was drying in the laundry room. But Mom said you never would've known because when she patted his arm, he reached for me before he opened his eyes.

Years later, after Jared was gone, Mom admitted when she saw his car in front of the dark house, the scene she expected was quite different from the one she found. She said that's when she knew I had a partner, knew the concerned young



Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

man she tucked into the guest room would be her son-in-law,  
and the thought filled her with a mother's peace for our  
future.

## **Chapter 10—Thresholds**

As seasons have a habit of doing, summer reluctantly gave way to fall and school turned out to be nothing like I expected. My ideas about it came from books and movies and I thought it would be the urban frenzy most described. In the rural high school, however, there were precious few kids who didn't have responsibilities waiting at home, and other than sports, there wasn't much outside activity. Despite every last one of my fears, I made friends—showing up as the new girl already hanging around with Jared Madison surely didn't hurt.

All-in-all, my life found a pace. The twins, Joanie and I went to parties and Upper Hanover High had dances once a month. The drive-ins were a treat since it took forty-five minutes to get there and we managed to go infrequently until late autumn.

In November, winter steamrolled the mountain with a blizzard that piled snow hip-deep. A sleet storm followed in a few days, thoughtfully adding a crystalline shell to everything without bias—roofs, tree limbs, power lines, rocks and roads alike—its icy attention to detail spared nothing. A great thing for kids, since it also transformed the logging trail into the world's finest sled hill. And the second school was declared closed, we went running into the gift horse's mouth equipped with aluminum saucers considered much too dangerous for today's safety conscious ilk.

Over and over, we sped down the mountainside straight into a snow bank erected simply so we could stop. It was a

screaming, swiftly careening, three-quarter mile ride with no brakes or steering besides body weight—I swear, if Hershey Park could package that baby, they'd be open all year!

Jared and I took a turn at rebuilding the rudimentary speed bump, pelting each other with snowballs while the forest's icy limbs dampened our laughter.

A better shot by far, my aim rarely missed. When I hit him smack in the back of the head for the third time and prepared to go for a fourth, he rushed me, plunging us both into the snow bank.

"Land Shark," he pronounced dead pan, his weight bearing me deeper into the snow, wedging us in a snug hole the *Call of the Wild* dogs would envy.

"Get off me, you jerk. You can't hit a target for nothing."

"Maybe not," his lips brushed mine, "but I'm damn good with smaller targets."

Warmth flowed from his tongue and spread through me until I thought we would melt the snow around us. Wallowing in his eyes, bluer than usual in the white-robed world, I said, "I love kissing you."

His hand burrowed under my heavy coat and sweater and tickled my stomach. "You love this, too." He teased my breast, turning our breaths into puffs of excitement. We both wore jeans as well as long-johns, but I still felt Jared's erection rise until, with cherubic hopefulness, he said, "Will you rub me, Laney?"

"Yes, but hurry, before Joanie and—"

He had his fly open before I finished and while I tugged off my mittens, dug into his thermals like a miner and yanked his

beleaguered appendage into daylight. Wrapping it in my hand, I pumped with efficient confidence—the alacrity with which I learned to please him still amazes me—there was never a talent I honed more eagerly.

Stifling groans against my lips, his hand snaked back undercover, milked a turgid nipple in cadence with my stroking until a sharp cry announced his finale.

"Thank you," he murmured, holding my eyes as he tucked up. "Here..." Always willing to give as good as get, he rolled me back, unzipped my coat and pushed my sweater up. Tongue-tip teased quickly cooling skin and he suckled my nipples with deliberation. I squirmed, pushed my hips into his. His thigh slipped between mine, pressed firmly into my crotch and pried a lust-laced laugh from my belly.

We had been messing around for a couple of months by then. Jared never—forgive the pun—pushed for penetration. He didn't have to since every orgasm he elicited with his hands made me yearn to go a little further. If he knew what he was doing, it worked. If he didn't—we always joke how there's a whole frigging list of things that made him the luckiest bastard on earth, so I guess that would be one entry. Either way, yessiree-Bob and boy-o-boy, did it ever work. Like a locomotive speeding towards a switch, I moved ever closer to the looming precipice of going all the way.

But there, in a world waxed white above and below, inside and out, wantonly humping Jared's leg, I decided when the time came, I would give him my virginity. As if he read my mind, he wriggled into me, nudged my hip with his sequestered flesh, proving he was ready again.

I wanted him. God, how I wanted him. Still, part of me remained reluctant to cross the last threshold. While my body begged for more almost to the point of pain, my brain stubbornly refused to follow, refused to take on the adult responsibilities I believed come with sex.

My heart, on the other hand, had more compunctions than my body but certainly fewer than my brain. Jared and I fit well. Whether we rode snowmobiles up and down the mountain or sliced through the pond lap after lap, we could spend an entire day laughing so hard we couldn't talk. He treated me as a physical equal—a first for a male in my experience. He challenged me, then pushed me to reach deeper into my resourcefulness and stamina to beat him, a challenge whole-heartedly reflected in our make-out sessions.

Joan's shriek reached us moments before her sled appeared. Too late we scrambled. She hit the speed wall, sending a barrage of snow to fill my open parka. I screeched, leapt to my feet, frantically tried to scoop it out.

Realizing my difficulty, she about died laughing. Dear friend that she was and is, we shared all the best girly things like clothes, make-up, secrets about boys—including me being in love with her brother. Joan didn't worry, though. She figured it meant we would be real sisters one day.

At least Joanie only rolled her eyes over us. Jared and I irritated the hell out of Sam. He acted like we were deranged sex maniacs and went out of his way to abort anything he deemed romantic nonsense.

Between Sam's pique and Jared's arrogance, my paradise definitely wasn't perfect. Like later that evening, while our

parents played cards at my house and Joan and I were doing homework in the Madison kitchen. We started talking about her book report and the discussion lured Sam away from turning summer photographs into drawings—the first in which I would appear.

"But what made you think Maxim loved Rebecca?" Sam carefully packed away his charcoal sticks. "He never says he did, only Mrs. Danvers does."

"The point of view seems clear," I said, "but yes, they were assumptions. Maybe DuMarier's saying there's a very thin line between love and hate?"

Jared appeared from the basement and scowled. "Are you guys still talking about books?"

"If you would read one," Joan suggested, "maybe you'd have an opinion, too."

He growled, "I thought we were going to paint the barn."

Sam dismissed him. "Later."

"I'm going out awhile. Laney, you coming with?"

"I'll be out then. I have to get this paper done."

"But with men, you never know," Sam continued. "Usually it's not what they say but what they do that shows how they feel."

"That's true," Joan agreed. "Dad's idea of romantic is the Army-Navy game, but he watches old movies with Mom, even when he thinks they're dorky."

"Exactly."

Jared slammed the back door hard.

"Do you think he's mad at me?" I asked.

His twin snorted. "Of course he's PO'ed. He's not getting his way."

I climbed into my parka. "I'm going to check."

Sam huffed. "Why do you always do what he wants?"

I could have pointed out that most of time Sam did likewise. "I don't always do what he wants."

"Yes, you do. And it's just stupid, if you ask me."

"Nobody's asking you, Sam."

I found Jared painting the loft's shutters, kerosene heater blasting away. The clubhouse, as we took to calling it, was really shaping up. We painted the walls light blue and the twins had muscled up an old wooden rocker that afternoon—an easier task than getting the battered sofa aloft.

Jared cheerfully kissed my cheek as I shrugged out of my coat. Sam was right, even if I wouldn't admit it. When Jared wanted what he wanted, he had a habit of giving me crap or pouting until I felt guilty enough to give in. Why precisely I felt guilty may be open to interpretation, but giving in was better than letting his funk degenerate into a temper. Dad always says, if you want to play with a boa constrictor, whatever you do, don't poke it with a stick first.

So I took the bright smile in stride and examined the paint can's warnings. "I don't know about this, Jared, it might be too cold to adhere."

"Adhere? I got some adhesion ideas."

It took nothing more to drop me into a bucket of lusty need thicker and whiter than the fresh paint. If I knew then what I know now about hormones, perhaps he wouldn't have owned me like he did. Arguably, burgeoning sexuality had a

lot to do with it, but I felt love so strong, I swore not even God could keep us apart. Although I still believe there was more to it than simple sex, otherwise we wouldn't have been as happy as we managed to be.

Winter or not, it didn't take much before our clothes were open and our combined temperature surpassed that of the heater. Jared's hardened flesh made me salivate, led me to crouch between his thighs.

Fellatio was an act that excited me from the time Ann and I discovered its existence in a purloined copy of *The Sensuous Woman*. And by enthusiastically endeavoring to master the art, I found it to be everything I expected and more. I dare say it did as much for me as it ever did for Jared. Setting him off with my mouth not only gave me a powerful feminine rush, it also resulted in Jared's total enslavement, something he never tried to control.

That being said, it didn't take long for his arousal to be abated. Afterward, I sat with my cheek against his thigh while he petted my breast.

Sweetly woozy, he mumbled, "Give me a sec, Laney, then I'll do something for you, too, okay?"

"Incoming!" Sam's shout sent us scurrying to look as innocent as possible. Not that we fooled him. "Quit messing around," he grouched, "this isn't a love nest, y'know."

"Leave them alone, Sammy." Joan appeared on his heels. "Sorry, guys. We thought you wanted help."

Brusquely flipping off his twin, Jared hopped up to oversee operations. "There are extra brushes in the box," he



instructed, planting a proprietary kiss on my forehead, "and some rags."

I caught Sam's lapis eyes glowering over his brother's shoulder and I wished he would get over whatever bugged him. Joan insisted it had to do with the twin thing. She said before me, they never did much separate. Since I showed up, though, they even twin talked less than they used to.

I found that sad somehow, and it made me determined to be Sam's best friend. I liked him a lot. I wanted him to like me, too. Which is why, since he treated me very well one-on-one, I went out of my way to be kind when he got moody.

So I smiled into his frown and, when he continued to brood, tilted my chin in question. He finally smiled back and whatever had darkened his eyes fled from the joy of those delightful dimples. "I've been thinking about putting words on the walls," he said. "Poetry we like or lines from books. Maybe a couple drawings."

Jared scowled.

"Or songs, if you want."

That eased his double's tight jaw. "Boss. Like American Pie?"

"You need a whole wall for that," Joan said.

"There's four walls—" Jared began.

"—and four of us," Sam finished. "A wall each would be great."

Joan headed for the ladder. "I have a bunch of magic markers. They should work even when it's cold."

"Solid idea, Sammy." I gave him a hip-check as he studied the empty space with a critical eye. "What'cha going to put up first?"

"Kubla Khan, I think."

I had to laugh. "Our Xanadu."

"As e're beneath a waning moon was haunted, by woman wailing for her demon lover."

His brother snorted like a derisive bull. "Why not *Charge of the Light Brigade*?"

"Shut up, Jared," I said. "Xanadu, yes—but I don't know about the 'prophesying war' part."

"Interpretation. Interpretation. Interpretation," Sam mimicked a favorite teacher.

"You two are so queer." Jared rolled his eyes. "Don't put any of that crap near mine, okay?"

## **Chapter 11—Smoke and Moonlight**

A week after my eighteenth birthday, under an April moon veiling the woods in pearled fantasy, I made my way over the mountain. All poetics aside, it wasn't the first time I would meet Jared in the middle of the night. My feet already knew every rock and root wed to the trail, leaving me free to enjoy the way moonlight decorates apprehensive excitement.

The last hurdle. A hurdle which would finally put me on even keel with Jared. Since he was years beyond losing his virginity—as was, he confided, Sam—not only did my sense of competition object to my reluctance, my libido had started to use the inequality to justify sleeping with my favorite opponent.

With a twist, the uneven playing field extended to Sam, too, once Jared revealed poor Sammy had yet to find a girl willing suck his cock. And if competition between Jared and I waged fierce, it wilted in the shadow of the contest raging between the twins from, Madison legend has it, the moment Jared followed Sam from the womb.

No surprise Jared told Sam about our oral antics. One, he wouldn't have been able to resist lording such tasty information over his twin's head. Two, even though Jared refused to admit that he gave Sam details, the way Sammy began to obsessively study my mouth when he thought I wasn't looking made it obvious he had. Besides, for all they liked to bicker, the twins had no secrets. What one knew, the other learned and by girlfriend osmosis, eventually I did, too.

So since we knew everything about each other anyway, I wasn't embarrassed to have Sam privy to my favorite form of foreplay.

Instead, I found a sense of amatory pride in his knowledge, along with an uneasy, guilty wish that I could even the score for all of us with a little sixty-nine—a wish carrying enough power to haunt my dreams.

But back to my agenda as I hiked to the farm. My sensual nature wide awake, the time had arrived to embrace love's biggest mystery. At the end of February, I had even summoned the courage to talk to Mom about it. In her usual wonderful way, she reassured me desire was natural and healthy. Then she also offered the sensibility of abstinence—her 'don't do as I did, do as I say' pitch—followed the next morning by an announcement that we would visit the gynecologist to procure The Pill.

And sitting in the doctor's office, mom grinning at me like we were about to rob a bank, I wondered what she would think about the dreams that plagued me. The dreams where I rode one twin while the other filled my mouth. Dreams I woke from drenched in sweat and aroused to the point I had to masturbate to get back to sleep.

Not that I believed there was anything unusual about those dreams. I hungered to be full, to experience penetration with every orifice and my subconscious simply found a way to satisfy a growing need.

Still, whatever the psychological bent, those dreams didn't scare me off my mission that virginal spring night, rather they made me determined to proceed.

Jared didn't have a clue. And there, in the silent woods, hugging the future had me worked into a wonderful, romantic froth. He loved me already. He would love me even more after. He would be surprised but so touched by my gift, that he would strive to make my first time as beautiful as it could possibly be.

Confident in my youth, in my incomplete femininity, I skipped along, high on a mixture of expectation, anticipation and curiosity laced with exhilarating dread. Pure adrenaline propelled me over Blue Mountain that night. Remembering the rush even now, I'm not surprised farmers lift tractors thanks to its surges.

At the farm, light spilled from the kitchen windows, even though the elder Madisons were usually early-to-bedders. Cautiously, I skirted the yard and eased into the barn on cat feet.

Greeted by silence, I called, "Jared?"

"Shh," he hissed from the loft. "Mom's still awake, so be quiet, okay?"

I headed up the ladder, hands slick with nerves. On the last rung I slipped.

A hand shot out of the dark and grabbed me, nostalgic parody of the first time I climbed into the loft.

"Jeez, I almost fell."

"Shhh." He towed me into the clubhouse. Outer doors open, the moon drenched the space with incandescent, false dusk. Notions of romance continued to flow strong and I thought it an appropriate setting for the twilight of my innocence.

"Hi," I grinned at the man about to know me Biblically,  
"how about a kiss?"

"Shhh," he hissed again. "Mom's—"

"Don't worry," I scolded gently, "she won't hear us unless  
we—"

The rest of my observation vanished when he pulled me  
into his arms and, impatient as usual, ravished my mouth like  
we hadn't kissed only hours before.

Intensity growing by leaps and vaults, I embraced the  
memory in the making, the last kiss we would share before  
everything between us changed forever.

Words unnecessary, once we were naked, the old sofa  
cushioned our locked limbs. Initial frenzy dissolving into  
searing sweet explorations, his mouth honored my breasts as  
if they belonged to Venus herself, while his fingers stroked  
my stomach as delicately as a lion's whiskers. Nuzzling his  
throat, my tongue traveled through collarbone hollows.  
Petting his torso in conjunction, I pausing only to tug at wiry  
curls where they thickened below his navel.

Tasting the wider breadth of his shoulders, then nipping  
over the slopes of his chest, I drank in his salty musk mixed  
with the fragrance of spring's first grape blossoms.

Proceeding perfectly, I believed without any doubt that our  
souls were in such synchronicity, his body divined my intent.  
His hand slipped between my legs, teased my swamped  
clitoris with generous deliberation. I arched into his probing,  
unable to stifle my moans. His mouth muffling my cries, his  
hardness drew desire over my hip until I intervened, grasping

the heated flesh, outlining the sensitive helmet with my thumb.

"God," he choked, "I'm so hard, that's..." I circled the brim, pressed the hot spot below the tip, melted his words into a groan. After some seconds, request barely audible, he whispered, "Would you suck me, Laney? Please?"

I snorted. Like he needed to say please. "Lay on your back first."

Stretched full length on the sofa, the moon sketched the muscular curves of his abdomen in charcoal, put the appendage rising above it in sharply-shadowed relief. I straddled him, rubbed the wetness between my legs along his swollen penis—and when I nestled his very ready head against my eager entrance, I fancied it a monumental tease since it was as far as I consented to go in the past. Poised to consummate our union as full adults, then, and only then, I asked, "Do you know how much I love you?"

"Laney, I..." His response a ragged whisper, I strained to hear. A sudden shudder rolled his pelvis under my thighs.

"What was that?" Oh-so-cocky I taunted, then hitched forward as his wriggling threatened early invasion—it was my virginity, thank you, and I would choose the moment.

The way he tightly closed his eyes, his answer taut as his abdomen under my hands, I thought he concentrated on controlling himself. "I love you, Helena," he said, guttural and ferocious, "I love you so much it hurts."

"Good." Pleased he used my Christian name at that delicate moment, without further fanfare, I relaxed my thighs and took him prisoner. The swiftness with which his organ

pierced me was unexpected. The stretching, singular flash of pain was not.

"God, Laney, oh God," he cried softly.

Completely sheathed in nature's design, adjusting to the flood of foreign eroticism as his heat spread through me from inside, I rasped a reply. "Is it nice?"

Head buried in the cushions, eyes wide, his mouth went slack. Filled with immense, profound joy, I almost forgot to move—but when I did begin a rhythm, lioness dominated the lion until he recovered his senses and pushed up to meet me. Prideful of the way I robbed him of speech, I cupped my breasts, arched my back, held myself just above reach, made him work for each new incursion.

After a few minutes, displaying the graceful strength to which I succumbed, he lifted me, deposited me on my back, leaving me empty—although thankfully not for long.

Without another word, he wrapped my legs around his waist, grasped my hips and impaled me with a grunt. His weight behind the deeper penetration made it more deliciously intimate, as if I had opened my soul as wide as my thighs, given myself the way lovers' poetry described.

"It's better than I thought it would be," I murmured reverently, savoring the unique oneness only a woman can appreciate.

He stilled, worked his arms around my shoulders and hugged me hard, a position that underscored the solidity of our union. Snuffling my hair, his lips made their way to my ear. "I'll never forget this, Laney," he murmured, "not as long as I live."



"I feel so—yours now."

"We're not finished yet," he said, and began an easy rhythm.

The fullness spread with each thrust, shrouding every last one of my cells with the beauty of nature's design. I wanted to laugh with sheer delirious happiness. A woman had made the oldest sacrifice there is, and once again it transformed primitive male into tender lover.

Before I could respond, before I could tell him he damn well better remember, he increased that basic human friction, that flesh-upon-flesh nuclear reaction that strips away every shred of cognitive ability. His body invading mine was beautiful, astounding, so overwhelming I wanted to scream my delectation, shout the perfection of it to the heavens. Instead, mindful of ears awake in the house, I mewled my Nirvana as something began to build along with the growing frenzy of his thrusts, something sending currents of ecstasy coursing between my rocky nipples and soaked tunnel. Not at all like an orally induced rise, or the kind that grew from stroking each other. No, this was a rising cloud of silky sand, an enveloping heat hungrily pursuing me while my raw-soul skin begged to be consumed.

His hips slowed, the cloud threatened to dissipate. I cried out, pleaded for him to continue. "Don't stop—please—I'm close, so close—"

My supplication interrupted by a renewed pistoning, when his thumb also found my clit, circled it, pressed it, lightning struck dead center in my belly. The sand storm plunged over me, radiant red light spearing into my brain, spinning me

through the infinite nothingness and everythingness the French so rightly dub Little Death. Passionate whimpering trapped in my throat, my vagina gripped and released his hammering organ with pulses stronger than I ever thought possible. And no sooner did they begin to subside when another climb started, a second orgasm that would easily follow the first.

"God!" I panted, gazing into the intense blue eyes above me, wishing I could see them clearly as he labored toward his own culmination.

His eyes never left mine as I rolled into the second peak, shuddering and shaking while he continued to plumb the depths of my desire. Regaining control of my muscles, I locked my ankles around his waist, pulled him tighter into the ageless position and urged him toward his well-deserved climax with a growl, "Come in me, babe, do it now."

"Fuck, Laney," the oath sputtered hoarse with awe, "Your pussy squeezes my cock so fucking hard when you come."

My body tightened in surprise, bred a shock that only made my sheath milk him harder. A host of displaced familiarities combined with that particular four-letter word to produce a sure knowledge bleeding into my stomach like mutiny.

"Sam?"

His explosion arrived, jerked into me under his cry of delight—and even as he fired, I was struggling, clawing my way out from under, spitting snarling snapping, shaking with rage.

"I can't believe you played switch on me! *Me*, Sam!" Tears full of disappointment and, God help me, still laced with vibrant, gnawing pleasure—thickened my anger. "Jared is going to kill you!"

A sure belief I harbored for scant seconds, until I ran smack into the devil himself, standing in the doorway—chest damp, scent aroused, his jeans were unzipped and his hard-on far from newborn.

Jared put a hand on my shoulder. "Hang on. Don't be mad at Sammy. This wasn't his idea."

As if that made everything all right, that Jared not only engineered my humiliation but watched it play out, too.

Hauling back, I smacked him with as much force as I could muster. I whipped back for another shot and he grabbed my wrist, yanked me into his arms. My teeth sunk into his shoulder, the taste of blood prefacing my hasty release.

Wracked with sobs I desperately wanted to curtail, I pulled on my clothes as fast as I could. Jared mutely zipped up, staring at me like his last meal. And despite my not sparing his twin any glares, Sam remained naked where I left him and looked anywhere—everywhere—but at me.

Scraping up what tattered dignity I could find, I stated my opinion of their stunt loud and clear. "Don't you ever come near me again. Either of you. Not ever! Do you hear me?"

"Come on, Laney," Jared pleaded. "I thought you'd suck him off, that's all."

"All? *All*? Fuck you, Jared Madison. Fuck you straight to hell."

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*by Deborah Boyer*

"I wish it had been me," he called as I fled past him—past Sam, who still wouldn't look at me.

## **Chapter 12—He On Honey Dew Hath Fed**

I cried so hard I dry-heaved, then piled foolishness on top of anger and humiliation. No one in the kitchen could see a light in the clubhouse. Turning one on would have revealed the twins conspiracy, aborted it before it began. It was their eyes, damn it! I knew the difference between their eyes!

Most appalling of all, as dawn crept over my windowsill I realized I wasn't angry about the sex. I felt betrayed, yes, but in no way molested. That frightened me as much as the memory of the wrong twin's caresses aroused me. I wrestled with many monsters that long night and my tainted happiness produced a confusion I can't describe even now.

When I heard my parents stir, I scribbled a note and left to seek solitude—if my mother saw me, she would know something terrible happened.

A dozen yards down the lane, Sam waited under a birch, his hunkered form subdued in the aura of fresh day. Not that I trusted my eyes but Jared wouldn't have been caught dead in camos.

Back ramrod, face forward, I marched by without a glance in his direction. Just like he ignored me the night before.

"Laney," he called, low and anxious.

"Get lost!" I didn't feel like being quiet.

"Helena, wait, please," his voice was filled with anguish, a fact I noted with perverse pleasure, "I want to talk to you about what happened."

Desperate not to burst into tears, I forced my reply through clenched teeth. "Go. Away. You got what you wanted, now leave me alone."

"I didn't want—that's not what—oh for fuck sake, give me a chance to explain."

I kept walking, although I couldn't resist a parting shot. "Why must you use 'fuck' in every sentence? Do you think that's all there is to being a Marine?"

Trailing me, he said, "No, of course not. It's just a good word."

"Quit following me!"

"Are you going to tell Joan?"

That stopped me. I wrapped my arms around my shoulders. Leave it to him to worry about his sister. I didn't think about how the situation might impact her. No, all I thought about was the twins' betrayal, my shame and, the pinnacle of humiliation, the exquisite things Sam did to me before I realized their duplicity. Selfish me hadn't spared my girlfriend a thought but spent the time wondering with gutting agony how different my first time would have been with Jared—and then weeping with self-disgust because I suspected it wouldn't have been near so sweet or cherishable.

But they tricked me! That's the part I tried to concentrate on, the part that made me want to beat their heads in, tear out their eyes, kick, claw, scream, rage—all the while loving them both for different reasons. Yet standing there with Sam's restless shuffling sending his guilt crawling over me like a battalion of carpenter ants, I knew I would never tell Joan—that I would die of mortification if she ever found out.

"I'm really, really sorry," Sam said to my stone back. "If I could change it, I would. I knew I shouldn't do it but I wanted to be with you so bad, just once, and I know you'll never— Jared made it sound so fucking simple," he added grimly. "That's a lame excuse, I know that, too. I'm a giant asshole with free will and I messed up all on my own. Just—is there— tell me what I've got to do to fix it, Helena. Tell me, and I'll do it."

His fragmented excuse was better than he knew. If Jared set his mind to it, Sam hadn't stood a chance. That meant there existed the distinct possibility he was a victim, too— giving me a reason to forgive.

I risked a glance over my shoulder. "First, you have to swear you will never pretend to be Jared again."

A snap to attention demonstrated Sam's willingness to stand by his word. "I swear. On the Corps itself. What else?"

"We never tell Joanie."

"Agreed."

"I'm sure there's more, but I haven't decided what."

"Now or fifty years from now, name anything, I'll do it."

I finally turned to meet his impassioned determination. "When people are friends, Sammy, they have to be honest, never lie and always tell the truth. If Jared ever gets on your case again, you have to tell me right away, okay?"

"Okay. Then..." He paused, considered me for long seconds before blurting confession in a single breath. "I meant what I said I love you so much it hurts."

*What?* I didn't know whether to laugh at the absurdity or cry with horror. "Well you really have a shitty way of showing it."

My curt response snuffed his hopeful face and he dropped his lashes in defense. "You're right. I do."

"So, it was Jared's idea." I avoided his declaration, pretended I didn't notice the sheen of tears that appeared faster than he could cover them, and took the first step toward a lifetime of Sam and I doing our best to ignore the most basic truth between us. "Where is that rat bastard? I'm going to make him fucking pay."

\* \* \* \*

I steeled my resolve on the trail. No matter how hard he tried to talk me out of being supremely pissed off, no matter what weapons of mass charm he trotted out, Jared Madison would *not* get away with it.

By the time I found him near the pond, I was the epitome of woman wronged and much more inclined to shred than roar. Seeing me coming, he leapt to his feet, protestations fading under the onslaught of my wrath. I slapped him. Repeatedly. I called him every name I could think of, then added a few from Sam's repertoire. I do believe I managed to introduce every last one of Fuck-You's relations that day.

Of course Jared groveled and pleaded as eloquently as ever. He didn't mean anything by it. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt me. He didn't think I would ever know. He did it because he loved me and couldn't tell me he was a pervert. He was a pervert because he wanted to watch me suck Sam.



He knew it sounded sick but thinking about it turned him on. Blah blah blah. I could give you every last detail of every last excuse—God knows I've listed them often enough in my head. Suffice to say, despite my vow not to believe a word, from the depths of his arsenal, Jared produced trump:

Sobbing, tears streaming, he begged my forgiveness on his knees. All that irresistible arrogance melting into helpless weeping appeased some warped sense of righteousness, and I caved like a fucking house of cards.

The next thing I knew, Jared kissed me and I let him. My hormones didn't give a damn about my psyche and joined right in to convince me it had all been a horrible mistake. Which is why, stretched out in the tall grass by the pond, when Jared started asking questions about my experience with his twin, it never occurred to me to lie about how good it had been.

Consequently, I ended up lying there wondering how I could hate Jared for arranging something I so thoroughly enjoyed. He may have thought wanting to watch me perform perverse, but I knew that I was even more depraved. All I could think about as Jared's insidious fingers increased their range into my shorts, were dream images of the twins consuming me together.

I responded to his questions with increasing enthusiasm, described exactly how I felt pinned beneath Sam's weight, the whole time imaging how decadent it would be to suckle Sammy while Jared rutted fiercely between my legs. After all, the one thing I hadn't done was fellate Sam—a failure I rued as his brother's erection molded into my thigh.

Tweaking my equally erect clit, Jared murmured, "I wish I could have seen better. If I can talk Sam into it, will you do it again and let me watch?"

My initial negative was unintelligible as fantasy and suggestion collided, sweeping me into a shuddering, babbling, mind-numbing orgasm. Jared had cajoled me into giving him what he wanted and when I could breathe again, I presented him with a tenuous agreement—one that allowed me a measure of control.

"I won't screw him again, but if you want to watch me suck him off and he says it's okay, I'll do it."

"God, I love you."

His face as he said it haunts me still. Of course he did. I was willing to do anything, no matter how demeaning, if it made him happy and—no. Stop. That's not right. That's not the way things were. If I'm going to tell the story, I have to be honest for once and tell it like it is, even the parts I don't want to acknowledge. The truth is, by the time I floated back to earth, there was nothing I wanted more than to turn my dream into reality.

I had sex with my twin that afternoon, and I did it without encouragement or recrimination. As suspected, Jared's sensitivity to my pleasure didn't approach Sam's, although our lovemaking contained a feral quality that, in some bent way, made up for it as we coupled again and again, each seeking to conquer the other. Did I protest, try to gentle him like a rangy stallion? No, not me. I sucked his thumb with relish as he pounded into me, imagining how heady Sam's

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genteel consideration combined with Jared's ferocity might be.

Was I actually in love with them both? Probably. Was it my lascivious nature? I want to believe that had a great deal to do with it—more likely, I think, it was simply a platinum example of just how twisted Fate can be.

## **Chapter 13—Brother's Keeper**

It took exactly one week for Sam to capitulate, a record even for Jared. He surrendered to me and not his counterpart, although another week would pass before I realized it.

I was reading in the clubhouse when Sam appeared, demanding, "Do you know what he's up to?"

"Who?"

"You know fucking well who."

"Jared?"

"Yes." Sammy stood there, eyes repeatedly meeting mine and flying away quicker than a bee sting. Obviously searching for courage, once he found it, quietly and succinctly, he said, "The bastard says you want to do us both."

Hearing it so baldly, I paled. "That's not exactly what I said."

Sam huffed, ruffled his hair and fell onto the sofa. "Then what did you say?"

I studied my hands. They trembled. "I told him if you were willing, I'd give you a blow-job while he watched."

"Jesus Fucking Christ," he blurted, "you're not serious?"

The single word took enormous effort to pronounce. "Yes." It echoed, hanging ripe between us. I couldn't bring myself to look at him, but I swear the three letters of my affirmative glowed in the air like some distorted mobile.

"Because you want to, or because he wants you to?"

"I'm not sure." I lifted my eyes to find him sitting on the edge of the sofa, elbows to knees, head down. "Does it matter?"

"Yes, it does." Both hands ruffled his hair, squeezed his head. "I won't do it, Laney. I'm not sure I could—not both of us. I don't want him watching me. Not again. It wasn't a good—no, just no."

"That's okay," I said, surprised to be relieved, "I told him it's up to you."

"If you ever—I mean, you and me without..." He raised his gaze, eyes writhing with emotion like I writhed beneath him in the dark—he was so very easy to read then. "I'm yours, Helena," he said gruffly, "all you ever have to do is ask."

I can't tell you how often I've turned it over, prying, analyzing, dissecting, trying to understand why I didn't let go of Jared and turn to Sam. The best explanation I have is I somehow felt compelled to keep Sam at arm's length because Jared was actually the weaker twin. Under all the bravado and portrayals of leadership, Jared desperately needed me to sustain his self-worth and required concrete evidence that his love was returned.

I also think Sammy understood that, even if he didn't fully recognize it. The strength underlying his soft spoken manner didn't need outside confirmation. His love didn't require permission or validation. He loved me, would always love me, and he didn't have to destroy his womb-mate in order to continue loving me.

And, you know, to break Jared's heart and take up with Sam was something I simply wasn't brave enough to do. All

hell would have broken loose and I didn't have the fortitude to be a wedge in their oneness. They were complete opposites maybe, but the bond they shared ran to the deepest depths of their existence.

Although I do wish Sam had kissed me that afternoon, instead of offering only a resolute smile as he left. If he had, Bradbury's butterfly would have been crushed in an instant, along with his twin's heart.

But we would have been happy, Sam and I. And Jared might still be alive to hate us for it.

\* \* \* \*

It didn't take long to discover the armless rocker made a superior stage for sex. In summer's high humidity, when you've got your choice of doing it on fuzzy velour or smooth wood, you go with the wood.

So to speak.

A few days after I reported that Sam declined to join our games, Jared wanted to know how many times we could get off before crying uncle. Willing to oblige his curiosity and soaked inside and out, with my lower lips spread like angel's wings around his swollen member, that old rocker made the first peaks way too easy.

Mutually striving toward number three, Jared suddenly pulled me against his sweat-slick chest and nipped my neck. "I've got a surprise."

Still concentrating on our contest, I yowled, "No fair! I was almost—"

Lips to my ear, he said quite clearly, "Sammy says yes."

"He said no," I struggled upright, "I told you he said no."

"Changed his mind." Jared grinned over my shoulder.

I stiffened, unable to breathe knowing Sam stood in the doorway. I wanted to look. I was afraid to look.

"You promise, right, Sammy?"

"Yes," Sam's gruff concurrence cemented his presence as more than a daydream, "I won't forget."

"Forget what?" I whispered to Jared.

"He promised he'll stick with your mouth, like you said."

"Oh." I felt Sam close the gap, sending goosebumps to pucker my nipples with awareness. I couldn't really do it, could I?

"Only if that's what you want." A low, emphatic rumble, Sam's next statement raised the hair on my arms as he contradicted himself, revealing his uncertainty mirrored mine. "If you want me to leave or if you want me to—do something else, it's your decision. Not his. Okay?"

Jared searched my face anxiously. "Okay, Laney?"

"Okay," I said without looking at his brother, afraid he would see just how confused—and aroused—I was.

But Sam required full consent. He grasped my chin, forced me to meet his eyes, stated that need with precise emphasis. "Say you want this, Helena. Spell it out, or I'm gone."

I used to believe in free will. I could argue the ins-and-outs of it down to the ground. Now, I'm not so sure. Do you have one of those moments where the rest of your life turned on it? One of those moments you look back at, point to with authority and say: 'There. Right there. That's when I gave away control over what would come.' You know, a moment

where you followed impulse and changed the course of absolutely everything. Doesn't matter how smart you are. Doesn't matter how much sense you usually display. Right or wrong, good or bad, no matter what the situation is, you simply react as though the outcome is a foregone conclusion.

It's those moments that make one hell of an argument for Manifest Destiny and the fact remains that as my eyes held Sam's, with my body already feverish astride his brother, it was to be one of those very moments. I wanted to. I shouldn't want to. I couldn't. I could.

In the end, I followed impulse rather than rationalize, summarily choosing the path from which my fulgent fantasy called, followed avarice toward that siren's tantalizing glimpse of naughty but nice and answered him sincerely. "I want you in my mouth. God, Sammy, it's all I can think about."

Pleased, Jared groaned, pushed my hips up to reposition himself. Granted permission to proceed, Sam kissed me with unhurried indulgence, with the same famished reverence as the night of their perfidy. By then I understood what his kiss said all too well—it said he loved me with a depth I couldn't fathom, that he would be with me however, whenever, I wanted, and the whys of it were nothing more than empty details.

My heart broke a little, thinking what he most wanted I couldn't give. But knowing, understanding, divining the truth, did I stop him? Did I push him away, beg him not to love me? No. I did not. Instead, with impatient, self-centered deliberation, I pushed away the epiphany, refused it, ignored it, pretended I felt nothing in return. I would be Marie



Antoinette, have my cake, eat every last crumb, lick the icing from my fingers and send my subjects to hell on the dirty plate.

Sam sucked my tongue and I pulled his hands to my breasts as Jared stabbed into me balls-deep. I spilled groans into one twin's mouth as the other worked up a bone jarring rhythm. When Sam finally broke our kiss, I gasped as much from the loss of his lips as his brother's thrusts.

"I love you," Jared murmured, once again sheathing himself to the hilt.

Glutted on his rigid member, I studied him until his over-eager eyes signaled his second's camos were unbuttoned, that Sam was prepared.

"You'll look so beautiful doing this," Jared said.

Caressing my cheek, his twin growled, "You're a moron. She's always beautiful."

Sam's casual manhandling of his cock liquefied my tongue—in all our antics, I never saw Jared caress himself—and sent a spasm through my well-filled passage. I still couldn't look at his face but the pearl of excitement decorating his erection made my stomach flutter with want. I closed my eyes, opened my mouth, accepted Sam's tumescence even when I couldn't find a way to accept him.

Within seconds I was lost to the pleasure, reveling in every grunt and groan stuffing me with tandem pleasure. Exactly when I found the courage to meet Sam's eyes, I'm not sure, but I remember their hunger dissolved the last of my inhibition. After that, it wasn't long before I switched

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positions, my body capturing and releasing Sam with erotic precision, my moans muffled by Jared's meatiness.

Again and again I shuddered into heaven and every time I did, they exchanged places. I don't know how many times they pushed me into flight while I gorged with insatiable greed. Stamina challenged, ultimately they took me in turns. And in that whirling, striving, aching need for something I still cannot name, I repeatedly went crashing into the consummation of orgasm with one cock inside me, only to drift back to earth to find the other had taken its place.

Spent first, Jared fondled an erection that refused to rise above half-mast and lolled on the sofa, watching Sam hammer into me from behind. I can still feel the wood under my knees, still feel Sammy's hair tickle my face as he nipped the nape of my neck—most of all I can still hear Jared's voice with vivid clarity, encouraging and exalting me to the end.

## Chapter 14—Hunger Pains

Alex's stomach growled louder than a rampaging grizzly. Helena blinked, returning to a reality that included him. She had been speaking so low, so adamantly, he was reluctant to interrupt—even though he ached to hold her, stroke her hair, shield her from her revelations.

Squinting at the foamy waves glowing in twilight, she hugged herself. "Jeez, how long have I been talking?"

Afraid to spook her, he answered softly, "For a while."

As usual, she huddled under humor. "I thought you'd have run screaming long before this. Now's your chance, boy-o, get out while you can."

"Why on earth would I do that?"

Aidan had an opinion. *"For the same reason she's bound to give you the boot when you finally spill, mate. I'm more than a detail now."*

Her sigh was louder than the waves. "There's more."

No doubt. Suggesting Aidan bugger off, Alex said, "I'm listening."

In a way, more was a relief. Otherwise, he would jump in the Olds and drive hell-bent for Harrisburg, where he would do his bloody best to make the surviving twin pay for ... for ... he wasn't entirely certain for what, but at the very least, for his hand in creating Helena's pale face.

Smile faint but appreciative, she nodded. "Yes, you are." Pursing her lips, she rescued her cigarettes from the deck rail.

His stomach interjected another comment and she chuckled. "How about you call for hoagies while I talk?"

"There's cold pizza in the fridge."

"You hate pizza."

If she didn't return to her story directly, she might not finish. *And if she keeps talking*, Aidan said, *you won't have to*. Swearing wordlessly—and colorfully—at the snippy voice, to Helena he said, "I can stand it well enough right now."

"All right," she conceded. Gripping the rail like an anchor, she didn't move.

So he did. "Come here, sweeting." He briskly rubbed heat into her arms. "You haven't shocked me. Surprised me a bit, I reckon, but not shocked." Cheek snuggled against hers, he willed warmth into her chill.

Releasing the rail, she leaned into him. "I could really use some coffee—a nice, tall, iced one."

In the bright kitchen, their silence was comfortable. Although, in light of an internal controversy raging with Aidan, Alex had to concentrate on brewing the coffee and it took two attempts to get it right—Helena liked her coffee strong and he wanted it perfect. Thankfully, she was busy cutting the pizza into strips, knowing he detested over-cooked cheese more than the pie itself, and didn't notice his distraction.

Everything ready, they settled at the table. Helena took her time stirring sugar into the iced cuppa. On his second mini-slice, Alex tried to decide the proper way to phrase several questions he had.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Helena finally asked.

"Dunno." Certainly true. It didn't seem prudent to tell her that he found some of her story compelling and provocative—or that he sported a stiffie several times while it unfolded. He also didn't want to state the obvious in a wholly asinine manner, and say it must have been confusing for a young woman barely eighteen.

Aidan started to grumble and Alex tuned him out—no, he couldn't tell her *that* either. Later, but certainly not now. Yet he could be straight up about one thing, the thing insidiously boring into his heart like a razored corkscrew. "Suppose I most wonder why it took hours to tell me you married the wrong twin."

She snorted. "If it were as simple as that, I wouldn't be here."

"No," Alex flushed, "I suppose not."

"And I didn't marry the wrong man at the time."

He found a reason to study his plate. Even worse, but it did blunt the screw a bit. "A stupid thing to say. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I love your ingenuousness. I always know right where you stand. I find it irresistible that you insist on challenging me if you think it's necessary—that's what I love about you most."

He halted mid-chew. Did she say love? He peeked through his lashes, heart hammering, all trace of wheedling pain disappearing in a flash of hope. Chin in hand, she looked tired but sadness had been replaced by an earnest openness quite unlike her. So he asked, "How long did it go on?"

She frowned. "I'm not sure. Four, maybe five hours. Until it got too dark to see."

"Not that—*it*—the three of you—how long?"

"Ah, the ménage. About a year."

"Until you were married?"

"Until Sam joined up."

"And after that?"

"After what?"

"After Sam went in the service?"

"We didn't see him again until the Colonel died. And he was—"

"But after that?" He peppered her. He knew he peppered her. Not that the knowledge helped him stop.

*Slow down, mate, Aidan said, you've got your ballocks in a twist. Best pull them out of your arse before you proceed.*

The observation a good one, Alex tried to soften his interrogation. "I want to know if the three of you picked up where you left off when Sam came home from the Marines." The bloody problem wasn't jealousy so much as he couldn't stop imagining Helena sandwiched between the twins—nor could he stop wishing he had been one of them.

Helena slit her eyes, the old wariness creeping in. "What are you looking for me to say? I said until Sam enlisted. We didn't see him again until his father's funeral five years later."

"But after that, did you do it again?" His bloody imagination killing him, he could see her on all fours, bobbing back and forth.

"Your panties are in a wad, Alex. Are you sure that's really what you want to know?"

Aidan hooted at her echo of his sentiment, which didn't do anything to alleviate Alex's distress. Exigency made him gruff.

"I'm not sure what I really want to know," he snapped. "I may not be shocked, but it takes a fair amount of assimilation."

"You're right," she rolled her neck, boxer back in the ring, "I'll try to keep my smart-ass comments to a minimum—so long as you stop asking the same question ten different ways. Now, is there something specific you want to know before I tell you the rest?"

Despite the invitation, Alex back-pedaled. Entirely annoyed with himself, he rinsed his utensils and placed them in the dishwasher while he collected his wits.

What compounded the problem was Joan had shared the last picture of her brother, taken at Windspray a few months before he died. Alex immediately recognized it as the model for the drawing Helena said she hated, the final one Sam destroyed. And, upon examination, worth far more than the standard thousand words.

In the photo, an obviously irritated Jared leaned from the deck, pointing at his tattooed twin holding Helena aloft in an Atlas pose, well above his cadaver grin. Helena's face, however, was hidden. Was she amused or angry, frightened or calm, guilty or ... aroused?

If things weren't right between Helena and Jared at the end, he wanted to know if Sam was the cause.

*It's neither Sam nor sex that's irking you, Aidan said, you want to know if she was faithful to her vows. That's what's eating into your belly, pure and simple.*

Precisely. Oddly, while Alex could accept the twins sharing her—not that he'd bloody let any bloke, including his brother,

anywhere near her naked—he couldn't accept out-and-out infidelity. He phrased his concern carefully, not wanting to be accusatory. "After Sam came home for good, did you have a go that excluded Jared?"

She studied him for a moment before asking a question of her own. "You haven't laid eyes on your brother in, what, ten, twelve years?"

"About eleven." He told himself to remain calm. Deflection her favorite ally, it was an ally he had learned to patiently circumvent.

"Do you think he's the same? Isn't it possible he's totally different?"

"He sounds the same."

"An annual 'Happy Birthday, Bro' doesn't reveal much."

"No, I reckon it doesn't. What are you getting at?"

"A different person came home in Sam's place. The Corps changed him. The world changed me and Jared. There was a hell of a lot of water that passed under a hell of a lot of bridges by then, and everything was different."

He bit back a snort. Lovely non-answer. Perhaps he should simply let her finish her tale in her own way.

*Who appointed you keeper of everyone's morals anyway?* Aidan said with disgust.

As usual, Aidan hit it bang on. A fella couldn't be judgmental when he knows he will eventually have to have suffer judgment himself.

Staring out the window, hiding his worry by hiding his eyes, he asked as gently as possible, "Help me here, Helena. Why were you so reluctant to tell me about all this?"



"Oh come on. It's what you'd call an unnatural state of affairs, to say the least."

The phrase at such odds with things speeding through his brain for the last several hours, Alex had to stifle a laugh. "Unnatural?"

"I was afraid it—" She broke off with a frustrated yowl. "I was afraid you would be too disgusted to touch me if you knew what a slut I was. I told you, it's seriously kinky and definitely unnatural. Definitely smacks of incest, I'm sure and—"

"Don't be daft. You can be certain I'm not about to brand you slut. Nor is it like you did something you didn't want to do. After all, I dare say ten out of ten fellas would jump at the chance to bed two women, let alone twins—I know I bloody well would—or," he added hastily, "I would if I didn't have you. Call it unusual, perhaps, but in no way unnatural."

Tears filled her eyes. "God," she muttered with a hitch, "I'm about to bawl like a baby."

Realizing her snappiness flowed from an effort to hold emotional exhaustion at bay, guilt poked him in the stomach. She bared her soul and he badgered her for deeper truth—perhaps deeper truth than existed. "So is that all it was? You thought I wouldn't understand a kink you enjoyed?"

"Mostly, yes." She wiped her eyes on her shirt before getting up to refill her cup. "And I didn't want you hating Sammy over our past. Because his family and my family are old friends, he and I will always be friends, and if you and I are going to have any kind of relationship, Alex, I need to know you can accept that I love Sam, too, and not act like a

complete ass over it. Can you do that? Do you even want to try?"

That word again—Love. And 'too'? Was that 'I love Sam in addition to being his friend' or 'as well as you, Alex'? A bit lightheaded, he forced himself to breathe and pursued the carrot. "Are you saying you love me?"

"You didn't answer my question."

"I will certainly not be the jealous arse I was before." He decided to share some of the steamier, quite envy-free reactions her story produced. "Although, knowing what you two have done, I can't promise seeing you together won't give me a rise."

Ice cubes clinked into her glass and she responded with misery. "I was afraid of that. I guess I understand."

"No, you don't understand. I'm not about to try and bash the big sod's head in. He's a trained killer, so I reckon that wouldn't have a positive effect on my health. But no matter, as I'm talking about an entirely different kind of rise."

"Snake!"

His t-shirt noosed, his back immediately transported to Siberian winter via a tray of ice, which launched him to his feet with a roar.

Tension evidently alleviated, Helena laughed. "That should cool off those overactive hormones."

Trying to look offended while he emptied the cubes into the sink, Alex began to snicker. Then Helena started giggling. By the time they stopped laughing, the only emotion shining from her eyes was love.

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

Tempted to simply drag her upstairs, he leaned against the counter. "I want to hear the rest."

She grimaced and returned to the table. "All right. But I've never felt so naked in my life." Arms crossed, she leaned toward him, as if searching for strength. "I guess the beginning of the end was the day we found the bird..."

## **Chapter 15—Necessary Evil**

What do you know about our American Blue Jay, cousin to that more popular sky denizen, the Crow? Usually the first thing folks say is they're aggressive, bothersome. But did you know they have family values? It's true. The male will bring food to his mate as she sits on their eggs—and if he can't provide enough, it's not uncommon for other males to pitch in. And while it's also true the Jay's omnivorous diet can include the plunder of lesser birds' eggs and even, when times are lean, their young, in Central Pennsylvania where the corn is plentiful, they don't seem to bother. Not much comfort to farmers with fields of cornstalks, I guess, but it's hard to have great sympathy since the birds were here first—although, even the most hardened old-timers admit a Jay's gourmet love of tent caterpillars definitely does more good than harm.

Besides being pretty good mimics like the Crow, Jays demonstrate other intellectual pursuits, too. In warm weather, if you sit quietly and are lucky, you can catch them anting. Wings and breast fluffed like some twisted, sapphire-painted Riverdancer, they do this calculated stomping atop an anthill. The agitation drives the ants to swarm through the Jay's feathers until, suitably crawling with invited guests, it sets about crushing them into a paste to spread through its plumage. Some say the ant-gunk repels nastier parasites like mites and ticks, while others claim it soothes skin made prickly by new feather growth. Either way, it's one of those

behaviors scientists label instinctive while the rest of us wink and say, 'yeah, uh-huh, instinct, sure'.

During the day, there's no better watcher than a Jay. If someone or something—including feral figments of its imagination—invades a Jay's territory, it lets everyone know in a clear, grating alarm.

That being so, arriving home from our final day of high school, when Jared, Sam and I heard a familiar steely screaming, its clarity blurred and broken, we tracked it down.

The Jay lay in a thicket beyond the pond. The poor thing obviously had a run-in with a barn cat and blood darkened its breast in an oily, purple stain.

Horried by its feeble thrashing, I said, "It's dying."

Jared crouched by the gasping bird. "Stupid cats."

"We need a box," Sam said.

"It's dying." I repeated, daring to touch a twitching wing, "we have to put it out of its misery."

"How?" Jared asked faintly.

"Break its neck?" Maybe not the best option but I couldn't imagine any other way. "That would be quick and painless, wouldn't it?"

"God, I can't do that," Jared choked. The bird's beak gaped, crimson droplets frosting its nasal bristles, and began to utter a meow, mimicking its murderer with chilling authenticity.

"Jesus," Sam went positively pale, "don't look at me."

That made three of us. On the verge of tears, I cried, "We have to do something!"

"You're right, we can't let it suffer." And with that, Jared strode toward the barn.

The sun continued to beat false warmth from the ground as he returned with a small spade. Urging the torn bundle of feathers onto it, he briefly caught my eyes—his were full of tears, too. As he lifted the load, I demanded, "What are you going to do?"

"Bury it under the grapes."

"Not alive?"

"No, I'll make sure it's dead."

"Are you going to wait with it?" Sam asked.

"Of course not," his twin replied with a scowl, "I'll do what needs done."

We trailed behind our brave companion to the far corner of the barn. "This is a good spot," he said to no one in particular. To us he said, "Don't look."

I didn't. A sharp thud ended the mewling. I heard Sam's sigh of relief and without turning around, asked, "What did you do?"

"Decapitated it," the executioner blurted. "I couldn't touch it."

Later that night, while the sun perched on the horizon we sat in the mouth of the hayloft, identifying each bird we heard speeding home to its nest.

Subdued, a totally unnatural state for him, Jared mused, "If it was in better shape, we might have been able to tame it while it healed. Roger Lapp saved a crow that sat on his shoulder."

I nodded. "I heard about that. His sister said it died when their mom made him keep it in a cage."

"That's what I heard, too."

"You guys want to play Scrabble or something?" Sam asked as the sun slipped to bed.

"Nah," Jared said, "I don't think I could concentrate."

"You did the right thing," I said.

"It was an injured bird," his brother pointed out.

"I know that, Sammy," Jared snapped, "and I notice you jumped right in to help. You know, if a Baby Marine can't off a dying bird, you might want to rethink killing men."

Sam snorted but didn't rise to the barb. "Well, I'm going in. I've got a new book. You interested, Laney?"

Next to me, Jared stiffened. "No thanks," I said, "I'm going to sit here a while, too."

In the silence that fell as darkness rose, Jared repositioned behind me. Thighs gripping mine, arms an iron-band seeking comfort, he rested his chin on my shoulder. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"For staying."

"If not for you, the poor thing would've suffered till it died. I was too chicken to do it, same as Sammy. That took guts, Jared. It was ... very brave."

"I wasn't brave. It was hard. But I didn't want it to hurt any more."

"It was probably relieved. You set it free to fly again, in a way."

"I guess so."

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

"One wing was definitely broken. Even if it lived, it would have been in pain a long time—maybe forever."

Crickets sprang into song and the katydids began their mantra. We snuggled closer, settled in to await the sun's rebirth.

It seemed like hours later when Jared broke our silence. "Marry me, Laney. Marry me before the summer's gone."

Taken off guard, I hesitated. I had done a lot of thinking about the future in terms of a career, but I hadn't thought about being a wife—or mother—since I stopped playing with dolls. "I don't know what to say. I never thought about getting married."

"Then you think about it some," he said, "and I'll be here when you decide."



## **Chapter 16—Idea of June**

After the bird, a distance appeared between the twins, and Sam seemed to think because I chose to stay with Jared that night, I had painted him with a yellow stripe. Not that I ever thought Sam a coward. There are, after all, quite a few brands of bravery. And while some, like Jared, can summon courage from necessity, others require a little more lubrication.

Sam Madison mixed with hard liquor is not a pretty sight. But when it comes to emotional bravery, the combination produces a full bottle of foolish courage, along with enough bravado for him to follow through. Properly fortified, Sam could kill even that which lay closest to his heart—and do it with the swiftest finality.

The three of us were granted leave to use Windspray for the season. Jared and I would start college in the fall and Sam would report to Parris Island the last week of July. Since we would be gone most of the summer, Margaret and John invited friends and family to celebrate Sam's impending service to our country the day before we left for the shore.

So proud he burst into a happy jig several times, the Colonel allowed that we graduates could dip into the homemade grape juice and vodka punch. Unfortunately, an hour later, Margaret decided he was stingy with the booze and added more. Then Joan and one of her cousins did the same, just to see if anyone would notice—not that anyone did after the second sip.

Due in part to the younger generation's tipsy silliness, the party was a success and Sam couldn't doubt his family wished him well. Even so, as the evening went on and he became more intoxicated, his usual quiet manner turned morose—and loud. Many there had been in his shoes and said they understood. Which is why, I think, when he disappeared no one found his absence alarming.

Well after eleven o'clock, the last handful of oldsters settled at the kitchen table to play cards at about the same time I discovered it pretty difficult to remain standing without swaying. I needed to move around, get some air, or I would throw up long before I finished having fun.

Escaping onto the porch, I unsteadily rounded the pond side of the house, and discovered Sam in a puddle of shadows. Feet propped on a picnic bench, he rocked his mother's glider like a destroyer.

"Hey," I ambled up to his makeshift bunker, "everybody's wondering where you got to."

"Here I am."

Believing I divined his reason for sitting in the dark while a party raged in his honor, I asked conspiratorially, "Sobering up?"

"Nope."

"Then what'cha doing?"

It seemed to take him a long time to answer, a lapse I blamed on my condition. "I'm waiting," he said finally.

"For what?"

"Not what, who—and you."

"Nice rhyme. You're a poet and don't know it."

He smiled. "You're drunk."

"I most certainly am. You?"

"Yep."

"Now that we've got that cleared up, move over." None too gracefully, I clambered over the bench and plopped alongside my friend.

He wrapped an arm around me, nuzzling my hair as I situated for a cuddle. "Kiss me, Laney."

"Not here." I shot a look toward the windows spilling light and a dozen possible eyes. "Somebody might see."

"No, they won't, it's too dark."

Giggling, I pecked his cheek—he yanked me back for a proper, tongue-tangling kiss.

"Mmm," I savored his grape tang, recalling my first taste of his twin, "you're delicious."

"Let's go out to the barn," he murmured, tongue slipping into my ear. "They'll be playing pinochle till dawn."

"Okay. Jared will be out in a minute." I nudged him. "We can have our own celebration."

He squirmed away from me. "That's not what I meant."

Embarrassed I was thinking sex when he was thinking something less intimate, I shrugged. "Fair enough. I guess that can wait until tomorrow. I can't believe we get Windspray all to ourselves! We can do anything we want, whenever we want."

"I'm not going."

"What?" Sitting up not an easy proposition, surprise made it even more difficult.

"I talked to the recruiter today, moved my boot date up."

Every drop of blood evacuated to my feet and I stuttered, "Wh-when?"

"Wednesday."

Only five days! "Why didn't you warn me?"

His reply was venomous. "Warn you about what? That I intend to do what I've always said I was going to do?"

"I thought we were going to the shore."

"You and Jared can go."

"I want all of us to go. Him and me and you—it won't be the same if—"

"Stop it. Whining won't change anything."

True, but the blow still struck me low. "It's just too soon."

"No," cold steel replaced his irritation, "it's fucking not soon enough. I should have enlisted last year and got my GED in the Corps, no matter what the Colonel said. Then I wouldn't have ... we wouldn't have..."

Even through the alcohol fog his meaning glared clear. My turn to be angry. "I'm sorry it's been so horrible. I didn't know balling me's such a chore."

"I have to leave. Right now. Because I'm starting to hate him, and I don't want to end up hating you, too."

I didn't have to ask who he meant and a vivid recollection of the previous day hardened my nipples. I had used Sam's damp body for support while Jared took me from the rear. I had held his eyes as his brother filled me, felt his erection grow against my stomach while Jared strived to finish.

"You sure didn't hate him yesterday," I said.

"Don't worry, I hate myself more."

"What the hell?" I was seriously confused. "Why didn't you say something before?"

"We can't spend the rest of our lives like this."

"Like what? Having fun, screwing our brains out?"

"I'm sorry, I just can't any more. It's got to stop, so I'm stopping it."

"Thanks so much, Mr. Chivalry. I love you, too."

"That's just it, Helena. You don't love me at all. You've never said 'I Love You, Sam' and meant it. If you did, you would go with me into the barn right now and not give a flying fuck who might see—including my brother."

His anger scared the hell out of me and I didn't like it. "I do love you, even if you're being a jerk."

"Oh, well, that's fucking eloquent."

My stomach brimmed with desperation. "You're my best friend, Sammy, I need you."

Control gone, he snarled. "You don't need me. I'm just Jared's extra dong."

"That's not fair."

"Yeah, well, my whole God-damned life isn't fair." He struggled out of the glider, stalked to the edge of the porch.

Hands clenched in my lap, tears bounced from my fingers like ruined gems. "I do love you, Sammy. You know I do."

"It doesn't matter. You'll forget all about me in a month. But I'll remember you—with my dick in your mouth. That should get me through until I find a woman who isn't a slut."

Shocked, raw cotton protests stuffed my throat, prickly and unclear. Stiff, coiled, Sam ignored my tears and studied the mist-shrouded pond. I wanted to wail and rage, beg if

necessary, but what he said next defeated my objections before they were formed.

"You know, the only regret I have," he said with a charred, casual callousness that burned my skin, "is that I never got the chance to sample that sweet, fat ass of yours. But hey," he shrugged, "I guess it's only right I let you keep one cherry for the husband-to-be." Headed for the house, he tossed the last shot over his shoulder. "Say yes, Laney. Marry him. Nobody else will put up with your kinks."

Before he reached the door, I fled into the welcoming shroud of the mountain, dropping tears like breadcrumbs from one valley to the next. A piece of me prayed Sam would follow.

He didn't.

I hated Sam that summer, and my sharp indignity lent a delicious, wild edge to the carnality I shared with Jared—wherein I discovered the sumptuous thrill of vocal, demanding sex, a thrill that has lasted long beyond using it to wipe an absent twin from my mind.

Still, as the young are apt to do, I eventually redrew my hatred into a vision of connubial bliss and, by the time I said I do, it was a wispy charcoal sketch of the original.

More than a decade would pass before I realized exactly what Sam did and why. Like I said, I'll never doubt Sammy's bravery. It takes a lot of courage to cut out your heart and throw it away.

## Chapter 17—Poultice

Incredulous, Alex blurted, "And you're still friends?"

Helena jiggled the ice in her empty glass. "Yes. Once he came home for good, we—talked about it."

"Reckon you did."

"And that's all we are, you know. Sam is the last man I'd be unfaithful with. I can't make you believe me but I hope you can accept me at my word."

Guilty for insisting she explain the situation to begin with, he said, "I do now. I'm only sorry I didn't before."

"Don't be. Jealousy is a blind old bat. It's hard to see the caves for the mountain through her eyes."

*Now!* Aidan shouted so loud Alex started.

Helena cocked her head. "Are you okay?"

"Fine."

Her deck of honesty sat on the table. The perfect time to explain his inner partner—though the moment was promptly lost when Helena said quietly, "Would you make love to me, Alex? Would you mind?"

He allowed Aidan to apply every foul oath they knew to the Madison twins. Christ Almighty and all his disciples in tow. No wonder she hid behind humor and ice and denial. Sam hanging about didn't remind her of Jared, he reminded her of weakness and regret. And if Alex had anything to say about her future, the one thing he wouldn't do was add to either of those lists. "Why would I mind?"

"I don't know. You might not be in the mood."

"Oh I'm in the mood." In the mood to give her his full tender, considerate, blessings-a-minute attention and shower her with the kind of care a cherishable woman required. "If you need me, sweeting, I'm always in the mood. Though one thing needs said before we do."

Brittle fear flickered through her green eyes and he reached for her hand, softened the conviction. "I don't care what you've done in the past, I love you in the present and I think you love me. But if you continue to keep me at a distance, Helena, no matter how much it hurts to do it, eventually I will take no for an answer."

"Well boy-o," she said with a proud, little-girl smile, "I think I just said yes."

\* \* \* \*

It wasn't until morning, still abed and savoring the memory of their lovemaking, that Alex realized precisely how impossible his growing pseudo-secret had become. Although he still believed it to be an extraneous, embryonic fact he reasonably had no reason to mention at the outset, and that really didn't bear on their relationship beyond the surface, it nonetheless had taken on an alarming level of importance.

Helena's confession, however, did impact their relationship. Some things became startling clear, such as her choice of profession—where better to seek answers than the subject that wrought the questions. He briefly pondered what more to the story there was, since he remained uncertain about quite a few things—the last bloody photograph of Jared, for starters.



Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

A murmur of satisfaction from the woman sleeping next to him dispelled doubt. Helena acted monumentally unburdened, even healed. No, there couldn't be anything serious left to learn.

Aidan presented an additional twinge of truth to be considered. *Love doesn't entitle you to every last one of her secrets, after all.*

And, Alex added as he drifted back to sleep, the simplest ones are sometimes the most difficult to share.

### **Part III**

Doubt is a pain too lonely to know  
that faith is his twin brother.

—Kahlil Gibran

### **Chapter 18—Along the Susquehanna**

Four women due in an hour and Rocky wouldn't come out from under the love seat. Nope. Uh-uh. No way. Wasn't going to do it. Helena crinkled the bag of catnip bribes for enticement. "Come on, old boy, don't you want a goodie?" Not a huge surprise the poor creature was skittish. At Windspray, the tom spent his first three days as a housecat doing little more than hissing at walls and furniture with such tenuous bravado it almost broke her heart. But if she could overcome fear with a little assistance, so could Rocky.

"I'm a mean prison warden," she coaxed, "and two new worlds in a month are hard on the fur. But I've got nip brownies for the sweet pussen—just have to trust me, little buddy." Without so much as a glimpse of paw in response, she almost gave up—until a quivering pink nose parted the pleated skirt, giving her hope. Settling cross-legged on the floor, she returned to wooing—only to have a sudden mad dash leave her on the wrong side of the room and Rocky's tail tip twitching from behind the sofa.

Above offices that she leased to an attorney for a small fortune, Helena's cozy home comprised the second story of an aging brownstone. Her haven. Her sanctuary that had held no memories, the clean slate all her own. Eclectic, warm, just a little bit frilly and, since she had only been back a few weeks, pretty tidy as things went.

Just beyond the main living area Rocky held hostage, a rocker piled with vibrant afghans stood to the side of a hearth, echoing the river rock exterior, as did the bedroom's fireplace.

Easy for the feline to translate forest glade hues as safe napping territory. Until he prowled for greener grass among the watchful army of bric-a-brac. A piece of china exploding when it hit the floor about scared the cat out of his remaining lives. Rocky wanted his master, his favored person, not the female who shooed him off the kitchen counters.

She called to Joan, "Is Alex heading back yet?"

He visited exactly twice before she insisted he move in. Beyond a severe lack of privacy in the apartment he shared with Leo, it would also make him stop acting the polite guest.

It worked immediately, too. The first thing Alex did after he unpacked four hours ago—well, first after declaring the fireplaces perfect for naked gymnastics come winter—was examine each and every member of her fragile horde with interest. She watched his progress, basked in how right his being there felt, and wished she could cancel the evening's plans. As much as she adored her friends, a night spent sexually baptizing every room instead of catching up with the girls was almost more than she could resist.

Joan's arrival nixed the idea. Her cheerful greeting startled Rocky, the figurine became history and their bubbling feminine preparations sent the new man of the house outside.

So while Helena attempted to mollify the cat, Joan hummed *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* and put her patent nosiness to work tracking Alex.

Framed in the carved bay window dominating the living room, her old friend announced an update. "He's still there and—what the hell is he doing?"

Opting not to wedge behind the sofa, Helena sighed. "Is he still climbing all over the sculpture?"

"No, now he's—well now he's sprawled on the ground, staring up at it."

"Since when do people 'sprawl' outside of books?"

Abandoning the chase, Helena joined her friend at the window. Two stories below, across three lanes of one-way traffic, in the tree-lined strip bordering the Susquehanna River the length of the Capital City, as Joan had summarily noted, sprawled Alex. Beyond him, at the bottom of a lengthy drop to its banks, the river flowed with glistening immutability under the Deco frame of the Harvey Taylor Bridge.

In the center of Friday rush hour in the park, the modern sculpture that caught her lover's fancy was situated just off the path where it intersected with the street and bridge. Looming above the prone Alex with ruddy, tubular symmetry, the short, hollow shafts of steel resembling bottomless garbage cans were welded in a stacking criss-cross twenty feet high. It reminded her of a fat, rusty DNA illustration. Definitely not one of her favorite pieces in Riverfront Park.

Tomorrow she would give Alex a tour of the dozens of other sculptures her city boasted, up and down river. "Wait till he sees the paperman," she said to Joan, referring to a life-like stone man on a bench with his newspaper. "Bet he sits down and has a chat with it."

Joan snorted. "The way he likes to talk to himself, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Get a load of the woman in the red jacket. She's trying not to look at him, like he escaped from the State Hospital."

"Go ahead and look lady," Joan hollered, "life's too short for blinders and he's damn cute!"

"Anyway," Helena concurred, then shook her head. "Maybe it reminds him of his dad's." A brush of fur on her leg interrupted. "Don't look now," she said out of the corner of her mouth, "but curiosity's finally killed the cat."

"To hell with the cat. Your guy's a lot more interesting. He never cares what people might think, does he?"

Helena sighed with satisfaction. "He is completely and enthusiastically himself. And as much as I tried not to admit it, his lack of guile literally curls my toes."

"On that note," Joan said, "tell me again why Sammy's going to babysit his first night here?"

"That's the fourth time you've asked me that."

"I'm still in shock you didn't cancel girls' night. I would, in a heartbeat. You do know you're out of your mind, don't you?."

"For letting him move in? I had to. I know it was all he could afford but that rat-trap gave me major willies."

"No, for letting him loose on the city with Sam."

"It's Sammy's fault he's here, the meddling old woman. They'll be okay. Sam swore he won't take him to a biker bar—unless he really wants to go."

"I sure wouldn't let him take my new boyfriend anywhere. You know the brat would drag out pictures of me nekkid when I was four."

"The pictures he has of me, I'm dressed."

Joan giggled. "Something tells me he has a couple of drawings where you're not."

"Shush your tongue. I'd feed him his balls for less. It's okay, really. I don't think Alex is overjoyed, but I'm tickled he didn't want to go carousing alone."

They watched the subject of their scrutiny tuck his arms behind his head, oblivious not only to the plethora of pedestrians and traffic but to a wino's sudden interest as well.

"You know," Joan said as the ragged man engaged his quarry, gesturing for emphasis, "once you let them in the house, they're yours for good. And they say to keep them inside for at least a week, so they learn where they live."

"Very funny. You just want him to stay until everybody gets here," Helena said as Alex climbed to his feet to talk to the unfortunate soul. "For the record, you're out of luck, because it ain't going to happen. I don't want you perverts prodding him like the newest exhibit in Helena's hotties at home. Maybe Jared ate that shit up. Alex isn't as extroverted."

"Spoil sport. But somebody got lucky—here comes Mariel, on a collision course with Alex."

Mariel and Alex were no sooner inside and properly introduced than Sam arrived. Helena grinned when she opened the door—he looked significantly worse for wear. "Hiya, Sammy. What tiger did you wrestle with? Even better, did you tame her?"

Stressing the plural, he said, "Tigers. I started doing the self-defense classes at the Y today."

"You better find your own space or those ancient mats will kill you. Hate to say it, but you're not twenty any more."

"It's not the mats, it's the students. Damn women are more gung-ho than raw recruits."

"So you've been playing with girls all day?" Alex assessed his readiness by patting his pockets and securing his keys.

"Certain you don't require a nap before we go?"

"You just keep talking, college boy." The battered instructor checked his wallet, too. "I'm armed and ready if you are."

"Hi Sam," Mariel called from the kitchen.

"Hi, Mariel! Nice to see you."

No secret the blue-eyed brunette was attracted to Sam. Despite gentle encouragement—and not so gentle encouragement from his sister—he refused to ask Mariel out other than an occasional friend-to-friend situation. His stubbornness drove them insane, since it remained obvious Sam liked Mariel. A notion he reinforced by observing, "Is that a new haircut?"

Pleased and pink, Mariel nodded and while they chatted, Alex raised his brows, to which Helena nodded and shrugged, hoping he understood.

He did. "Perhaps we should stick here. We could shave our legs or summat, blend in."

Sam grinned. "So long as I don't have to wear panties or a silk thong, I'm in."

"God Sammy," Joan grimaced, "as if I need that in my head."

He gave his sister a bear hug and indicated Alex with his chin. "What time does the Princess have to be home, Laney?"

"Not a second before midnight, Prince Charming, or I'll turn you both into pumpkins."

With three pairs of envious eyes on them, it took all she was worth not to laugh straight into Alex's mouth when he kissed her soundly good-bye. Although unquestionably she had been gossip du jour more than once in her circle of friends, she never had the pleasure of being tawdry giggle gossip.

"Have fun," she murmured and anticipated a sly reply as Alex checked the others for earshot.

"I'll do my best," he said and, lowering his voice into a soft, seductive growl, added, "Fair warning. I demand appropriate payment later for having to go at all."

\* \* \* \*

Girls' night a semi-annual tradition none of them missed unless kept away by acts of God, by seven o'clock all the usual suspects had arrived but one. A mixture of pajama party and bitch session, the regularly-scheduled girlish mayhem served as a modern panacea for lives too diverse for their mothers' coffee klatsches. Husbands were set to cooking



dinners, children were farmed out when necessary, and no amount of wailing from any of them interfered.

Wrapped in the warm shawl of Home, Helena had her head in the pantry when the front door burst open.

"I know, I know, I'm late," Veronica, their blond, leggy straggler, hollered. Greeted by unanimous shouts of concurrence, she dumped an armload of bags onto the coffee table. "I've got movies, wine, smelly garlic dip and extra cigarettes—let's Party!"

Mariel demanded, "Three stores took you this long?"

"No," Joan smirked, "bet she was giving Stanley something to keep him good. Bet she was running late before she got started."

Ronnie stuck out her tongue before plunking her dip on the dining room table. Along with a delectable, fudge-frosted monstrosity sitting center stage, most of the food on it adhered to a time-honored rule: Bring something in no way good for you, and chocolate anything always qualified. "God," she groaned, "look at that cake. You girls really outdid yourselves this time. There's at least ten pounds on my hips waiting to happen here."

"What movies did you get?" Amber helped herself to the Blockbuster bag. "Ooooh," she cooed, "*Never Talk to Strangers*. Didn't we watch this last time?"

"I requested it again," Natalie, their token redhead, said. "Last theme was legs, this time it's butts. Rebecca DeMornay biting Antonio Banderas' fine tush qualifies for many themes. As a matter of fact, you give me a theme and I'll tell you how it fits."

"*Virtuosity*?" Helena examined the case. "I said *Starman*. Better not be robot butts."

"I've seen that," Mariel said. "Denzel Washington and Russell Crowe. Cyborg butt, not robot."

"Sweet. A two-fer Jeff Bridges trade."

"You wish. There's yummy Denzel's legs but only Crowe's butt."

"That works for me, too."

"Amen to that," Natalie said as she strolled into the living room munching a handful of chips. "They've both got eight pound Oscars, after all."

Veronica muttered throatily, "I'll just bet they do."

"Ronnie!" Joan scolded as the rest dissolved into giggles. "Your mind's in the gutter already!"

"It would have been there—and here—an hour ago if I didn't stop at the grocery store for cigarettes. It took forever, let me tell you. You have to go the counter, find somebody who's not standing around with their thumb up their ass, then they have to get somebody with a key. I mean, they lock them up now. *Cigarettes*, in the name of all that's holy! And it wouldn't be near so ludicrous if the kid who has the key isn't like, twelve, tops."

"Working age is thirteen," Joan said.

"How the hell do I know?" Veronica responded. "Any male under thirty-five looks no older than twel..."

Helena turned from the DVD player at the abrupt cessation of chatter to find her friends staring with expectant curiosity. She pretended incomprehension. "What? Is there toilet paper hanging out of my pants?"

Amber spoke for the group. "You're our official expert on robbing the cradle. We want to know everything."

"He seems nice," Mariel said, "very polite."

"You met him?" Amber squealed and fished for more.

"Joanie says he has a sexy accent. God, you know how much I love foreign men."

"He's not foreign," Helena said, "he was born in Jersey. He was raised in the UK and Australia so he has an accent."

Natalie narrowed her lashes. "Oh. I see. Not only do you have a young piece, you have your own Mel Gibson, too?"

"Damn," Veronica said, "I should've got *Bird on a Wire*, too."

Helena shuddered. "Please! Alex has a much better ass. A lot less fuzzy, to start."

"First of all," Joan said, "he looks more like Hugh Jackman than Mel Gibson, and second, Alex has killer legs attached to that fabulous ass. If Laney would just make him wear Speedos instead of surfer trunks, I could die a happy woman."

Making a face at her sister-in-law, Helena said, "He does not look like Hugh Jackman. He doesn't look like anybody except himself. And he's not allowed anywhere near Speedos until he's sixty."

Mariel grimaced. "Now there's a scary thought. Men aren't the only ones who don't appreciate what they've got till it's gone. At least he won't spend every night at the gym, tightening his tush."

"Nope," Joan said, "he won't. He's way too busy doing pelvic thrusts at home to bother with a gym."

"You guys!" Ronnie exclaimed as they shrieked with laughter. "Isn't anybody going to ask about the kid's mind?"

"Good point," Amber said. "You have to keep a child's mind occupied. There's a new Discovery Toys at the mall, Laney, might want to check it out."

"He is a wonderful man," Helena said haughtily. "So the next person who says he's a child will be subjected to sterling examples from our early thirties—Amber."

"Uh-oh, Amber," Natalie warned, "you're in trouble now."

"Oh please," Amber sniffed, "I'm not the one who married the eternal ten-year-old. Jared was always just a big kid. Color me so not surprised the new guy's the same."

The observation was casual enough—right on the mark, to boot—and Helena found herself smiling like the proverbial cat. "What can I say, I like 'em playful. Keeps things interesting."

"Isn't it a little weird, though?" Mariel asked. "I know after I left Rob, I couldn't have a man in my bed without thinking about—"

"I never appreciated my fellow man in his thirties," Veronica interrupted. Despite her bawdy teasing, a squeeze of her hostess' knee spoke volumes. "If I had realized what a commodity Stan's hardbody was then, you would've never got me off my back. So do it as much as you can," she said with a wink, "while he can still see the Mighty Willy."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Joan said, "they holed up at Windspray for eight hours at a time."

"See, that's what I miss," Ronnie said with a sigh. "There's definitely a lot to be said for an Energizer Bunny boy."

Grateful for the shift, Helena chuckled. "Like you've ever said no to Stan because he's bigger in the middle." Shaking her head sadly, she asked the others, "Ever have the misfortune of showing up at Ronnie's when they're going hot and heavy? Soft or not, Stanley hanging naked from the chandelier is a serious treat."

"C'mon," Veronica objected, "he was wearing a towel. Gravity might be a bitch, but time's consolation prize is an inventive slow hand."

"I almost went out with a twenty-eight-year-old at work," Mariel said, a faint blush saying she realized her earlier faux pas. "But since the only common ground I could find was our mutual appreciation of his bod, I figured it was a lost cause."

"Alex's age doesn't count for much actually," Helena said, curious to see if the time-tested clarity of good friends would find her actions favored or foolish. "Most of the stuff we talk about, it's just not a factor. For a guy, he's a real motor mouth, the same as Jared was. I guess that makes a difference. Usually, I don't even notice. I mean, I notice but I don't notice notice, y'know?."

"Tell them about the CD." Joan confided to the rest, "He made her a love song disc."

To the chorus of heartfelt awws, Helena said, "Yeah, yeah, really sweet, but..." She winced. "He gave me this rigmarole about starting it with his favorite classic rock ballad."

"And?" Amber urged.

"It's the Thompson Twins' *Hold Me Now*."

"Wait, wait." Natalie held up her hand. "From the '80's? *Classic* rock ballad?"

Helena nodded with solemn sincerity. "Precisely."

Veronica quipped in perfect Bugs Bunnyesque, "Oh, the Horror! I'm so sorry for you—not. We're out the other night and they played our wedding song. Stan goes, 'where do I know this tune from?' Once a hopeless romantic, always a hopeless romantic, Laney—eat it up, you lucky thing."

Amid spirited agreement, Helena was pleased to find everyone's opinions positive. "You should be sorry for me, though. He never sits still. I've never been so fucking exhausted in my life."

Amber giggled. "Don't you mean you've never been so exhausted fucking in your life? Gawd. I can't remember the last time I had eight hour sex. Is he into repeat performances or one long opus?"

"Save yourself the trouble," Joan complained. "If I can't get the gory details out of her, you won't get much further."

Veronica scrutinized her hostess. "There's always blackmail. Bet we can come up with something that'll loosen that tongue."

"Ack," Natalie cried, scrambling for the remote control, "details have to wait—Antonio's headed for the shower!"

They gathered around to watch the scene, their false calm simply preparation for more silliness. Helena realized that for the first time since his death, Jared's name had come up and she didn't want to hide under her bed and cry. What's more, even as the thought settled into its rightful place in her heart, Alex's intention-drenched eyes overlaid all other recollections, and a tiny shiver of anticipation signaled all was again well with her life.

## **Chapter 19—Boys Will Be Boys**

Although Sam said the club reputed to be Harrisburg's hottest spot, its name escaped Alex the moment they set foot inside. During too-brief gaps in music blaring from speakers the size of Europe—all of it in a numbing, dominating, bass-is-master beat that shriveled his scrotum—they started half a dozen conversations which were swallowed up the moment the next track began. Not that there weren't plenty of people to watch instead. No lack of opportunities to dance either, yet the idea of making small talk with a strange woman held zero appeal.

Although Sam twice accepted invitations to do so, he returned directly to their place at the bar afterwards. Bad enough he already harbored reservations about spending the evening with a man who knew Helena better than he did, inside and out no less. Sitting about in a meat market, unable to converse or strive for harmony, wasn't about to dissuade any of them.

So as oblique as his feelings about Sam were, Alex experienced a warm rush of gratitude when the lone twin tapped his arm, and motioned toward the door.

Crisp evidence that summer started packing for holiday stung his nose and skipped around his ears as he matched his guide's brisk pace toward the carpark.

"How the hell you're supposed to meet anybody in those places beats the fuck out of me," Sam said as they

approached the lot. "If you want permanence, you better find out right away if you can talk to her."

"Amen, mate. What about that friend of Helena's—she's called Mariel, yeah?"

*Sly devil, Aidan laughed, get him wrapped up and no worries, eh?*

No reply from Sam, Alex charged on, "Quite pretty and seems right sweet."

Sam blew a sigh. "Problem is, I know her ex. He's a serious fuckwit. I wouldn't call Rob a friend but I see him a lot. He'd be sure to make things—difficult."

"Shame, that."

"Yeah. Maybe one of these days I won't give a shit what Rob might do and then we'll see. But what now, Alex? Any ideas?"

"Do you know a pub were blokes have a beer, yabber about sport?"

After some hesitation, Sam said, "I know where there's a poker game. Some guys I hang with, including rat ass Rob."

A much better proposition than any tavern. As for Mariel's dumped dick, there's a dead plant in every crop. "That sounds far better to me. Can we stop at an ATM for cash?"

Sam studied him. It drove Alex screaming up a wall that he couldn't read anything the fella didn't want seen. Most people radiated some kind of signal, but not Sam Madison. Not so much a blank slate affect as a mirror thing. As if for every thought Sam shuttered, he read two from his adversary.

Bloody unnerving, that's what it was.



"They've all known Laney a long time," the occluded man said finally, "some since high school." He let the ramifications of it pass to his companion before he continued, "None of them would give you any real crap but they get telling stories and they won't give a shit if they're about..."

"Jared," Alex finished.

*Decent of the bloke, Aidan said, he could have taken you straight off, without a word.*

Could he weather it? Drawing from the only experience he had, he quickly reviewed Mum's short list of paramours after Da.

The first was an all-around sneaky drongo. He didn't count. The second one—a bloke by the name of Paul—got annoyed at any mention of Roland. The third one, Carson, the man Maddy Barnes eventually married, easily and regularly broached the subject on his own. He said if you loved a widow, a bloke had to admire her dead husband's taste, if nothing else.

"Reckon I have no trouble with your brother," Alex said. "Helena loved him. That's all I need to know."

To his great surprise, discomfort flitted across Sam's face and he looked away. "Yes. Jared, of course. But when they talk about the old days, there might—when we were kids, everybody knew—they still razz me about it and Laney said she..." Paying particular attention to unlocking the truck, he finished vaguely, "Told you about us."

Climbing into the passenger's seat, Alex wrestled with the emotions lurching over the four short words. Throughout the intertwining thoughts, that he felt inherently sorry for Sam

kept turning up. "Too long ago for me to worry about," he said, and realized he meant it. Helena made her feelings about Sam clear. She couldn't help the twin's doggedness.

*No sense kicking a three-legged mongrel when he's simply looking for a handout*, Aidan agreed, and Alex swallowed a nervous cough. Yes, dead cert. Things were the way they were and as promised, he would find a way to deal with Sam.

"Would it help level things out," he attempted to alleviate Sam's discomfort, "if I told you about the humiliating circumstances under which I first got laid?"

"Bad?"

"Far worse than bad."

"In that case, I don't think it would have the right touch coming from you." Sam chuckled. "Maybe someday I'll get to meet your brother and he can tell me about it. Humiliation is a lot funnier when your siblings rehash it for you."

"I'm afraid not. He was gone by then."

"Sorry, man, you said your brother died but I thought that was when you were kids. I didn't mean to—"

"No, I'm talking about Aaron. He ran off a week after—a week past his fifteenth birthday. It was after that I dropped my cherry down a well-known and oft-visited well."

Sam acknowledged the tidbit like a sage. "Rode your velvety buck's horn into a yearling knob, did she?"

"I had to seek medical assistance. The bloody thing stayed swollen in a wholly unpleasant manner."

"Damn. That's some ride. How come Aaron left?"

Under the abrupt shift, painful memories tugged like an old friend. "Him and Da never got along after our brother died,"

he explained bluntly. "Da blamed him because Aaron dared us to jump."

Sam whistled softly. "No shit. Does Laney know?"

"About jumping off the stable? Sure."

"I mean why Aaron ran away."

He sifted through his box of half-truths. "I told her he ran off to Sydney. I'm not sure if I told her the reason. Why?"

"Just curious," Sam said as they turned onto the highway, heading out of the city.

\* \* \* \*

Atop a garage set apart and well behind a modest suburban Cape Cod, in a cigar-fogged sanctuary that screamed masculine haven, Sam introduced Alex to six men. There was a disquieting moment after the former Marine connected Alex to Helena, but other than shooting the big man a few startled, curious glances, none blinked twice at the newcomer.

Their host, a gregarious sort called Stanley Miller, went out of his way to make Alex welcome and, within minutes, led his guest through a nickel tour. Beyond the main room, there was a small bedroom for 'anybody who needs to crash' and a large bathroom complete with a urinal. By the time Stan finished explaining how he and Jared liberated said porcelain prize from a demolished place called JFK Stadium, Alex felt quite at ease.

The graying athlete returned to his seat at the poker table just in time to assist kidding a truck driver called Curtis Hoerner about losing his baby-on-board status to Alex.

"I'm telling you," Stan said as Curtis shuffled a new deck, "now you're really playing with the old guard. Curtie's taking the plunge in a month," he added for Alex's edification. "One more bachelor hold-out's been hooked."

Alex turned his attention from the wealth of baseball caps covering the walls—a shining collection among collections amid memorabilia scattered everywhere, including an inflatable Goodyear blimp proclaiming 'Superbowl XXXI' drifting above the felt-topped table—and accepted a proffered seat next to Sam.

"You're getting married, Curtis? Congratulations, mate."

"Thanks," the burly fella replied with a six-pack beam, "and not a day too soon, no matter what these assholes think."

"He's doomed." Eric, Stan's older brother, puffed on a fat cigar for emphasis. "He'd rather be at your girlfriend's house with his honey than with us unruly fuckers."

"You bet'cha. All you guys do is take my money while I smoke a stogie. No shame wanting to be the smokee instead of the smoker—and keep my hard earned stash intact."

In the spirit of camaraderie, Alex agreed. "Best put me in that category as well." He grinned at Curtis. "If you get an itch to interrupt the ladies, I'll go with you."

"God no!" Curtis winced dramatically. "Nat would have my balls in a sling. My Cohiba wouldn't even get lit."

Joel, whose own garage sat across the alley from Stan's, snorted. "You never know, Curtie. Offer her more than a lousy forty-ring gauge, you might be in business."

Mike, a strapping fella who dated one of Helena's friends, shook himself with a shudder. "Don't even go there, Joe. From what Amber says, all our packages have been checked and cleared. I wouldn't walk into that hen house if you paid me."

"Nothing gets by them, that's for sure," Stan said. "They're probably comparing every inch of us right now, 'nad by 'nad."

They all laughed when Joel observed, "More like fart by fart."

Curtis refused to be cowed. "You bastards just keep talking. I got all the bases covered."

Emerging with ale-induced unsteadiness from the toilet, as obstreperous as Sam predicted, Rob added his two cents. "Heavy hitting's no good once they start moaning about romance."

Alex wanted to roll his eyes. He wouldn't have required Sam's warning. Rob was annoying from scrummage. That his ex-wife came across as genteel and gracious did nothing to hamper the immediacy of his dislike for the yobbo, either.

"Nah, romance is easy," Eric said. "It's just creative empathy."

"Too true, mate."

Full of his own importance, Rob leaned over Alex like a victim. "See, that's where you young guys are wrong. You think it's always going to be easy. Then one day they make up their minds that just because you don't bring 'em flowers every week, you're no good in the sack. And that's it, Fort Pitt, dead in the water."

Sam came to the rescue with a bark. "Shit 'n shineola, Rob. You definitely don't need to explain women to this guy." He hooked his thumb at Alex and gave him a broad wink. "He's the fucking King of Romance—aren't ya, college boy?"

"Bloody right. Romance isn't flowers anyway. It's paying attention." He turned to Eric, his most obvious ally. "Am I right?"

"Yep, I'd say you're right on the money there, buddy."

"That's right," Curtis said, "you just pay attention."

"Christ," Rob muttered, "if you can pay attention to all that mindless clucking, you're a better man than I am."

Mike chimed in, a teasing rise of bushy brows evidence he enjoyed Rob's growing glower. "You're such a frickin' twat. See, Rob," he mimicked, "that's where you older guys are wrong. It's not that hard. If they get off when you suck their earlobe, you don't start with their toes the next time."

Amid guffaws of accord, Rob exclaimed, "Like you know anything. You got, what, three ex-wives now?"

Sam snickered. "No way, man. You're yapping up the wrong tree there, too. Everybody knows ol' Mikey's a poontang bloodhound. The way I see it, next to me, he's the voice of experience." He grinned at his pal with parental pride. "If there's a chick looking to get laid in a ten mile radius, he'll sniff her out and have her legs in the air before you can say 'pop goes the weasel'."

Mike shook his head but concurred. "Getting panties off is never a problem. It's the sensitive part fucks me up. But," he thumped his admirer affectionately, "that's why I've been taking notes from Mr. Smooth." To several nods of assent, he

hastily added, "I actually hope it works. Amber doesn't take my shit. I need a girl who won't take my shit."

As Rob opened his mouth to reply, Sam cut him off. "C'mon, Rob, let it go already. You won't get anywhere with these swinging dicks."

The wankasaurus looked Sam up and down before pointedly ignoring his suggestion. "You know, Mike's right about Mr. Smooth," he said to Alex, who wished Rob would find someone else to lecture. "You have to keep an eye on Romeo Madison. My ex is all over him and Laney's no different."

"Shut the fuck up," Sam said more mildly than his eyes did. "Mariel's hot. I won't pretend she's not, just because you pretend it's her fault your life got fucked."

"You wait and see," Rob insisted to Curtis, "one day you'll wake up and the only thing your wife talks about is kids and money. Then see what happens when an intelligent girl comes along."

"Ah yes," Curtis mused, "intelligent. Enter one rapier-swift, fluff-brained blond."

With a wince, Sam endorsed the observation. "Man, Rob, he's got a point. The only thing lower than Sharon's IQ was her age. You couldn't keep it in your pants, end of story—and you know what always confounds me, Michael?" Sam turned back to the table. "Inquiring minds want to know why your ever-swinging dick never gets you in trouble." He nudged Alex. "I'm not talking about your traditional trouble, mind you. When he's married, Mikey's the epitome of faithfulness,

but when he's not—this guy can get laid, relayed and parlayed with one wink."

There is nothing more tedious than a mean-spirited drunk and like a rabid dog's bone, Rob refused to turn over the conversation. "If you're going to pay attention to something, Curtie, I know what I'm talking about."

"Okay," Curtis said. Arranging his cards, he caught Alex's attention and, with a sly grin, added, "But I think maybe I wanna skip the part where some pregnant bimbo is screaming outside my house in the middle of the night."

Chalking up yet another reason to dislike the man, Alex actually enjoyed watching Rob speechlessly huff, then demand, "What the fuck do you know about it?"

"Pretty much everything," Curtis said, forever cementing Alex—and Aidan's—respect, "same as everybody else who heard her shrieking."

"He's got you there," Joel said.

"Yep," Sam said in concert, "yep, he does."

Unable to make a stir no matter what he tried, one could watch Rob shift gears, searching for another target. "Maybe so," he said finally, arrowed glare coming to rest on Sam. "Then again, at least I didn't run down my dead brother's wife and fuck her before he was cold in the ground."

Alex wasn't the only one who held his breath—although behind him someone hissed, 'Jesus, that's harsh'. In the following river of hush, he frantically tried to digest the knot of dismay and anger forming in his stomach. Being well prepared for extraneous knowledge about Jared unfortunately



left him not prepared for that sort of information about his twin. *Pay no mind*, Aidan shouted, *he's just a bloody drunk!*

While old friends exchanged nervous looks, including several directed uneasily toward Helena's new one, Alex came up with and discarded any of a hundred things he could say, coming to the unsavory conclusion that he should hold his counsel for the moment.

Meanwhile, the target's struggle to remain in control evident to everyone, Sam managed a reply—a reply which did nothing to temper Alex's growing urge to throttle him as well.

"If you're feeling that fucking froggy, Rob," Sam enunciated, low and tight, "maybe it's time you stop running at the mouth, and jump."

Rob laughed, holding up his hands as if anyone would believe he had been joking. "No offense! Just thought Alex should know what kind of whore you really are."

Before Alex could interject, Sam erupted from the table like a surfacing killer whale. "Fuck you! That does it. Get your motherfucking ass outside, because I'm going to kick it from here to fucking China before I make you eat—"

Before the evening could disintegrate into a brawl, Alex stepped between them. "Easy on, Sam," he patted the redwood shoulder, "not worth getting out of whack." Receiving no contradiction from the rest, he next fed Rob the largest lie he may ever utter. "I know all about Helena and Sam. So perhaps you'd best bugger off, before I'm tempted to join Sam in giving you a lesson."

The odds for a memorable arse-kicking increased, Rob muttered, "Screw this. I'm outta here."

"No keys for you," Stan said, motioning toward the extra room. "Hit the cot. No argument."

During the debate that followed about whether Rob should be denied service in future, Alex stole several glances at Sam.

He had asked Helena directly about her relationship with Sam as adults. Why did she avoid the truth? Obviously common knowledge, she must know it may come up.

At one point, Sam caught his clandestine observation and returned an equally uncertain stare, although it could have simply been the implacable Sam Madison mirror.

Aidan tried to help. He reminded his charge that even if Sam loved Helena, it didn't mean Helena was in love with Sam. At the time Jared died or at present.

The strain on the evening soon brought noises of disbandment and since Alex's reverse curfew had come and gone, Sam suggested they join the exodus.

Stan's hearty invitation to return helped temper Alex's fractured thoughts. He felt pleased to have discovered new mates. Student friendships were one thing, fellas with similar commitments were another.

During the trip home, Sam remained silent. Alex searched for a way to broach disturbing subjects without making outright accusations. Accepting Sam's friendship knowing he had sex with Helena as a boy was quite different from knowing they did it as adults.

Enough courage summoned to blurt 'did you actually sleep with Helena after Jared died?', he was somewhat disappointed when Sam offered a back way into the question instead.

"Thanks for stepping up with Rob," he said. "I would've ended up in the brig for sure."

He wanted to snarl. Surprisingly, he managed to reply calmly. "If what he said is true, make certain you don't give me reason to regret it, yeah?"

"It's true," Sam said, "and I'll do my best not to make you regret you know."

"It's a mite late for that."

They both knew to whom Sam referred when he muttered, "Fucking asshole. Look, Alex, I won't interfere with you and Laney. You have my word. I also won't say I'd walk away if she wanted me."

Aidan spluttered, *Bloody hell. Wolf in sheep's clothing, you reckon?*

No doubt Sam purposefully opened an armistice door. And if the co-eds in Alex's past didn't concern Helena, there should be no reason for her past to concern him. "Fair dinkum," he said, "but best be aware that unlike Rob, I'd go outside if need be."

"I sincerely hope it never comes to that. Maybe if..."

At a stoplight, the truck's idle reverberated in Alex's chest. Pinned by the dashboard lights, he ignored Sam's raking frown and turned toward the Susquehanna's wee hour glimmer.

"Okay," Sam said softly, "I'm going to break at least one promise. Then, I'm going to give you a piece of unsolicited advice."

His last word barely spoken, Alex hoped he wouldn't immediately have to prove his integrity. "All right," he said to the passenger's window, "let's hear it."

"After Jared died, I hoped—I did some things I'm not proud of. I knew what everyone would think. I even knew, although I never would've copped to it, that Laney needed a peace I couldn't give her. But I'm a selfish bastard and I wanted what I wanted.

"So if you're going to blame somebody for a few months of sheer stupidity, blame me. And that being said, if you don't mind, I prefer to keep Rob's little drama to ourselves."

"Don't tell Helena," something green and vile bubbled in his throat, "is that it?"

"I see no reason to give her more pain. Do you?"

Did he? That depended on why Helena wanted to keep her relationship with Sam secret.

*And why shouldn't she? Aidan asked. You're quite fond of secrets as well. You should empathize, at the very least.*

Decision made moot by his pesky guardian, Alex said, "You're right. It would accomplish nothing."

"Thank you. Now, the advice." Sam paused, as though whipping his words into formation. "If Laney cares for you, Alex, she can be talked into anything." A quick lick of his lips an unconscious mimic, steel slipped into his tone. "Don't use that to your advantage, no matter how bad you want her to love you. Instead, just open yourself up. Tell her your hopes, let her see your fears. Don't hide anything you feel. Because that's the only way she's ever going to believe in you enough to love you forever."

Traveling along Front Street, the Susquehanna slipping past in streetlight-painted, star-kissed ribbons, Alex's heart toppled into the pit of his stomach. An aching weight next to the pulsing, rancid white lie that encapsulated his biggest fear, it salt-washed his eyes with frustration. Damn it all to bloody hell! How could he open up when he couldn't even get an accidental misunderstanding sorted?

*And why is that? Aidan asked. All you need do is pull a photograph from your wallet, and tell her the truth about those lads.*

The answer was relatively simple. He was a coward after all. He couldn't bear losing Helena over something so stupid as difficulties overcome yons ago and a situation no one but God could control.

*That's what Sam is saying, you bloody sod, Aidan spat. He's telling you the risk is worth the reward.*

Aidan was correct. Aidan was always correct.

In that breath, Alex almost confessed all to Sam. Yet his heart found precarious foothold on the sides of the yawning pit, habit forcing it to crawl upward, and he equivocated. How could he trust Sam's advice contained no ulterior motive?

*And do tell me what lying would get him? Aidan growled, invoking a tapping foot. What if she didn't love you? Would you wish her miserable, or would you wish her well?*

As the truck approached the brownstone, Alex shook his head, a futile attempt to dislodge his inner harpy. Sam heaved a sigh and promptly demonstrated Aidan's point as palpably as prying his heart from his chest and holding it out for inspection.

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

"Whatever you do, Alex, don't be me." Sam leaned on the steering wheel, gazed at the windows pouring bright warmth over the night's portrait. "I've been hiding from her most of my life."

## Chapter 20—Family Portraits

In addition to a shaft of late-day sun drilling into the back of his head, Alex's nose itched horribly. He concentrated on the muffled city bleeding through the bay window behind him, resisting the need to scratch. Scratching would, no doubt, produce more grumbling from the bloke across the room.

The one scowling dangerously at his sketch pad.

Helpful as always, Rocky sat next to the artist on the love seat, tail tucked demurely around his toes. For the last hour, the cat had demonstrated precisely how one should behave, itchy or not, when posing for a portrait.

"It's not as easy as it used to be." Sam flipped back through the pages for the tenth time in as many minutes.

"You're not starting over again?" Alex exclaimed, though seized the opportunity to subdue his nose. "Relax. You'll do a beauty but you have to finish it first."

Perusing the pronounced failures with a face full of uncertainty, his companion muttered, "I know."

The rocker creaked as Alex also used the break to readjust his arse. "Will you at least let me see them?"

"No. One last time—do you really mind?"

"Perhaps you should do the one for Mum first. She won't know you've not sketched in a while, like Helena will."

Studying an earlier trial, Sam replied absently. "Well now, college boy, that helps heaps. 'Do the first one for the famous artist's wife'."

"I hadn't thought of it like that."

"Besides, I'm worried about what I think. And I think they suck." Rocky turned his all-knowing stare from the subject to the drawing and offered the craftsman an encouraging meow. "You're right, fleabag." Sam scratched his head. "This one's not too bad."

"Why do I think his high opinion means you've made me look the cold fish?"

"That's just it. I used to have a knack for capturing what a person's eyes reveal. Now, I can't seem to present much beyond the obvious. I still record what I see but I've lost the conduit to surpassing the concrete, you know?" Ruffling his hair, he added, "Like I can't find a way to be honest about the interpretation. Except for the color of your eyes," he said with relish. "Your eyes have a touch of faïence."

The eloquently described distress mixed with creative enthusiasm evocative of an ardent Roland Barnes—his Da as he sometimes forgot to remember him—Alex empathized.

In the weeks following Sam's confession and advice, he had actually enjoyed the big bloke's company. They did better when Helena wasn't around, because he couldn't stop distrust from popping up every time Sam touched her, but by and large, they had settled into a comfortable sort of friendship. The sort of camaraderie he might share with his brothers if lives had gone differently.

"Bloody artists," he muttered with dark humor. "Stop bloody analyzing and do it already."

"That's easy for you to say. Your open honesty doesn't have to prove anything."



Though the Kettle meant nothing by it, his statement brought a wince from the Pot, whose self-flagellation continued to predict disaster waiting to happen. "I'll shut up," Alex said, "let you concentrate."

Often tempted to pour the sordid secret into Sam's lap, seek assurance that his fear amounted to nothing beyond a drop in the river, he still couldn't get truth to take shape. Sam may well comprehend the situation were he to explain, yet it didn't take a genius to know Sam also held a low opinion of cowardice.

*You're getting better at lying to yourself, Aidan said, but it will be jubilee day in hell before you can lie to me. You simply don't want him running to Helena with it.*

Sometimes Alex wished he could give Aidan a swift kick, rarely wrong or not.

Sam responded to the soft snort from his model. "No, you're okay, talk as much as you want. This is all Dr. Clark's fault anyway. If she wasn't so good at getting to the root of things, I wouldn't have admitted ignoring art closed off my biggest release valve. I thought it'd be easy, but the fucker's definitely rusted shut."

"You're putting major torque behind it," Alex shunned his second's voice—which, he told Aidan, he was also getting better at. "No worries, mate, it will give over eventually."

Charcoal flew over a fresh sheet. "I sincerely hope so."

"It could be worse. Like Aaron. He denied a need to paint for a long time, too. It only made him sadder. What with the way Da treated him, I don't think he wanted to admit he inherited the muse."

"I Googled him. Looks like he had some success about ten years ago?"

"Some. Last I heard, his wife was arranging a one-man show in Melbourne. She's an art dealer."

"You should get him here for a visit. Some of the world's best galleries in New York and Washington."

"I tried to ring him when I moved. His number's disconnected. Not a huge surprise. He's always been a nomad."

"How does your mom keep track?"

"She doesn't."

"That's a shame."

"I'm not sure it is. Too many things said that can't be taken back. In some odd way, I reckon Mum understands. Da ran about as far away from home as he could, same as Aaron."

"I mean a shame you can't enjoy the brother you have left."

"It would be good to see him, though I won't hold my breath. Eventually, he'll call, he always does. Then we'll have a right good gab, catch up on all the details."

Thick pencil paused, Sam cocked his head. "He's going to wake up one day and regret not having you around more."

"Perhaps."

"If he has a problem with your parents, that's on him. He shouldn't hold it against you, too."

The conversation moved too near things Alex would rather not discuss. "There's nothing like families for drama, yeah?"

"No," Sam said, "there sure isn't."

Not one to stand on civility when action was required, Rocky made a sudden leap, claws raking the illustrator's springboard shoulder.

"Fucking cat," Sam roared, "what the hell is your—"

Reaching human ears well after the feline's, double footsteps on the stairs explained.

"Shit," Sam hissed. Adding a string of quiet oaths, he stashed his implements in a gym bag. "What time is it? She's way fricking early."

Shoving the rocker into its proper place while Sam frantically searched for a place to hide his pad, Alex said, "Put it under the sofa, mate. She won't look there for weeks."

They barely made it to the kitchen—the coffee pot hopefully compounding their ruse—when Helena arrived with Leo in tow.

"Look who I found up to no good!"

Alex pretended surprise. "Hey sweeting."

"Yo, Leo," the twin bellowed, "how's it hanging?"

Leo shook Sam's hand. "Heavy 'n hopeful, dude, like always."

"I told you they were having a party without us." Helena hugged him, turning up her face. "Where's my kiss?"

Alex gave her a pash and handed a mug to Sam. "I thought you were going to the mall after school?" Noticing a bold black smudge remaining on his conspirator's chin, he turned his back to Helena and motioned for Sam to wipe his face.

"I did," she said, "but Christmas is in the air. Gifts galore but nary a shoe sale in sight." She sent her brother-in-law a

frown as he hastily swabbed his face with a napkin. "Hole in your lip, Sammy?"

"Christmas," Alex said, careful not to look at Sam, "I haven't even thought about the Holidays yet."

"Better get cracking, boy-o. I expect something classy under the tree."

Helping himself to a cuppa, Leo smirked. "Alex is always a classy guy. He just needs to put a big red bow on his—"

"Stop right there." Helena put her hands over her ears. "Unless you want to go to dinner by your lonesome."

"What's got you to the city, mate? I thought you had computer lab on Fridays."

"I had to go to PennDOT," Leo explained. "Figured while I was here, I'd see if you and Helena want to grab supper."

From Leo's too-casual shrug, Alex wagered he needed a friendly ear. "Sounds good. How about The Town Inn? They've got ripper specials and a bar."

"Cool. I could eat a horse."

"The Inn it is," Helena said. "What'cha up to, Sammy? I thought you had a class today, too."

"Postponed," he lied easily. "They double booked the gym."

"That's a shame. Want to come with?"

He checked his watch. "I can come for a beer but not dinner. Got a date."

"Ooooh," Helena eyed him curiously, "anyone we know?"

"Maybe."

Alex laughed as she swung around, ready to demand information. "Don't look at me," he held up his hands, "I don't

know anything." Although he had suspicions. Unlike Joan, who thrived on her singularity, it wasn't difficult to recognize Sam was lonely. Mariel had asked to borrow their staple gun. Alex lent her Sam's instead, and sent his mate to fetch it three days past.

"Lousy teases, both of you."

"On that note, Laney," Sam said, "can I talk to you real quick, in private?"

Alex gathered his jacket and wallet, trying not to fume. He trusted Helena. He did. At least he thought he did. Sam—well Sam continued to be a different problem. Quick to say he wouldn't interfere yet bloody well managed to do it in many small ways: private conversations, unannounced visits, phone calls, emails—

*There you go thinking again, Aidan interrupted. When will you learn too much thinking gets a bloke in deep, steaming, shite? Trust is earned, mate. Unless he gives you a concrete reason not to trust him, what choice do you have?*

## Chapter 21—Murmurs at Midnight

In a scene straight from *Family Circles'* Greatest Hits, Helena tucked a blanket over the snoring drunk. "Do you think he'll be okay?" she asked Alex, haunting the doorway of the extra room since he dumped Leo on the bed.

"Until morning. Then his head's likely to make him pay one more time."

She brushed damp curls from the young man's face. "At least he hit the toilet with every hurl."

"That he did."

"Poor kid," she murmured, still stroking his forehead. "What's this, the third time his folks are getting divorced?"

"Reckon they won't get married again this time." A caveat purred from his diaphragm. "Do you plan to sit with the little bugger all night?"

"No," she said, but didn't move. Leo's parents were idiots. They gave him a life as chaotic as a chipmunk in a cattery. Some people didn't have enough sense to count their children as blessings, whether they were mostly grown or not. Some people simply had assholes for brains and didn't stop to think others would give anything, go to unimaginable lengths, for the privilege of children. And damned if she didn't know just what lengths she was talking about.

Even absorbed in maternal musings, Alex's suggestive growl raised goosebumps down her spine. "The fire's lit, the bed's warm. If you have a burning need to pet someone..."

A grin threatened to spoil her serious mood. However, since Alex acted distant during dinner and basically ignored Sam outright—very strange, since everything seemed fine and dandy when she got home—she was more interested in what went amiss than his invitation.

"Shh, be quiet." She went to the window and adjusted the curtains. Nobody with a hangover should be rudely roused the second the sun appeared. "I don't want to wake him."

"Not bloody likely. We could have an orgy, he'd be none the wiser."

The way his voice settled into her tummy when he tried to lure her into sex surpassed any physical caress. As her nipples tightened, Helena considered leaving her fishing until morning. But sometimes it seemed as if Alex used seduction to avoid certain discussions. For once, since his snappish behavior at dinner demanded an explanation, she would get one before he touched her.

"Perhaps it would have to be a very quiet orgy," he drawled when she didn't respond. "Come along to bed and I'll show you how quiet we can be. Although fair warning," he continued in a low rumble, evoking summer rain on gravel and molasses on French Toast, "how quiet you'll remain isn't so clear. I wager you'll be chewing your pillow to keep from screaming within ... let's say, three minutes?"

She tried not to smile at his double-headed determination. Neither her curiosity nor her libido would get very far babysitting Leo.

The apartment locked up in short order, once their bedroom door closed, Alex stripped off his sweatshirt and

flopped on the bed. Every night, no matter how late, he watched her undress with casual appreciation. A game, of course, one of the many lovers play. She liked that he enjoyed watching her do every-day things, even though getting very little privacy in the bathroom took getting used to.

A special intimacy spread from the ritual as well. It didn't matter whether she dressed, undressed, put on make-up or did her hair, Alex was content to observe. Like he treasured her being her, as if her smallest gestures were capable of holding his attention indefinitely. And what woman could resist being fascinating?

Besides, whether the result of heightened awareness on her part or some sweet quirk on his, despite rarely interfering with her girly goings-on, watching her shave her legs guaranteed a bout of silken lovemaking fresh from the bath.

Yes, the myriad mental stimulations he supplied continued to hold her profound interest. Then again, there were definitely times—such as now, with his fine body spread on the bed, clad in nothing but her favorite male equivalent of lingerie, his well-aged jeans—when his physicality might have a little something to do with it.

Oblivious as men were in the face of a woman's constant analyzing, Alex popped the button on his Levis, sighed with relief and rubbed his stomach. Make that a lot something to do with it. He believed his body to be nothing special. He was terribly, horribly wrong—although that bullheaded misbelief actually made him sexier.



He compared himself to the boys he went to classes with, not the men of her acquaintance—those very men who, to her delight, now included Alex in all their guy stuff. If he took a good look at the peerish group, he might realize he was in superior shape. Sure, his school buds' hardbodies were a little leaner, a little more effortlessly maintained, but judging himself by their standards seemed just plain silly.

Of course, women notoriously did exactly the same thing so she couldn't fault him for it. She also had to admit his recent efforts weren't hurting either of them.

Exploring the building, Alex had discovered the profusion of gym equipment stored in the basement—a holdover horde from Jared's collection she kept under the guise of using someday. Within hours, he had space cleared, the Universal and brethren assembled, and his own work-out facility in place. Scrumptious as rare steak to begin with, lately his ass took on such advanced mouthwatering dimensions, she gaped at it every time he passed, naked or otherwise.

Resisting his unconscious display, Helena deposited her soiled clothes in the hamper. Releasing her boobs from confinement—a day-end ritual only the full-figured could truly appreciate—she soothed scented talc over the red grooves the bra left behind. After brushing her hair, she shrugged into her favorite silk robe. Still aware of the voluntary entrée lounging on the bed, she poked the fire into a blaze and wondered how best to broach his behavior at the restaurant.

"Warmer over here." He patted the mattress.

A direct approach. Definitely. "What were you so pissy about at dinner?"

"Nothing."

Lashes immediately shrouded his eyes. He was spending way too much time with Sam. "Bullshit. You're not much of an actor, boy-o."

"I've kept my word about Sam, haven't I?"

"Yes." Yet another day in her life complicated by Sam Madison. "You've been great. I appreciate it."

"Ta." He contemplated the fire. "I like him, Helena. Sometimes, I think we could substitute for missing brothers."

Pure Alex. Honesty without censure. "Is there some particular reason you can't, other than old history?"

"I've found balance on that," he revealed, returning her gaze. "Dunno. Everything is fine when you're not around. When you are, I get—edgy."

An interesting surprise. Female logic deduced it to be the other way around. Men always seemed to relegate necessary posturing to public demonstrations.

Maybe it wasn't Sam. She inherited touchy-feely from Mom and habitually gave him a friendly pat. "Do I touch Sam too much?"

"I don't believe so." He cocked his head, as if considering it. "I reckon it's most to do with how a day doesn't pass where he doesn't lob in or ring. And he doesn't keep you on the phone for a few minutes, it's always half an hour. I'd hate to say I'm jealous. That's not really—when we were leaving for dinner. He pulled you aside and I—reckon I got paranoid."

His insecurity melted the edges of her heart in an instant, providing a sweet marshmallow cushion for its beats. And while she couldn't reveal Sam's great idea for Alex's birthday

present, she could temper the white lie with truth. "You know I'm right where I want to be, boy-o. Sammy needed bucking up for his date, that's all."

"Ta muchly. I rather thought that, though couldn't help but wonder. I suppose what bothers me is he's still in love with you. Surely you recognize that?"

"Yes." Rock. Helena. Hard Place. Sam. Nothing new. "I can't force him not to be, any more than I can turn my back on a friend who, quite bluntly, needs me to be his friend."

"I'm not asking you to. I only know I don't like it, no matter how much I try to ignore it. I'm simply asking—" Unstrapping his watch, he tossed it on the bedside table and stretched, rippling abs a renewed invitation. "Hell's bells," he huffed, "I'm not certain what I'm asking."

"Hell's bells? Where did you pick up that?" A smile unavoidable, the reaction to his fur-clad, iron-bound stomach weighed serious in her belly.

"Joan said it yesterday."

"I should have known." As much as she feared the answer to her next question, she had to ask. "Is this a dangerous point of contention? I mean, is it a relationship breaker?"

"God no."

"Because I really don't know what to do. I told him exactly how I feel about you, Alex, and he accepts it, far as I know." Daring to risk a subversive interruption, she sat on the end of the bed. "I could talk to him about it but that's no guarantee. Stubborn has a name, and it's Sam Madison."

"The way your Auntie Carolyn tells it, stubborn goes by Helena Ream Madison."

She snorted merrily. "Talk about the pot calling the kettle."

Brusquely back to the point, he said, "Did you ever consider you hang on to Sam simply to keep Jared alive?"

The observation offered for her well being in the middle of his doubt further disintegrated the marshmallow, with the watery, sugary sea surging to drown her heart in love before reality suffocated it.

"Jared's at the center, sure." As usual, when they skirted the particulars of Jared's death, perverse fatality tempered everything. She and Sam visiting Dauphin County Morgue together might also have something to do with it.

Still, no matter what mistakes they shared, a definitive distance from Sam might be required, despite the tears the simple thought threatened to produce. "I would rather think it's because we've been friends for so long. But you're right. It's more than that for him."

Heartbeat growing louder than the fire's whisper, Helena came to an uncomfortable conclusion. To save her happiness, her friend must be hurt. Again. On the side of selfishness, she was tired of worrying about Sam's heart as well as Alex's. Sammy was a big boy. Capable of going it alone. She would wish him luck, but offered no alternative, she would placate Alex.

Although her head rang clear, as usual her heart remained reluctant to live in a world that didn't include a Madison twin. Determined to side with her brain, she searched for a solution. A solution that would preserve friendship—with Sam as well as Joan, since unpleasant explanations could affect her by default.

"I'll tell you what," she laid a hand on Alex's calf, "when the phone rings, you answer it. If you're not home, I'll let the machine get it. I won't call him back every time and when we're all in the same room, I'll stick to you like glue—at least for a while, since me up your ass for years is bound to get annoying. Maybe that way, we can gently make the point. Together."

The relief in Alex's sigh caused the puddle to morph back to its original pillowy marshmallow, upon which her heart bobbed with every slowing beat.

"That may work. Basically he's a good bloke a bit lonelier than he lets on." Alex tucked his hands behind his head in full length satisfaction. "Reckon I should introduce him to some girls I know from uni? A lovely bird on his limb might do the deed as well."

The same idea occurring to her as it did to him, they said in unison, "Lydia."

Helena hooted. "Great minds and all that—sorry, I know, be quiet." Still snickering as the indescribable, invisible hum of *We* settled in where it belonged, she held his smile. "I do love you. More than I ever loved anyone. You make me feel safe and warm and cherished and respected and never stop talking to me like this. Not because it keeps our relationship healthy, of course, simply because it makes me wetter than a free-range hen in the rain."

Extraordinary mushiness mixed with teasing innuendo always produced a blush for Alex—a state he found entirely unmasculine. Snorting, he ducked his head, made her laugh again. "Okay," she said with finality, climbing fully onto the

bed, "on to more important issues. Where's that pillow I'm supposed to bite?"

Sensibilities recovered, he peered through his lashes, made her wish they were already fluttering across her stomach, going south.

"Take your pick." He propped his head on one hand while the other slipped beneath her robe.

What began as a giggle became a gasp when he purposefully trailed beyond her belly button, burrowed into the springy curls below the curve of her abdomen. A finger slid between already moist lips, came to rest millimeters above her quivering clit.

"Look at me, Helena."

Her pussy pulsed an echo of his command. The moment she focused on his hazel teasing, the questing digit slid over its target.

She groaned.

"That's my girl," he said, well into growling out comments the way she loved best. "Seeing your pleasure makes me harder than—uh-uh-uh, no you don't." He circumvented her attempt to reach the referenced bulge. "I have a challenge in front of me, and I aim to meet it."

"But—"

"Shh." He kissed her objection away. "We're being quiet, remember? No talking—although," he added as if it were a royal boon, "feel free to moan all you like."

Failing dismally not to roll her hips, she joined in the fun by observing, "Have you noticed that you're talking?"

"Ah, well you see, I'm the challenged one," intent dripped from his lips like falling stars, "so I'm in charge."

"Oh-kay then."

"Shush. Be quiet, woman, and let me concentrate. Now," he continued casually, while his hand was anything but, "this always makes you crazy." The caress became barely-there contact, the heat of his fingertip sending tremors of anticipation skittering through her legs. "And of course there's this." Two fingers gently straddled the tiny bud at the root, producing a duller, though wholly satisfactory sensation.

Her hips rose of their own accord. "Lay still," he ordered.

She objected with a pretty pout. "You said no talking. You didn't say squat about not moving."

"Either stay in place and let me proceed, else I'll be forced to take more drastic measures."

"Ooooh." She deliberately wriggled. "Is that a promise?"

"Come on," he pleaded, bestowing a flurry of kisses, "it's no fun if you don't play as well. I know you like to talk, but I want you mewling like a kitten, begging without words for a change."

"All right. I'll try." Being passive with zipped lips as he worked her into a froth wasn't going to be easy, given her bent for athletic—not to mention noisy—sex.

"Do this for me and you can tie me to the bed in retribution tomorrow. All right?"

"Promises, promises."

"You're a pain in my arse. A very sweet pain, but a pain nonetheless."

No stage whisper could be performed more dramatically. "And you love it, buster! Okay, okay, I'll behave. Do your worst. I'll keep it to a dull roar."

"Mm-hmm," he uttered doubtfully. "As I was saying..."

Or, to be precise, what his fingers were saying. She stifled a snort but held her tongue, which seemed to satisfy Alex immensely.

He played her favorite game all the time, so she wouldn't deny him any game he had a taste for. Especially understanding why a writhing, needy woman, pre-positioned for quick claiming at the ripe time might be headier-than-thou for a lover like Alex. He liked being played. The first time she bound his wrists to a chair, drove him to bellowing orders for his immediate release—and not from the chair—proved it. Yet the fact remained that Alex enjoyed being the player even more.

She didn't have to guess that her capitulation gave him an extra charge. Reflected in the lewd grin, which started with a lick of his lips and pointed, direct attention to her clit, it grew in his eyes as he engineered her euphoria.

Repeatedly led to the cliff, only to be drawn gently away from the edge, between the fire's embers and her own rising temperature, diaphanous perspiration broke over her like spring morning mist, promptly producing a yearning, vociferous whimper.

The sound so unexpected, it startled her. Attention locked on her tormentor, a further outpouring of moans followed. Each cry cast sparks of smug satisfaction into his eyes—the full lashes not hiding the glowing, prideful mastery—and



beneath the echo of his voice suggesting, promising, swearing to give her all possible pleasure that existed on earth, an overwhelming charged submission burst free. Rich as chocolate, it sent a shudder coursing through her limbs. The helplessness intensely erotic, she finally knew beyond any host of doubts harbored that, without dispute, reservation, or objection, Alex owned her.

Just as the twins had.

But this would be no indentured servitude. Because this time, with the same unflappable, unshakable surety, she also owned him.

Perfection is what they achieved. Perfection and an undeniable sense that no right place existed outside of each others' arms. From the start, Alex's pleasure existed in her pleasure, her satisfaction existed in his. That mutual desire to please imbued their love, and their lovemaking, with an unfettered intimacy of such expanding proportions, sometimes it felt as though the enormity of it would transform her into living fire.

And the most surprising thing, the most important thing, they continued to do it, time after time after time.

Not that sex was never less than stellar, never more a release than an explosion. Yet even those interludes were laced with a magical comfort. Overall and in the end, it was how they fit, as if their bodies and minds had been carved from the same slab of marble, with the specific intent of being rejoined.

That sense of completion is what made her love him in a way she never imagined possible.

Through her fractured thoughts, Alex continued to tune her like a cello, pulling sonorous moans from her deepest wells, filling the room with a melody of need—a song he accompanied with lyrical murmured threats of raptures yet to come. Helena held his purpose-laden eyes, caught every lick of his lips prefacing each new note, and admitted that only in his arms was she sublimely whole.

Alex chuckled, his petting insistent, and she concentrated on keeping her undulations to a minimum. He continued to burble encouragement, paying obeisance to the burning ruby between her legs, until each shift of his attack sent hunger fuzzing outward, transforming every inch of her skin into heat-stamped velvet.

Her reined muscles produced a quiver impossible to quell. It took enormous effort not to buck. Swallowing rapidly, nipples ultra-sensitized by the liquid robe slipping from her breasts, her cries became grunts forced between gritted teeth. Careening toward the precipice leading to satiation, she headed for the white light—only to have Alex cease the second her eyes fluttered shut.

"Would you be needing that pillow, sweeting?"

Prying her lids open, Helena wanted to laugh but could only nod.

"Well then," he said, "better grab hold of one while you can. And do dispense with the robe."

Having no idea what he intended nor giving a damn, she giggled like a madwoman and peeled off the silk. It could have been a little more enticing if not for the giddy moment

when she sat up—not surprising in light of her blood busy below her head.

By the way Alex spread his gaze over her, from head to toes as she clutched her pillow, her lack of grace didn't matter in the least. "Lovely," he rumbled, stroking her side, teasing a tickle spot that guaranteed reaction.

Helena buried a squeal in her pillow and despite prior instructions, wriggled out of reach.

In a tone blatantly opposed to the apology, he said, "I'm sorry. That's not good, yeah? Let's try another angle, shall we?"

Her nod was adamant, her laughter unstoppable. She bit her pillow all right. He shot her a stern look and she managed to stem the sillies, but when he hopped to his knees—jeans still tantalizingly half-zipped—and marched to the foot of the bed with honed arms comically pumping in Munchkin determination, she started laughing all over again.

Playfulness melded back to arousal when he manhandled her legs around his hips. Soft as it was, the old denim felt like fine-grained sandpaper scraping along her inner thighs, sending fresh trills traipsing through her tummy when Alex settled her ass in his lap.

"Now," he murmured, "where was I?"

Legs around his waist, lower body in a veritable load-shifting slant, Helena decided two could play any game. Grin broad, she bit into the pillow and unceremoniously pointed to her crotch.

Alex's laughter boomed against the ceiling. She triumphantly waggled her brows, put a finger to her lips and again pointed the way, albeit with more insistence.

"Yeah, yeah, one tic," he grumbled, unable to manage his fly, "this isn't going to work."

She sighed when he unwrapped her legs, shook her head with impatience while he struggled to get his jeans off—though licked her lips at a glimpse of hard flesh when his briefs went halfway along for the ride. Still, the bulky cock straining under the white knit held an allure of its own, particularly when he re-wrapped her legs and it butted against her wetness. Precisely where she summoned enough fortitude not to lock her ankles and hump for heaven was anybody's guess.

Alex tucked a pillow under her butt and wasted no time returning to his enterprise. Slowly and deliberately stroking her torso before repeating the exploration in reverse, he moved in ever smaller circles over her midriff, across her lower abdomen, hands splitting around her pubic mound to reunite inside her thighs, thumbs brushing more intimate regions.

Legs spread as they were, her clit felt doubly exposed. Each time Alex neared its hiding place, her abdomen tensed with anticipation, only to be frustrated when he roamed in a different direction. Eventually whetted to the point she wanted to scream for more contact, she groaned with relief when he grabbed her backside, lifted her flooded apex, and flickered the hardened tip of his tongue over her exposed button. Electric bolts curled fingers and toes, welded her

moans inside her chest, where they quivered and thrived. So ready, so needy, she sobbed as Alex awarded her patience with the most luxurious tongue bath imaginable.

Senses lost in the thrill of his ravaging mouth, she barely noticed being jostled. Not until he dropped her back into his lap and the heat of his bared erection pressed against her throbbing clit did Helena realized he had abandoned their play.

"I have to have you, Laney—now."

Surprised he used her nickname, she spared it no further thought as he speared into the permeating ache of her yearning. Her sheath pulsed around the welcome invader. She pressed upward, seeking the second plunge. Uselessly scrabbling, she couldn't find leverage but Alex immediately adjusted and, furious through the gate, the second stab came, went, and then he was driving into her like a zealot, blurring brain and body with delicious pistoning lunacy.

Joined in punctuated pleasure, they were two flames touched to a single wick, seamless fire with no individual entities, no way to divide without forcible separation. Mewling as predicted, she savored Alex working to satisfy them both. Grace, power and strength surged through his musculature. In every way that she was soft, he was hard, and she would never tire of the contrast.

The rapid ferocity after the slow build-up like throwing a candle into autumn leaves, the fire welled from his cock, seeped into her tunnel. Their flame gained greater substance, licked at the bottled incendiary of orgasm. Helena sought the

soul behind hazel eyes that held her captive. "I love you, Alex. Every corner of my soul is yours."

Bottom lip gripped between his teeth, his eyes widened briefly, before he tucked his chin and avoided her gaze.

Fighting back the rising explosion, Helena craned her neck, tried to decipher the uncharacteristic action before her body, in full traitorous tandem with his, imploded. Orgasm singed her in a world gone red, gold and green. Game and guest entirely forgotten, she howled her way through free-falling, mind-numbing bliss.

Senses clearing, she realized Alex remained inside, arms wrapped around her like life's last solace. She patted his sweat-glazed shoulder. Without fail, he consistently noted every iota of the pleasures he gave, and before he had looked away, his eyes had brimmed with fear.

No way around it. She would have to set Sammy straight, once and for all.

Under a stabbing guilt that she would do for Alex what she could never do for Jared, she said, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not. Look at me. What is it?"

"I..."

His eyes met hers, again shied away. Helena's throat swelled with foreboding. Not good. Bad. Very, very bad. She ventured what she already knew. "Are you still worried about Sam?"

"No."

He rolled to the side, leaving her empty. Stroking his dewy hair, she recalled their first time, when Alex held her while

she cried. Maybe it wasn't her past this time, but his. Maybe Sam hit on something she had missed. Maybe it was the talk of brothers. A memory sprang up that Alex would rather not recall during an emotionally vulnerable moment.

The clock on the mantle began its midnight count. He twined a leg with hers and pressed his lips to her ear. "Sometimes I get scared. Scared of a time when you won't want me any more."

Stuttering in astonishment, she blurted, "Why would you think that?"

At first, she thought he might not answer. With a weighty sigh, he did. "We all have regrets, you know? Reckon there's things about me you aren't prepared to know."

The question dug so close to bodies buried on her side of the cemetery, Helena was stunned. Gathering her wits, she went with the old standby defense and laughed it off. Even if there were dozens of girls in his past, his would never compare to hers. Whatever made him so grim needed to be exorcised—the likely culprit two men with a single face who continued to be a bane on her existence.

Nothing like humor for grinding blues into sand. "Other than you having a twin—because I'm way too old to deal with another pair of doppelgangers—it would take concentrated effort to get rid of me." Twisting onto her side, she nudged him with a smile. "And since we can cross that off the list, Mr. Doubting Alexander, somebody needs to have more faith in his woman."

"Suppose you're right." He sounded more convinced than he looked. "Faith in myself is where I fall short."

Fingers walking over his bare hip, she rubbed his nose with hers. Sometimes she forgot how insecure she was at his age, too. "There's nothing what-so-ever short about you, boy-o, that much I know." Sobering, she went on, "If anybody has a right to worry, it's me. What if you decide you want kids?"

"Not likely. Reckon I've never been anxious to be a father."

"Or you could get tired of all these lines on my face. If I hear *Maggie Mae* one more time, I'm driving straight to the radio station and hurt somebody."

"What bloody lines? I'm in love with your eyes and all that lies beneath them. It has little to do with your face."

She stuck out her tongue. "Thanks."

"No, no," he objected, "I have a line or two setting in as well. I didn't mean—"

"I'm teasing, you goose." Tracing his tense jaw, she willed it to release its burdens. "All I know is for you and me, We is better than I. Remember that and the rest should be gravy."

"What if there's lumps?"

"Then we dance our way through the sieve, cursing the bastards as we go. I've been there, Alex. It's easier than you think. We just have to trust that all possible problems will be overcome. You convinced me they can be. I guess the only question left is, have I convinced you?"

With a single nod, he cupped her face reverently, as if to prove he found the stamp of time invisible. And although he never answered her question, if he wasn't convinced, she certainly couldn't tell from his kiss.



## Chapter 22—Shifting Snow

Amid boughs of holly, *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* blared through her parents' house, rivaling Macy's best year. Helena stood in awe of her mother's decorations. She would never rise to the master.

Poking at some of the newest additions, she had just begun to investigate a miniature Christmas village when Aunt Carolyn arrived.

Shouting season's greetings to one and all as she stripped off her treasured mink, the gregarious, deceptively-regal-looking woman went straight for her niece. "Well," she demanded, "where is he? I told Ruthie she'll be green with envy."

"Subtle as ever, Aunt Carolyn." Helena hugged her with relish. "We just got here, too. He's out back, having a cigarette with Sam."

"Andrew too. I wouldn't let him smoke in the car and he headed for the shed before I had my seatbelt off. Damn! All that beefcake in one space, I suddenly wish I hadn't quit."

The women in her family were definitely connoisseurs. "Mom said almost the same thing. Dad's been—"

Interrupted by a shriek, nine-year-old Dorry launched herself at her grandmother, and Helena made way for her cousin and her daughter.

Christmas Eve the family's main event, Aunt Carolyn completed the tribe. While Naomi greeted her mother, Helena returned to her decorative survey. Most notable, a stuffed

Rudolph head that sang when someone passed. Accompanied by a chorus of adult groans, he belted out His Song as the gaggle of small cousins found yet another excuse to trigger his performance.

Brushing the vaulted living room ceiling, the tree reigned magnificent. Its chubby girth filled the curved window-settee-cum-library and put her in mind of *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. At first, every time a child admired the mountain of ornaments artfully burdening the branches, she fully expected a crash—until she noticed her father anchored the top to the walls with fishing line.

As the extended family welcomes wound down, bringing the volume back to simple bedlam, she said to her aunt, "Can I run your coat up?"

"That would be nice, dear. Then," Carolyn added wink, "I can get straight to telling Jeanna how to make gravy."

Headed for the cloak pile upstairs, Helena basked in the perfume coming from the kitchen below: Turkey laced with sage the powerful overtone, fresh bread and pumpkin pie served subtle, mouth-watering undertones.

Handmade stockings hung along the stairway with care. One of her favorite customs, even if Mom insisted on putting the women together, followed by the men, a Christmas version of old people in cars.

The line had certainly grown over time. Rather than make her feel old, as it well should, it remained the center of a private tradition began as a child in their old city house. Every stocking labeled in bright glitter, like she had done from the first year she discovered she could actually read them, with a

caress of a fuzzy toe, Helena whispered each name she passed.

First Mom, then Carolyn, Margaret, Helena, Joan. Then came cousins Ruth and Naomi and their girls, Susan, Dorothy—no nicknames to Dorry's distress—and Lillian. The men started with Dad, then Uncle Andrew—fondly referred to as U.A.—Hubert's was new and, efficient as mom always was, so was Alex's—or Alexander, and he would die when he saw it spelled out. Next Sam, followed by Ralph and Peter, their boys, Peter Jr., Jeremy, Winston, Georgie—obviously, tiny George rated special favors—and baby Oscar.

Then the dearly departed, grandparents she barely remembered: George, Betty, Milt and Grace, then John—always nice to see the Colonel still there—and finally, at the end ... Jared.

She stopped, stared at his name like she never saw it before. Guilt leaked into her stomach. When did she last spare him as much as a passing thought? Once upon a time, she sent him silent pleas every morning without fail. She couldn't remember the last time she offered even hello. Two weeks? Three? A month maybe? What kind of woman forgot so readily? Alex was wonderful. What they were building together even more wonderful. But history should still count for something, especially at Christmas.

Tears appeared, unwelcome and unacceptable, but there they were.

When the elder Mrs. Madison touched her, Helena jumped, banging her elbow on the handrail.

"I'm sorry," Margaret said, "I didn't mean to startle you."

Hugging Carolyn's fur, she choked, "I was just..."

Her once mother-in-law followed her gaze. "I see. It's a shock to the system, isn't it?"

Swallowing thickly, willing the tears away, Helena tried again. "I was thinking I ... miss him."

"Me, too. Both of them." Margaret's veined hand traced her own husband's name. "I hope they get along better in heaven than they did on earth. Too much alike, that was their problem. And both too stubborn to see it."

Helena searched her face. "I haven't thought about him much lately."

"That's the way of things. I don't think about John like I used to either—even less now that Hubert's turned my head."

"Do you feel guilty? With Hubie, I mean?"

A twinkle in the older woman's eye belied any innocence. "Are you asking me if I think about John when I'm *with* Hubie?"

"No! Although maybe. I don't know. Do you?"

"Never."

"I'm relieved."

"Thought you might be."

"Do you ever feel like you're cheating?"

"Sometimes," Margaret admitted. "Then I tell myself he'd like to know somebody's looking after me. John hated leaving me alone when he went on maneuvers. I'm sure he wouldn't want me to be alone the rest of my life."

"I wish I was that sure."

"Oh honey," her second mother laughed not unkindly. "Jared would adore Alex. Look how well he and Sam get along. That should tell you what you need to know."

"I guess you're right."

"No guessing about it," came the stern reply. "Can I give you a spot of advice, Helena, one widow to another?"

"Of course."

"Worry about what you want. Jared lived his life, short as it was and for whatever purpose God intended. The older I get, the more I believe there's a reason for everything under the sun, good and bad. The future needs worrying about, not the past. Fretting over what can't be changed will only keep you from living—and there is nothing good about that, and everything bad.

"So. Now. Do I make good sense? Or am I being a self-righteous old fishwife?"

"No, you're absolutely right." Circumstances weren't quite as Margaret thought them to be, but her advice was sound. "I thought I was getting better at doing just that, but times like this are—tough."

"They are indeed," the wise woman agreed. "My last word of advice is to stop staring at these stockings and go kiss Alex. It will help heaps, believe you me."

Helena put on a cheerful smile she tried to wholly embrace. "You're a right smart woman, Margaret Madison."

"Yes, ma'am." Margaret hugged her and added, "I well know the value of a live man, even when they're being royal pains in the butt. Hubie's got Sammy and Alex trapped in the kitchen, talking football."

"And Alex would be patiently explaining what rugby is."

"Hallelujah. Do you want to save your mother from men underfoot or shall I?"

"I'll sic 'em on Dad. He's looking for excuses to show off his new table saw. That should keep them occupied until the turkey's done."

"Good thinking. See, I'm not the only smart woman around here. You and me, we're suckers for those talky sorts, God love 'em, but they sure do get in the way on occasion."

\* \* \* \*

After a flurry of gift opening that severely tested the tree's anchor-lines and a dinner meant to provide a week of leftovers for every household present, the Madison-Reams settled down in the den. A well-nogged Sam slouched in her father's recliner. Joan perched on the overstuffed arm next to her brother and Naomi's husband, Ralph, offered Alex the last bit of butt-room on the couch—then immediately launched into an invitation for the agrigarian student to come out to Lancaster County for a look at his new irrigation system.

Helena snuggled into her Daddy's lap at the other end of the wrap-around sofa, content to be grown-up and no older than five at the same time. Max kissed her forehead, obviously enjoying the attention from his little girl.

Story time began with obligatory embarrassments, such as dog-eaten gifts and raw turkeys. Stories repeated so often not a modicum of humiliation remained. Laughter shared all around, they moved on to family-history tales, most of them about people present only in spirit. All as it should be in a

happy person's life, despite her reservations on the stairs, Helena was that happy person.

The way Alex jumped right in with the family compounded her joy, and the way they scooped him up without hesitation meant they approved. She had heard through the grapevine that the age issue raised an eyebrow or two, and had been hesitant about dumping her sweet boy-o into the fray.

Friends are usually circumspect, even when they think you're nuts. Relatives, on the other hand, rarely possess that kind of tact.

The old stories provided both laughter that made everyone's tummy ache and a few sniffles good and sad. Although when Sam finally produced the worn copy of *The Night Before Christmas*, the kids crowded around for recital—even those who no longer believed in the whole chimney and man-in-red theories.

"Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house," Sam began.

Attention drifting, Helena heard his voice resounding in the distant past, swelling with Browning's lament: *'But how carve way in the life that lies before, if bent on groaning ever for the past?'* Her heart, well in the present, answered with Shelley's wisdom: *'The world is weary of the past, oh, might it die or rest at last.'*

Unfortunately, at the conclusion of the story, both her poetic musings and the comfort of her father's embrace were abruptly lost when Max went to whip up more eggnog. Transferring to the floor at Alex's feet for the general chatter,

Helena nuzzled his knee. The posture earned a quizzical look from her mother but she shrugged and winked.

Ruth's youngest, Lillian—a dainty, solemn girl of seven—cautiously approached and, holding Cousie Laney's hand for courage, asked Alex if kangaroos pull Santa's sleigh in Australia. Through the enviable logic of a child and Alex's cheerfully constructed, stretched-truth reply, the adults were also freed to satisfy their curiosities.

Helena watched with outright adoration as he launched into the story of his first Chrissie in Oz, where high summer seemed quite odd to a boy from the northern hemisphere. And while he described the farm and introduced his kin hers through the tale, she realized they weren't that different after all.

They both had upheavals and loss. They both had happiness as well as sadness. They missed people too long absent and they treasured those held close. Most of all, they both believed in honesty. And love. They definitely believed in love.

"I rode my new bike to the town line and back," Alex was saying, "perhaps ten kilometers. It was warm and clear, the best summer day you can imagine. I knew when I returned there would be chores and Christmas would be done, yeah? So I stopped two fields short of home and lay in the wheat under my favorite of Da's sculptures—he would've for certain had a fit if he knew," he added to Ralph, "crushing all that good growth."

As the cousin-in-law nodded sagely, Max Ream said, "You took a few minutes to savor the day."



"Something like that, I reckon. But laying there, staring up at the monolithic grace of Da's work—the piece by our flat reminds me of it actually—"

"Oh," Helena exclaimed. "That is what you were doing the day you moved in!"

He grinned. "Yes, but Da's was stone, not steel and, well, rather plainly put, that Christmas in the field is first time I remember feeling like *me*. The wind hummed, the insects were noisy, and the earth smelled musky and familiar. But for a good while, everything was in tune. Warmed by the sun's grace, I was content. I was alone in my surrounds and in my head and that was not only okay, it was ... the most real I've ever felt." He shrugged. "It's difficult to explain. I suppose it doesn't make much sense."

"No," Sam said, "it makes wonderful sense. I wish I had a moment that compared."

\* \* \* \*

On the crisp cusp of Christmas, with dawn converging on creation, Helena knew the most memorable part of the day would be the hours she spent watching Alex sleep.

Contemplating the whims of existence while her lover's lashes fluttered code from Sugarplum Island, she clearly remembered doing the same thing with Jared on their first Christmas, in the shabby two-room apartment more opulent than the Ritz because it was theirs. Recalling Jared's irritation when he opened his eyes to find her staring at him, she stifled her laughter in her pillow. He had been annoyed but she sweet-talked him out of it—something so easy in the

early years—and after opening presents, they went right back to bed.

That memory led to another and as pictures of Jared began to tumble through her mind, the good, the bad, the bittersweet and painful, she braced herself for tears that never came. Finally, with a gloriousness only those who have made their way through disaster on hands and knees understand, she peeled away the black shades erected on the day her earth stood still, and calmly waited for new light to arrive in eyes as timeless as the Susquehanna.

Her sun rose from those mossy depths only minutes later. Alex studied her sitting cross-legged above him, trying not to laugh. No perturbed grimace. No suspicious scowl. Nothing but love—and curiosity.

"Hi," he mumbled drowsily, "what'cha doing?"

"Nothing."

"Liar." He scrubbed his face. "Did Santa come?"

"Don't know about Santa. I did though. Last night. Coupla times."

"Did you now? Only a couple times?"

She giggled like he accused her of stealing butter cookies and attacked him with proverbial icing on her hands.

Grumbling, he wrestled her into a bear hug. "A coupla times. I'll show you a coupla times."

"Stop," she shrieked in purloined sugar, "not until we open presents!"

By the time she had two mugs of her traditional cinnamon-laced Christmas coffee ready, Alex had the tree lights lit, a

fresh fire started and was intently examining a fairly large, open-only-on-December-25th gift from her mother.

Shaking it heartily by his ear for the millionth time since they brought it home, he announced, "It crackles."

"Curiosity's killing you, isn't it?"

"Too right!"

"Then open it!"

In a flash, the bow disappeared amid shiny green paper, uncovering a plain, brown, cardboard box—sealed with an entire roll of packing tape.

"Nobody wraps a present like Mom but I'm ready for her." She produced scissors with a flourish. "Ta-da!

"Perfect," he said and cut into the cellophane.

When the lid gave way and revealed a mass of bubble wrap, he stared at it with dismay. "Great. I've been shaking the stuffing out of it and it's breakable."

"She loves bubble wrap more than tape. I'm betting on kangaroo slippers."

Gingerly lifting a corner, he peered inside like something was sure to nip his nose. Curiosity immediately became unadulterated surprise. "It's Violet Crumbles! Good Lord, she does pay attention to a fella's yabbering, doesn't she? I told her they're my favorite yons ago."

"What, is it cookies? Lemme see, lemme see."

"It's candy." He stripped back the packaging to reveal dozens of candy bars in bright purple wrappers. One open and in his mouth before Helena finished reading the label, he moaned crunchily, "My God, how many do you suppose there are? I'll be in sugar shock for a month."

"They're Aussie? I wonder where she got them?"

"Don't know, don't care. She's a paragon of motherhood, your mum. I'm hers for life."

Helena nibbled a bar more carefully than Alex, who licked remains from his fingers and blatantly considered seconds. Violet Crumbles, although they weren't in the least violet, turned out to be a familiar chocolate-covered sweet.

"Yummy," she declared, "they're giant Honeycombs."

"You mean I've been dying for something I can buy from any sweet shop?"

"Not this big, ours are tiny." She demonstrated a two-inch length. "Bigger's better, believe me."

He fluttered his lashes. "I thought size doesn't matter."

Laughing, she pointed to a lumpy gold package. "On that erudite note, smart ass, open the big one from me."

"Not yet." He slid a flat square dressed in purple across the floor. "This one is next."

The paper not only her absolute favorite shade of purple, the package was carefully wrapped with rainbow-colored ribbon and decorated with tiny, silver, stick-on stars. He put a lot of effort into making it as festive as possible. Whatever turned out to be inside, she loved it already.

Liberating the bow with as much care as he used in attaching it, she unfolded the paper to discover a framed portrait of Alex. In charcoal and pastels. "Oh!" she exclaimed with delight, tracing the lines capturing his half-teasing smile—the smile that never failed to produce excess moisture in all the right places. She didn't have to ask the artist's name. The style could be none other than Sam's.

Tearing her attention from the gift to find Alex nervously awaiting her opinion, she opened her mouth to tell him how wonderful it was and, in predictable womanly fashion, burst into tears.

"Sweeting," he gathered her into his arms, "if you don't care for it, it's all right."

Shaking her head, ear over his thumping heart, she sobbed, "No, no—I love it! It's beautiful and sweet and thoughtful and, and..."

"A river of joy, yeah? Then we best get the tears done straight away. Here, this one's from Sam."

"Another of you?"

"No. I know what it's of, but I haven't seen it. He's terribly worried whether you'll like it."

Unwrapping the more plainly presented package, she found the thing Sam always did best—a copy of the last photograph of the twins at the shore.

"Oh Sammy," she murmured, noting subtle changes he wrought from the original. Fear had been replaced with serenity, arrogance with laughter, animosity with amusement. Instead of a photograph of two men warring for her soul, she held a portrait of two men who loved her more than she deserved.

She hugged the frame to her chest, tears falling in streams.

Alex's hand on her arm was like lightning, the current dragging her out of the past and back to her living room. But anger in his voice is what opened her eyes.

"Is this still joy," he growled, "or has he upset you?"

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

Shaking her head, not sure of the answer, she smiled into the haunted hazel inspection. "They're both wonderful," she whispered, "I just wasn't prepared."

He nodded although his eyes remained suspicious. "Shall I have a go at the lumpy one then?"

"Yes, do," she said, and carefully placed his portrait on top of the twins.

## **Chapter 23—Flood Plain**

Spring prime, like a boy trapped in the classroom during the last days of school, Alex found the Susquehanna infinitely more interesting than his laptop. Perhaps he should have made the trip to the university library, where bay windows didn't offer never-ending distraction.

Nurtured by the river's generosity, Riverfront Park grew lush and inviting. Its patron, the mile-wide slash of blue-greenish-brown, shallow at the edges and deceptively deep in the channel, had become a familiar friend. Like the wheat fields of his childhood, she—for anything personified from Mother Nature must dutifully bear her gender—would remain a piece of him, no matter how far he roamed. For weeks, he tried to come up with the right color to assign the water, to identify the color of his friend's eyes, until Helena laughed and said, 'Look in the mirror, boy-o.'

He wasn't entirely certain why he found the waterway so compelling but the number of others observing it every day proved him not alone.

Perhaps it was the extraordinary beauty of its shores, ancient trees lining the banks like pious monks as far as the eye could see. Helena's city contained so many hues of green, it made his soul swell with the color's place in the human experience. For certain, whether through reflection of its surrounds or through a publicly-denied but privately-suspected contribution from Three Mile Island, the

Susquehanna was the most mysterious shade of green he had encountered on three continents.

Although, since his fascination changed little from season to season, perhaps it rightly came down to whatever his mood, the timeless flow mimicked it with a cognition calling for humble awe. Like the way its sky-reflecting calm in autumn fit his security when he moved into Helena's home. Like its frosty edges appeared about the time they wrestled with the minor difficulties of sharing space full time.

And how the chunky, frozen sluggishness of it in January and February strangely comforted him when influences outside of their unity spawned mini-icebergs of obstruction, leading finally to spring and a growing number of idiotic rows.

He reckoned most of their disagreements of late hinged on sheer irritability. On top of every worry he continued to tend, perhaps the decision to quit smoking cold turkey had been excessively foolish.

Swallowing a crave, he nodded to himself. Definitely smoking. When Helena had fetched the paper, the crisp, earthy scent of the day caused a flurry of activity. She actually opened every bloody window in the flat before she made coffee.

At first cheerfully chilly, as the day wore on, the fresh air gave him a hankering for a cigarette so strong, at the moment his skin hung on the verge of crawling into a corner and weeping with frustration. And Helena's off-key singing while she puttered about the kitchen only exacerbated his ill temper. She certainly found it easier to quit than he did. Then



she liked chewing gum—even gum that tasted like peppered sawdust.

Ciggie Jones aside, neither attempting to beat the habit nor their relationship itself were the real divisionary culprits. He had less patience for studying than he should and she was at loggerheads with a new Dean of Curricula, resulting in a fragile, dual irritability that had little to do with their disagreements.

Not that guilt seeping from his stomach into the rest of his cells helped. Ever since Christmas, Helena wanted to plan a trip, visit Mum. He claimed it wasn't a good idea. She wanted to know why. Yet again, he couldn't bring himself to tell her why—and every excuse he manufactured made it ever more difficult to fix the bloody white lie holding him in stasis. As long as he remained uneasy about Sam Madison's intentions, fear of his origin remained an insidiously suffocating noose.

*The only thing truly remaining,* a disgusted Aidan said, *is that you're still a bloody jelly-kneed drongo.*

Ignoring the unsolicited opinion, Alex concentrated on the river. Now that spring had rolled around with authority, the water's rush toward the dam wasn't unlike his present circumstance. He eagerly awaited the summer. In a few weeks they could escape to New Jersey, return to their love's birth. A place where he may be comfortable enough to tell her everything he needed to tell her.

The shrewish phone invaded his gloom and he switched to the love seat, removing the river from view. He must study. Finals at hand, he didn't feel entirely prepared.

No sooner did he get a single paragraph digested than Helena, laughing in the kitchen, erased the meaning of the next. "I know, I know," she said. "One second..."

She skirted past the doorway. Abrasive wood-on-wood scraped down the nape of his neck as she pulled along a chair. "I hope it didn't mean calling in every favor you've got," she continued out of sight. "I owe you big thanks." She paused, then said adamantly, "I thought we were going to skip it." Another pause. "Yeah, of course ... it is the best way. No, no, I'm sure it's okay. This is definitely the last one, though. We agree on that?"

Most likely Joan. Last one what? The receiver rattled into its cradle and when Helena appeared in the doorway, Alex pretended he wasn't eavesdropping.

"I tried to catch it on the first ring. How's it going?"

"It's not," he said, swatting the laptop to sleep. "Who rang?"

"Sammy," she said, "to see if we're getting together next Wednesday. It's sort of an annual thing we do. Usually later in the summer but since we're going to Jersey for the duration..."

True to plan, she hadn't spared Sam a significant portion of her attention since the night Leo monopolized the bathroom. "What for?"

Did she avoid his eyes? "Habit, I guess. A way to bounce our year off each other."

No real fault he could find with her request—it being in the wide open and therefore lacking a reason to be objectionable. But he didn't care for it. No, he didn't care for it in the least.

"If you must go, then go," his response reflected his rancor, "I won't stop you."

She presented him with a strange smile. A smile he couldn't interpret. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Then what's with the face?"

"Wednesday's my last day before finals. I told you yesterday I wanted to take you to dinner instead of studying. If I don't know it by then, I most likely won't."

"I'm sorry, I forgot."

He peevishly wondered if she also forgot his birthday weekend following. With all the bloody fuss her family made over birthdays, he had been certain she would want to celebrate. Yet Helena hadn't even mentioned it. Too busy making plans with Sam.

Aidan showed up. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself.*

Gaze returning to the window, which displayed nothing more interesting than fluffy tree-tops and blue sky, Alex searched for a way to be honest without starting another silly row. As much as Helena insisted she would never be with Sam, there were indications that may not be absolute truth. Whether conscious or unconscious didn't matter. Either way, it drove him bloody insane and put him in danger of copying Sam in the worst possible way: if he couldn't convince himself that Helena loved him beyond the pale of her past, he would end up hating Sam and leaving Helena before despising her as well.

*I keep telling you, Aidan said with infinite patience, they're lifelong friends. You may be reading entirely too much into entirely too little.*

Helena marched across the room and closed his computer with a snap. "Don't get bitchy about it and give me the silent treatment. I'll tell him I can't go."

He truly didn't mean to take his crankiness out on her. "Don't make it my fault," he said and whipped the computer back open.

She shoved the laptop to the side and clambered into his lap. "I'll tell him I changed my mind."

"Off me, please. I have to finish the chapter."

"A little longer won't hurt," she wriggled suggestively, "I'll make it worth your while."

"No doubt."

Her turn to sigh. "Give it a rest, Alex. I should mark homework, too, but a little R&R won't kill anything. We're snapping like twigs and maybe it's time we give Us some work."

Disagreement was impossible. Love may well take care of itself. To harmoniously share the same space full time required effort. What's more, while a year ago Helena's offer would have had him hardening in an instant, it didn't even get a bloody nod at present. Not that he didn't desire her, only that their insatiability had seemed to level out. Under the layers of pressure, sex of late was simply a stress-buster. Some may dismiss that state as comfort. He labeled it bloody boring—and the way Helena tugged his t-shirt from his jeans, she felt an urgency about the problem as well.

"You know," she stroked his bared abdomen, "we have to ignore the working for a living horseshit—or studying, as the case may be."

"I know," he conceded as she tickled between his pecs. "We only need hang on a few more weeks. Plenty of time to play soon enough."

"Not soon enough. Look, it's Saturday. To hell with what we should do. Let's walk up to the Inn, have an early dinner and a beer. Then come home and boff like bunnies. How's that sound?"

It sounded good. "Reckon it's an offer I can't refuse."

His mood improved simply by getting out of the flat, within the hour they strolled up Front Street hand-in-hand.

After admiring the sun lapping at the river's surface, Helena said, "Let me ask you something. Do you trust me to make observations based on experience?"

"I suppose," his curiosity peaked, "like what?"

"Ruts," she said, "I know about relationship ruts. As far as the bedroom goes, we're smack in the middle of a huge one. It's starting to spill out of the ditch and into the rest of our life. Unless you're just not in love with me any more. And if that's the problem," she took a deep breath, "please tell me and don't let me dangle, okay?"

"Don't be daft. Of course I still love you." Perhaps she was right. Perhaps it wasn't the outside world that had him in knots. He certainly missed the easy-going companionship that evaporated with the snow. Not that anything turned bad, only not the same.

"You're right. Reckon we are in some sort of rut."

"I think it would help if we do something different."

"Different? What haven't we tried?"

"Brain-wise, you bohunk, mind set. Like maybe some fantasy fulfillment. Could be fun since we're past worrying about our hidden corners."

Recognizing the possibility for a kinkier-than-usual encounter, his cock stirred. "What do you have in mind?"

"I can think of several scenarios off the top of my head."

He chuckled. "So can I."

"In your case," she snorted, "I bet it's heads."

A wave of adoration swept through him. "I do love you," he said as they reached the pub, "more than I have words for."

"Does that mean you want to go first?" She batted her lashes. "What secret wish can I grant for you, boy-o?"

"Oh no you don't." He opened the door, ushered her through with a bow. "Ladies first applies to more than doors, and this is your idea."

Early enough that the neighborhood tavern, which hosted the best local bands on the weekends, had abundant space, Helena chose a table by the pinball machines, far from the idle-eared barflies.

The waitress took their orders and promptly delivered a pitcher. Only then, hunched over the table, did Helena return to the subject. "Okay. Here's something I've never told anybody. It's a little off the beaten track and I'm nervous as hell, but you already know more—never mind, I'm stalling. Ally-ally in come free, ready or not..."

Pausing only for waitress interruptions and evidently, as evidenced by his eventually empty plate, chewing, Helena outlined in brilliant Technicolor Panavision a fantasy she claimed to have since puberty. The way she looked quickly away during some of the more heated details prompted Aidan to surmise, *I don't believe she has ever shared this ... rather interesting scenario.*

Ego stroked, Alex agreed. He would title it 'The Burglar Gets a Surprise'—and a bloody inviting game. A bit of rucking released his erection from its bowed-head prison. Thankfully, the Inn was dim, otherwise his growing opinion would be visible not only from the bar, but the bloody sidewalk, as well.

The second Helena's juicy plan wound to an end, he chirped breathlessly, "I can do that."

She dropped her eyes and grinned. "Yeah, I think so, too. Even if it sounds silly when I say it out loud."

"It's not silly. It's bloody hot."

"Oh! I wasn't sure what you'd—but enough about me. Let's spread the embarrassment around. Your turn."

"Uh..." That took the edge off of his excitement right quick. Alex searched his fantasy stash for one he could freely admit out loud. Only then did he realize precisely how daunting the task, how intimate a glimpse Helena had gifted. That provided an additional thrill. He must offer something equally significant. Something personal enough to show his appreciation of her trust.

*Perhaps the Amazon twins,* Aidan said, being no help whatsoever. *No, suppose not. I doubt she will agree to turning the living room into a mud pit.*

Alex cleared his throat. He had a better one in mind. One Helena may not find as repugnant as muddy carpets. "All right," he said—and other words refused to follow.

He tried again. "There is one you touched on once." Overcome with unreasonable shyness, he cleared his throat again. Perhaps it would be easier to trot out a pair of warrior women.

"Out with it, boy-o! I'm literally quivering knowing you know what you know now, and not knowing what you do or don't want me to know from your side of it. And I have to say, I'm about to burst." She frowned. "Did you follow that?"

"Frightening as it should be, I did. Give me a tic to, um, compose my thoughts." He shook off another taunt from Aidan. Amazons were common. A fact learned in his dorm room freshman year, listening to a handful of drunk youngsters. No, he would stick to another old favorite. And since he wouldn't dream of treating a woman with such selfishness were she not inclined to participate, the fantasy also held substantial illicit oomph.

However, fancy footwork would be required if Helena decided to explore the roots of their fantasies. He may be working up to his revelation as slowly as humanly possible, but he was working up to it. Either way, an after-sex cuddle wasn't the time or place for it.

But. In his imagination, Helena already fulfilled the fantasy on a regular basis. Reality would be...

Phenomenal.

Decision made, he started and stopped twice, imparting he still had trouble expressing his thoughts.



"C'mon, don't go modest on me," Helena urged, "there's nothing you can say that will shock me."

*Yes there is.* Aidan always derived enormous amusement from taking the piss out of him. *Only you can't tell her that any more than you can this, can you, mate?*

He closed his eyes, willed the whisperer into oblivion.

"Alex?" Helena touched his hand. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." His brain sounded the all clear. When he opened his eyes, Helena wore worry.

"If it's not your cuppa, it's okay," she said, "really. We can do something else. Maybe a boink in the Sunken Gardens?"

"No, this is fine. I was about to—there's one that ... I've had since I saw my first porno. One that gives the old rocket a bloody brilliant red glare. We talked about it the night we met, at the drive-in. Do you remember? Sitting on the merry-go-round?"

"Ah," she said like he shared the secret of life. "You want to watch smut, act stuff out," she presented a naughty-boy grin, "on the kitchen table, maybe?"

He smiled. "No, not that, the—other part."

Her thumb traced her mouth for a moment. "Oh! Demonstrations?"

"Yes, it—it doesn't contain as many sharp details as yours. I'm afraid it's purely a voyeuristic endeavor that changes from fantasy figure to fantasy figure and you needn't do it if you find it distasteful." He was blathering. He heard himself blathering. He bit his tongue to make it stop.

"You want to watch me play. Like it wouldn't matter if you're there or not."

Relieved he didn't have to apologize for his deviance, he said, "Yes, precisely."

"That's not distasteful. Are you sure you can handle it? I can get pretty carried away with my toy."

"Fuck," he muttered low, "leave off until we're home, or I may embarrass myself. I came commando in case I got lucky, and am now cracking a fat likely to pop straight through my zip without warning."

"Poor thing," Helena cooed before her eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Have you been thinking about it all this time and never said?"

"Not really—well, on occasion maybe."

"Silly boy-o. I hate to tell you how easy it could've been accomplished before this. Mine can wait, I want to do yours."

"Yeah?"

"Oh yeah," she said with pure lasciviousness. "I haven't had my playmate out of his bag since the day you showed up."

Right surprising, that. He assumed she masturbated same as he did. "You haven't had a solitary wank since we met?"

"I most certainly have. A quick climax beats the hell out of Midol."

"Really?" He licked his lips. "A pop takes care of that?"

"Really. But I don't need the heavy equipment. One finger's sufficient."

"You should've asked me. I would've done it for you."

"Like you ask me to climb in the shower and do it for you?"

Enlightened, he conceded. "Just so. Viable point."

"Do you want another beer?"

"I'm ready to go if you are. I may even run home."

"Will you settle for a trot?"

"Reckon I would. So long as you make it worth my while."

She laughed. "Damn straight. Come morning, this rut will be filled in and gone."

Once again, the world shrank to an oasis that held only the two of them, with everything—and everyone—outside of it fading into mere shadows. It would seem they survived their first rough spot.

Alex prayed all future difficulties would be so readily overcome.

\* \* \* \*

Helena threw her sweater at the hook and tossed instructions over her shoulder. "Lock up and meet me in the bedroom, but give me a little bit of time, please?"

As soon as she was gone, Alex converted the male-female math. Right. She wanted fifteen minutes. So he tried not to rush. Impossible. It didn't take but several minutes to check the doors and retrieve an amber lager from the fridge. Suddenly more nervous than excited, he stretched time by polishing the bottle off in short order. Then he unlocked the back door, placed the empty into the recycle bin straight away.

Returning to the kitchen, he fussed about, giving the cat fresh water, considering whether or not he should drag two beers along, or use mugs.

Then he wanted a cigarette. The craving spasmed his chest, shuddered over his scalp and clawed down his spine.

Naught to do about it beyond fossicking the cupboards until he located a bag of hard caramel sweets. They might not dampen the nicotine craving all that well, although the creamy, vanilla-and-brown-sugar flavor took his mind off the taste of smoke and centered it on the taste of Helena.

Pleased as pigs in mud that she consented to perform, Alex reckoned he best woo her through it, rather than take the non-participatory role he usually imagined. Finally discarding the mug idea along with his patience, he snatched two coldies from the fridge and made for the bedroom.

Cock better than half-hard when he opened the door, the disappointment of an empty room greeted him. Was that—no. That was not—repeat, not—the hiss of running water. Yet it was. Loud and unmistakable.

If Helena meant to shower before they started, she would be in there forever. The huge bathroom was her pride and joy, as modern as the rest of the flat wasn't. The shower itself occupied an entire wall, with frosted glass etched in elaborate fleur de lis. Like tiny windows, the design offered the only clear view into or out of the stall, a fact he regularly used for a bit of morning Bo-peep. Until the steam obliterated them.

That thought sent him barreling into the loo unannounced.

"Coming in?" Helena called from behind the double-frosted the glass. He yanked the shower door open to discover her lounging on the bench that spanned the chamber.

Hot water pouring over her nakedness, she ducked her head, soaking her hair. "Get in here, Alex, you're flooding the floor."

Naked so fast he barely realized he stripped, the water sluiced over his shoulders in less time than it took Helena to slick back her mane. Turning his face to the spray, he savored the womblike stage before shoving his own sodden hair back.

Then he licked his lips with relish and claimed her with his eyes.

He loved to look at her. His cock loved to look at her. Water streaming from her glistening breasts, she stroked the ripe mounds for his benefit. Curving to her waist and then spreading over the swell of her hips, her thumbs brushed the wet tufts between her thighs.

Her gaze traveled down his chest, his stomach, his half-mast cock, and finally his legs. When her gilded-green interest returned to the spray thundering over his organ, Alex thickened further.

It had been much too long since ascension accompanied the mere sight of her nude or her eyes on his offering.

So interested in her spectacle, he almost missed the white nylon bag. Similar to one Helena dragged in and out of the bathroom like a Totem, filled with all the tubes and vials necessary for the mysteries of facials and toenail painting, it lay innocuously by her hip.

An entirely different bag, judging solely by the size and general shape of the item it housed. He hastily curtailed his curiosity, both mortified and stomach-rolling giddy that she intended to do what he wanted her to do.

Prefaced by her thumb tickling her lips, Helena patted his stomach—maddeningly just above his up-to-the-challenge cock. "Somebody's ready to come out and play." Cat eyes

captured his. "Come a little closer. I might want to lick that wet belly." No further ado, she leaned against the wall, stretched her legs into a long V inviting him in.

Sorely tempted to dispense with the show and RSVP her invitation with his tongue, he admired how she didn't flinch at his examining her *au naturel*. Women always seemed to be in a hurry to shield this or that bit from view, and from the first he cherished the way Helena wasn't shy about herself, nor about looking him over with the same candor.

"Need a little encouragement?" She lifted her breasts to center the spray on her nipples. "God this is so good. Like a thousand little tongues."

His knees faltered. He grabbed for the door rail. Wouldn't do to fall flat on his arse, that much was certain. "Rather have one big one?"

She stared pointedly at his crotch. "Big tongue or big..."

Lips curling into a sly smile, he contracted his groin muscles, bounced the burgeoning bazooka.

She laughed. "I see!"

"You look good enough to eat." He wasn't teasing.

"You look like a sculpted god. Wet man shows off every perfect ridge of muscle. So," she mused, "do you want a taste first, or do you just want to watch?"

A finger slipped between her pussy lips. His thighs and ass went taut, burdened by the weight of a full erection. Difficult to say what he wanted. Greed would likely be a regrettable sin. "Suppose I'll enjoy the show a bit."

Trailing a hand over her abdomen before again wriggling into the mat of curls, she went on in the conversational sing-

song he loved so much. "We should have sex outside like this. In the pouring rain, on a blanket in the middle of nowhere."

That sounded right good. Sounded like a romantic rut-busting—not to mention ball-bursting—interlude if ever there was. "I know the perfect place. First black cloud in the sky, we'll be off."

"I think we'll be off long before then."

He threw back his head and laughed. What seemed lost in the realities of the world, in the harsh part of living that wears ceaselessly at love and patience, had come home. The teasing and taunting without worrying how it sounded added an anticipatory edge to everything and he had never experienced anything like it.

But he had never experienced anyone like Helena, either.

She rubbed faster, centering on her clit until she shuddered. "Time for show 'n tell." Her chin pointed to the web pouch. "He serviced me well before you came along, so don't be mean to him."

Although mesmerized by her diddling, Alex remained curious about the bag's occupant. The loose-weave nylon hinted at something flesh-pink and penis-shaped, clearly not the modest vibrator he envisioned. That alone made his cock twitch.

Shit! If they returned to their old lovemaking ways, his little fella would be tender tomorrow. He snickered, perversely enjoying her joke. "No worries, I promise to be right pleasant to the buggar. Reckon it's the least I can do when I took his job without a care."

Odd, referring to the bloody thing as 'him'. Even stranger imagining it as another bloke. Yet giving the toy a bit of personalization seemed right for the fantasy, and in no way decreased his excitement.

With a wicked grin, Helena dug into the bag and produced the promised item with a triumphant cry. "Ta-da!"

Not a vibrator, a bloody dildo. Alex promptly blushed. Perhaps he didn't want to give it suggestive animation after all. Not when it was a bloody mimetic substitute down to the last ridge and ... swell.

Too busy making erotic mental adjustments to consider how it sounded, he said, "Bugger me dead, Helena, it looks like the Creeping Flesh." Sweet Christ, no wonder she took four fingers without blinking. The bloody thing put his prick to shame.

"Well," she said modestly, "that is what brought it to mind at the playground."

"No wonder." Unbearably curious, he poked it gingerly, afraid to use more than his index finger. "Seriously, where did you get it?" The notion of her waltzing into some shop and asking for it was slightly embarrassing—and extremely arousing.

She confirmed his suspicion. "Never been to an adult shop? We'll have to remedy that."

"No—I mean, yes, but not for something like—did you ask for the elephant dick display?" Shit! What a thing to say. He giggled. Then he giggled again.

Helena seemed to enjoy his discomfort. "I wish I'd thought of that. I can just see the clerk's face." Grin evil, she flicked



her tongue over the tip of the implement. "It may look intimidating but I guarantee, nothing's as good as the real thing. So behave yourself while I'm busy, and maybe I'll let you do my mouth while I come."

Breath hissed from lungs that forgot to breathe. Alex licked his lips, swiped the water from his eyes. He needed nothing less than good, clear vision.

She slid it down her stomach, dragging the head through spread lower lips. Water pouring over it, then between her legs added a visual jolt—under no circumstances did he ever want to meet the model for it in a dangerous alley.

Torn, he wanted to keep watching. He also wanted to bury his tongue in her tender bits, kiss her and whisper sweet nothings in her ear. And, as a matter of fact, he wanted to listen to her tease while he wanked, as well. Perhaps he could find a way to do all of it at once. Hand straying to his shaft, sliding slowly up and down, he considered the options.

"Mmm, that is so hot," Helena said. "It always makes my mouth water when you play with yourself."

Right to the point. A grin stretched so wide, he may well resemble The Grinch. The faux glans caressed her exposed clit, Helena murmured pleasure, and a tidal wave of excruciating anticipation hit the shoreline of his brain, crushing indecision. "Do you plan to torment me for long, or are you going to show me what a girl can do with her imagination?"

It worked. "Oh, I'm going to show you. We'll play pretend ... pretend it's rain, not the shower, and I'll show you what we'll do in that thunderstorm."

The latex cockhead slipped into her ready opening and she gasped. The sight shot into Alex's balls and marble solid, his prick danced with envy. Mouth bone dry, he fruitlessly licked his lips and realized listening was well advised, since he really had no idea what to say.

Heels propped on the bench, Helena spread herself wider, took no notice of his idle tongue. "Can you see well enough or should I sit sideways?"

"Yeah. No. Yeah, I can. See. Can see. Can see fine." She would get mountains of her favorite dripping chocolate voice, because he had trouble breathing, let alone speaking.

With a slight pump, she slid a bit more in. He had seen it in pornos, of course, but the details in reality were twice as stimulating. Her vagina expanded, stretched to accommodate the increasing girth, and an abrupt arch pushed additional length inside. Pumping redoubled, Alex wrapped a hand around his inflated apricots, all effected organs screaming to be the center of her attention.

"Help me, please," Helena said, "I can't keep my heels like this."

No idea how he should help, he closed the gap, trusting she would tell him.

And she did. "Hold my legs up."

"Oh, uh..." He stared dumbly at the pommel still gripped in his hand. How could he do that and wank?

"When we get to bed, you can jerk off in time with him, if you want."

Alex's groan echoed off the tiles. Grasping her ankles, he pushed her legs up and apart.

"Much better," she drawled, "I knew I could count on you."

Lioness eyes glowing with pleasure and laughter, she enjoyed his divine torture. Paying her back would require some particularly interesting vengeance—vengeance sweet indeed.

"Watch carefully, 'cause here he goes," Helena murmured and began to service herself, working the shaft in bit by bit, until the entire length was buried with each thrust.

Utterly transfixed, his shoulders rippled, toiling to keep her far from motionless legs aloft. Soon he grunted through gritted teeth with each dip of the dildo while the shower pounded his knotted back, forging his iron-clenched neck. He hung onto her slippery ankles, envying the rubber rod's mission as his prick—a genuine ivory priapus—repeatedly boomeranged off his belly. Each bouncing-brush against his abdomen sent rivulets of sensation trickling into his spasmed thighs.

Astonishing as it should be, the mere sight of the thick donger pistoning into her edacious canal made it highly possible he may explode with little additional stimulation. A wish for an extra hand to ease the aching length was born.

He had to say something, if only keep his mind off his enormously happy prick. "Is it good?" In view of her groans, as questions go, a very stupid one.

"Mmm, it's great. How's it look, like you imagined? Does it make you extra hard seeing him slam me?"

At least she asked stupid questions in response. "Bloody brilliant. The way your pussy sucks it in—I'm in awe, sweeting, and so is my prick."

"Fight it, boy-o," she sang, "this show has a couple acts to go."

She really did get a kick from his voyeurism. Yet while she watched him watch her, and the toy continued to piston in and out, the hopeless romantic in him believed he should look into her eyes. The sexual animal part, however, thought that a crock of shite and insisted he keep his eyes on the prize. For the moment, he reckoned he would side with the beast.

Eventually pushing her hips high, the rubber member sheathed as solidly and deep as it could go. Helena humped the fullness, a quiver spreading from her legs, into his straining arms and chest. And when she lifted a breast, suckled the nipple—checking his reaction as she did—a matching shudder coursed through his rigid limbs.

"If you don't want me to shoot," he muttered in complete erotic woe, "best leave off immediately."

Releasing the bud, Helena unsheathed her disembodied lover with a reluctant sigh. "I guess you can breathe for a minute."

"No, no I can't."

That made her laugh. "Come on, the bed awaits."

He liberated her legs and pinned her to the bench with a kiss. She tried to break away but so intoxicated he wanted to spend on the spot, with insistent hands in her wet hair, he held her fast.

As he trailed kisses down her throat, she murmured, "Don't you want me to finish?"

He growled, wrapped her in cramped arms and imprinted his solidified appendage into her stomach. "Reckon you can

leave me like this?" He bit into the soft juncture of neck and shoulder, sucked, tongue laving the flesh.

Helena pinched his arse—which made him jump—and turned off the spigot. He opened the door, but she was faster. Snatching the only robe, she tossed him a towel. "Dry off. I don't want to sleep in a soggy bed."

Patting down enough not to trail water, Alex promptly followed—only to discover Helena had continued without him. Not that he minded. In fact, finding her already moaning and fucking bounded into his bat and balls with bawdy brilliance. Knees wide, well-filled with her latex mate, she went all out, hard and fast.

No longer any reason to deny his fattened fella, Alex wrapped it in a tight fist and stroked in time.

Not willing to tear his eyes from the broad prong distending her gateway and also not willing to stop abusing himself, climbing on the bed proved a bit awkward. Once he was there, he couldn't decide where to look first. Should he wallow in the glazed green-gold pleasure in Helena's eyes or focus on her glistening pussy consuming the dildo?

"A little closer, please." Her head landed between his knees. "Let me suck your balls while you stroke."

With a ragged groan, Alex simply shifted forward and offered his ripe fruit. She knew what she was about, as the position offered a better view. Her tongue teased his hypersensitive sacks while he leaned ever nearer her insatiable pussy. Streaming honey, her thighs dewy with the musky moisture, the faster she plunged the phallus in and out, the faster he pumped his prick.

They spent long minutes in the odd 69, his face hovering over her crotch while she tongued his shuddering gems and busy hand.

"What—where," Helena stuttered, took deep breaths.

Damned if she didn't look bloody well-fucked already. He wasn't the only one who would deal with tender parts tomorrow.

"Sorry, had to catch my breath," she murmured. "Do you want to keep jerking off or you want me to suck you? 'Cause at this rate, I'm going to come soon."

What a choice. Her tongue on his apricots while he manhandled their tree fantastic, the way she groaned around his cock during fellatio knew no equal. "Mouth," he decided, "I love when you moan around me."

He aimed for her open lips, and without hesitation Helena accepted the gift and set about doing what she did so well. He had been sucked before, of course. Some women did it because he asked. Some did it because they thought they should. None before Helena did it because they loved to do it, because they craved it. Which was why, of all the ways he could penetrate her hunger, orally continued to contain a huge charge, since he could service her mouth with the lowliest lack of restraint and, whether her pleas were intelligible or not, she always begged for more.

To that end, the encouragement he hissed was unnecessary, but it guaranteed to double her pleasure. "Yeah, do it, sweeting. I love how you suck my fat dick."

And suck she did, tongue swirling over the increasing pounding pulse until he groaned nonstop. As much as he felt

like pistoning into her delicious mouth, sawing his length over the firm flat part of her tongue, he remained still and allowed her to decide the rhythm.

Neither rhyme nor rhythm emerged. Helena suckled with unusual abandon, the fake cock's pounding renewed, the mad pace bowing her hips, each pierce seeking full and total penetration.

Slickened lower lips played peek-a-boo with her clitoris and Alex realized he could easily reach the begging bit with his tongue. Upon contact, Helena shouted her approval and it required a fair amount of concentration to lick her and keep his prick in range of her lips. To assist, do at least some of the work, he struggled for better positioning. That he couldn't find kneehold didn't matter. Helena abruptly crossed the line, his cock quivering under her muffled screams. Still twitching satisfaction, she abandoned her fantasy playmate in favor of digging into his arse, urging his engorged knob deeper into her mouth. When the unguided dildo threatened escape from her convulsing canal, Alex hastily pushed it back into labor, pumping extended pleasure with it and his lapping tongue.

The tremors wracking her finally began to subside and he somehow got turned around. Impatiently tossing the imposter aside, he filled her with his hot, deceptively-hardened living flesh as quickly as he could. His need turned feral, Alex sucked her moaning lips and savagely plumbed her silky depths.

Quite a bit of explicit commentary flooded his brain, unpronounceable as he climbed ever-nearer to detonation.

Fortunately, Helena knew what she wanted, and said so.  
"Yeah, Alex, fuck me. Make me come again on your big cock."

His big cock? After the sizeable thing she banged, the extra ego stroke was simply too much to bear. Buried as deep as nature would allow, his howl of release imploded. The world shattered into a dark haze filled with a million stars. He climaxed so strong and so long it seemed to go on for hours as his spurting horn twitched and his thighs shuddered. The straining muscles reduced his shout of satisfaction to a barely escaping whimper, Helena still bucking, striving to follow with another peak of her own.

"God, don't stop," she cried, her pussy continuing to milk his relieved erection, "harder, more, harder!"

Head buried in her neck, he labored to meet the demand.

"C'mon, pound me," she huffed, "I said give it to me, Sammy!"

The name burrowed into his ears, speared through his consciousness to penetrate his heart, wilt soul and cock simultaneously. With an abrupt halt, he choked out the question. "What did you say?"

Not losing a beat, hips yet grinding into his, she wailed, "I said harder! Pound me! Slam me! Bang me, damn it! Do me good!"

"For a second there," he said, not reassured, "I thought you forgot who I am."

Helena's slit eyes flew wide and she snarled through gritted teeth, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Nothing." Panic subsiding, he backed away from the powder keg. "I'm done for a few."



He wasn't certain whether the green-gold depths radiated guilt or confusion and her growl revealed neither. "You're fucking kidding me."

Scooping up her stand-by dick, he pushed it into her hand. "Here," he summoned cheerfulness from God knows where, "show me again."

With a sardonic smile, she clucked, "Naughty boy-o."

While Helena set about the task with gusto, even white teeth holding her bottom lip hostage, he used watching as an excuse to avoid her eyes.

The disturbing phrase echoing in his head, Alex felt strangely removed, as if he stood outside the house looking in, a filthy peeping Tom in his own bedroom. And it wasn't until he convinced himself he misheard, his ceaseless insecurity the responsible malefactor, that he wondered why Aidan hadn't showed up to offer an opinion.

## **Chapter 24—Thunder Enlightening**

With two underdressed young women competing for his attention, Helena easily spotted her date at the Pine Grill bar. For the umpteenth time, she tried to focus on what the dinner should be about, but still couldn't hold on to the somberness of the occasion. In so many ways, a few molecules always believed the time would, indeed, come, when she could recognize her old life's death without abject grief.

Near enough to discern the blond chickie's squealing from the brunette's, as she squeezed her jacket onto the coat rack, she grinned. Sammy played his cards right, he could probably have them both. Any other evening, she may let the bimbettes win themselves a class-A romp. Tonight, completely out of the question. Tonight, more than a ritualistic memorial, Helena required information—and too bad for the girlies, the object of their lust was the only one who could supply it.

"Hey Sammy." She patted the big man's shoulder.

Evidently, blondie promoted perpetration of several stereotypes. Store bought tan legs swung to face her, followed by a poison-tipped arrow. "Excuse me. Can't you see we're, like, talking?"

"Yeath," the brunette lisped, tongue-stud clacking, "thum people are juth tho rude."

Not in the mood to play children's games, Helena bristled. Always the gentleman, Sam moved to smooth fur, but she cut him off. "Excuse you, young lady. This is my friend. And for

your information," she looked the brats up and down with the kind of sour disapproval that always made her students shit in their shoes, "he was my friend long before your diaper days."

"You're late," Sam interjected, pecking her cheek with a 'behave yourself' twitch of his lips. "Ladies," he said to the girls, "nice chatting with you."

Still challenging Helena with her eyes, the brunette put on a disappointed moue and addressed the former Marine. "Me and Tiffany are here every Wednesday," she flashed her oral jewelry, "if you ever want to try something new and—different."

Knowing full well her smile would have given an experienced woman pause, Helena stepped into the girl's space. "Oh honey," she patted her arm sympathetically, "when it comes to fellatio with a capital F—you know, the kind that rolls his eyes back in his head—true talent never requires equipment." Responding to the chippie's flush, she added amicably, "You have a good night now, 'kay?"

Sam bit off a snort and coughed. Hastily dismissing the hootchies with a nod, he hauled her away from the bar. "Incorrigible," he hissed, while the maitre d' blazed a trail to their table.

"Thank you," she said without a shadow of apology, "I do my best."

The waiter spouted specials, took their drink order and left them to settle into their usual table near the back of the cozy-yet-stylish establishment.

"Damn." Sam looked her over with a hooked brow. "I had no idea the Pine has such an interesting pick-up menu."

She always enjoyed a game of parry and tweak with Sam. "Sure, it's tasty. If you like bimbos-in-training that don't know the difference between your corona and your corpa cavernosa."

"I know corona. I even know where mine is," he said thoughtfully, "but I'll be fucked if I know what a corpa cavern is."

"Cavernosa. Let's just say you wouldn't be fucking anything without 'em."

"Somebody's bitch is showing."

"You know my low opinion of brainless snack food. Anyway, if you would've just spilled on the phone, you could be eating at the Y instead of listening to me criticize your taste in tail."

"Miss getting paid for calling in favors? Not on my life!"

Petrified in an instant, the stone tease dropped onto the table.

"Six years," Helena said.

"Even early, I didn't dread our date this year," Sam said soberly, "and neither did you."

"Maybe a little."

"No, you didn't. I know you better than that."

"I guess I've forgiven myself."

"You were never to blame."

She caressed his face but only with her mind's eye. "I should have said I love you, Sam, that night on the glider."

"It doesn't matter any more."

"Yes, it does. I get to keep a few regrets. Regrets are my reward for surviving the bad stuff."

He smiled. "Regret it all you want, it still doesn't matter. You knew you did. I knew you did. He knew it, too—even then."

"Same argument, same answer."

"And tonight's the last time we're having it. Happiness looks good on you, Laney. Lately, you seem—content."

"I am." She cocked her head. "Do you think he'd mind?"

"I really don't give a flying fuck. You and Alex are a better fit than either—even Jared wasn't dumb enough not to see it."

"Which begs my next question. Do you mind?"

"At first, I did. Now, I don't. We were always better friends than lovers."

Helena studied her old friend with an amused frown.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. Doc Clark's a miracle worker. I'm happy you're happy. Besides, I like Alex. Very much."

"That means a lot to me, Sammy. It really does."

"I know."

They held each others' eyes, confirming the veracity of spoken truths, until the waiter returned with their drinks. Never breaking their contemplation, Sam ordered prime rib for two.

"We're done grieving," he said once the waiter had gone.

"Then shall we get the ceremonial bit sorted right off?"

"Do you know you're picking up some of Alex's patois?"

"Reckon I am. Suppose it's only natural. He's picked up a few of my expressions, too."

"Definitely. At softball, he started with 'slut-faced pig fucker' and ended with 'gravy-sucking bitch'. Both your favorites in one tirade. It bordered on eerie."

"God, he didn't! Not to a player?"

"No, he aimed it at the ball. Beautiful sportsman's tantrum. Earned him some healthy masculine admiration—and a bunch of old soldiers are hard to impress."

"Okay, enough small talk," Helena plowed forward, anticipating the meat of her matter, "did you contact Aaron or not?"

"Horse, then cart," Sam said, "first things first." He raised his glass. "To Jared. Wherever you are, Brother."

Helena raised her drink in answer. "We love you."

"Always."

In the chime of glass, she found peace. At last.

Like a magician sharing secrets, Sam said, "Aaron's in London."

"London? Alex said Melbourne."

"That's why you couldn't find him. You were looking on the wrong continent."

"So call me Watson. You got an address, Mr. Holmes?"

"I have his phone number. I talked to him this morning."

"You did?" She out-and-out wriggled with glee. "What did he say? Can he come? Does he want to come?"

"It took an awkward minute or two to explain. Fortunately, he seems just as laid back as Alex."

"But will he come for a visit?"

"They haven't celebrated a birthday together since he left home." A frown marred Sam's smile. "That really got me, Laney. I think this is going to be good for both of them."

"Therapy later, please?"

"Aaron said he'd be 'chuffed to come but life's a tad tight at the moment'. So I offered plane fare, bullied him until he accepted and," he paused for a self-satisfied grin, "he'll be here Saturday. The flight arrives at 5:09 in the p.m. I told him you would pick him up."

"That soon?" Helena squeaked with surprise. "He'll be here for the party?"

"I thought you'd like that. Actually, I can't wait to talk art with him some more. We got yakking and he's doing interesting things with latex paint and junkyard steel. My phone bill's going to be fucking insane."

"I'll take care of that," she said, "and the ticket, too. God, Sammy, I can't wait to see Alex's face."

"Me either. He knows we're plotting something."

"I don't think he has a clue. Will you keep him occupied while I go to the airport and Ronnie gets the decorations up, until oh, I don't know, say seven? He thinks we're going out with her and Stan around nine."

"Maybe you better ask Leo."

"No can do. Leo's babysitting his sister. She's going to a sleep over Saturday night, so he can make the party but..."

"I'm not the best choice. He about bit my head off yesterday. Did you even tell him why we're having dinner?"

\* \* \* \*

Alex paced. The empty flat had him bloody narked. Aidan repeatedly argued that Helena wouldn't have told him where she would be if she intended to sleep with Sam. *At the very least*, he pointed out with his usual sapience, *she's not that stupid*.

Nor, Alex must agree, would she be hell-bent on broaching the subject of the future. No doubt Sam would leap at the opportunity to discuss travel plans, for this summer, next summer and the summer after that.

Yet ... Bugger all to bloody hell and fucking back! He desperately needed a mate for a chinwag and a stumbling good piss up, but Leo didn't answer his cell. Flipping dismally through their address book, Alex searched for an appropriate distracter—and discovered one he hadn't considered.

Just as he was about to give up, she answered on the fifth ring. "Hello?"

"'lo," he said, immediately awkward.

"Hi, Alex. How are you?"

"Are you up to company, luv?"

"I'm in my jammies. As long as you don't mind, you're quite welcome. Is something wrong?"

"I need to get out a bit. I'm going rather mad here ... studying."

"Now why don't I believe you? You need a hug. Get your behind over here. I'll have one waiting."

Easier to walk downtown than search for decent parking, a crisp, thick wind off the river made it cold enough for a jacket. The air laden with rain, he almost changed his mind



and headed for his auto but decided getting a little wet on the walk home might feel welcome.

Once again, the Susquehanna salved his spirit as he followed it downstream into the heart of Harrisburg, where his hostess waited on the redstone stoop of her neat, yellow building.

Wedged between pious colonial rowhouses like a child center pew, the bright façade was a cheerful grin surrounded by a somber sea of brick and, in faded orange pajamas and stuffed slippers bearing tiger faces, Joan was a garish, treasured brooch on her home's sunny frock.

Looking every inch a canary-eating Bengaless, she immediately wrapped him in a tight hug. "It's good to see you."

Her warmth well applied, between it and the walk, Alex already felt better. "I hope I'm not interrupting your evening."

"Nah, Mom's out with Hubie and it's too quiet." She waved him inside. "Come on. I've got an ear at the ready."

While they climbed the stairs, she said, "I got an email from Leo. He said he's not heard hide or hair of you lately."

"I tried ringing him several times today."

"I think he took his sister to a concert tonight. I mailed him back, told him not to worry, you're still a love-sick puppy and we'll see plenty of each other at the shore."

"I can't even think about that," he said as they entered her flat, "not until exams are over."

"You're worrying about more than finals tonight."

He tried to shrug it off. "Do you have a crystal ball under your bed or summat?"

"You know where the fridge is." She flopped on the sofa and punched the remote, muting the telly.

Joan and Margaret's flat always felt like home. Neat as you pleased yet not the least stiff or cold. He popped into the kitchenette, separated from the main space by a breakfast counter, and helped himself to a lager.

"There's nothing psychic about it," Joan said. "I know Laney's out with Sam. You try not to let it show, but it's easy to see you're threatened by him."

"It's that obvious?"

"Sometimes. If you want to talk about it, nothing you say leaves this room. If you don't want to talk about it, that's all right, too. We can watch a movie or play a game—waste away our hours of desertion."

Even though Alex did want to talk about the situation, being privy to parts of Sam and Helena's relationship that Joan wasn't made things touchy. He didn't quite know how to explain what bothered him and still maintain Helena's confidences.

The number of remotes on the coffee table evidence of Joan's love of electronic entertainment, she rooted through the pile until she found the stereo controls. "No matter what you might think, they're not fooling around, if that's what has your briefs in a twist."

The perfect opening, he forged blindly ahead. "I'm not too certain about that."

Radio volume adjusted, she propped her feet on the table. "Why the hell would they mess around? Ask yourself why Helena had you to move in if it's Sammy she wants."

"I know. But it's still got me stuffed up."

"It's sweet that you're jealous. Cute as the devil, even."

He was tempted to tell her about hearing her brother's name pop out in bed, where there should be no whisper of his presence, and see what she thought then. But that would mean divulging more personal information than he could ever summon the courage for.

"Great," he muttered instead. "I'm happy you enjoy it." A tiger's whiskers bobbed with Joan's bouncing foot. He attempted to change the subject. "Those are ... interesting scuffers."

She held them up for additional admiration. "They are gorgeous, aren't they? There's a few perks in child-sized feet."

"I wouldn't bring them 'round our place. Rocky will label them competition."

"That cat is crazy. Lucky I won't need them down shore."

"I only hope the little bugger doesn't move back to the alley. I suspect he'll remain well-attached to where his food bowl is, but you never know."

"Good God. Not another round of catch-Rocky-without-getting-stitches."

As they rehashed the feline's capture and subsequent domestication, Alex began to relax. Joan was right—Aidan was right—nothing nefarious going on. Helena and Sam went out for a casual dinner between good mates.

Childish to be so suspicious. It truly was. Had Helena been suspicious or accusatory when he told her that Lydia, his attractive, young field lab partner, offered to experiment

privately? No, Helena took it in stride. She thanked him for being honest. She had even been pleasant to Lydia when she came to their flat to study.

Aidan added his opinion. *Precisely what I've been saying, mate. You're simply being the jealous arse you swore not to be.*

"Anyway," Joan said, "don't waste your energy worrying about Laney and Sam. For one thing, Laney's not the cheating type. For another, I can't see them trying again. I told them before it would never work, but hey, what the hell do I know. I mean, even a moron knows you can't base a relationship on what doesn't exist. Sammy is not Jared. Helena wasn't in love with Sam. I'm just happy they didn't end up hating each other. Even trying to live together was the most idiotic thing either of them has ever done."

A vice ratcheted the base of his balls. "Beg yours? They lived together?"

Joan's brown eyes searched his face and surprise dawned with a hoarse oath, "Oh, fuck me. You didn't know. Jesus, I assumed somebody would have mentioned it by now."

"I heard they were ... close after Jared died, but—"

"Alex, I'm sorry. I should shut up. It's not my place—let's play Scrabble."

"It's all right. I knew they were together, I just didn't know they lived together as well."

"Well thank God you at least—forget it, it was nothing—absolutely nothing. A few months, six at most. Hell's bells," she muttered, "Laney's going to kill me."

Several things Alex believed were ominously indicative of Helena desiring Sam—like the fact the bloke had keys to their doors—suddenly took on whole new meanings of insignificance. Still processing, he let the fact slip into other unfilled gaps where old questions were answered as rapidly as new ones arose. "As you said," he tried to slough it off, "no worries, it stays in this room."

Fussing with the remotes, visibly distressed over the huge foot in her mouth, Joan still pursued the root of his problem. "Is that it then, you're having trouble knowing they've been intimate?"

Since she turned a black mark on his worry list to gray, Alex reckoned begging her counsel would be beneficial after all. Especially since, he noted with vague curiosity, he wasn't charging-bull angry. That he didn't have an urge to bellow and rage certainly must indicate that, deep down, his fears were unreasonable and unnecessary. "Reckon I didn't think so at first," he said with a sigh, "yet it sort of snuck up on me, eating quietly into my brain."

Joan waved trouble away. "Pure stupidity. They quickly realized exactly how stupid. They struggled to find a way to heal and Sammy always was sweet on Laney. Anyway, if she's been a little off this week, it's probably because she's distracted by the occasion, even if it's a little early."

"How's that then? She said they go out to bounce the year off each other."

Joan pursed her lips and blew out decision. "I guess if I'm in for a pounding, I might as well be in for all the pinches,

too. They usually do it on Jared and Laney's anniversary—toast the missing twin."

"Oh!" He was the right jerk, for certain. "I wonder why she didn't simply say as much?"

"It's part of their exclusive club," little sister replied with a snort. "You don't see me being invited either, do you? It's no reflection on you, Alex. The three of them were always tighter than thieves. Hell, the night Jared died, Laney called Sammy before she called me. She said she didn't—probably didn't want to hurt my feelings—but he was already there when I got to the house."

Helena had given him an outline of the worst night of her life and Alex wracked his memory for the scant details it possessed. "She told me she called you first. Maybe she has it mixed up. Easy to understand if she does."

"I don't think so." Joan studied him thoughtfully before muttering, "Sometimes I think she's certifiable. Here's the deal: She thinks Jared's wreck is her fault. But he never could drive for shit, and I wish somebody could convince her it's not her fault."

"Because of the fight? She said they had a row."

"That's an argument, right? What they had was a knock-down, drag-out, screaming match. Jared smashed a hole in the kitchen wall with a frying pan. If you ask me, she had already called Sam to cry on his shoulder. I'd bet my left boob he was there when the cops came—and I'm pretty fond of my left boob."

"I'm sure it's a perfectly lovely boob," Alex said, well used to Madisons stirring humor into their pain. "Do you mind

talking about this?" Obligated as he felt for sympathetic insider information, he had no desire to make her uncomfortable. "Helena told me the basics. They were a bit confusing, though I didn't want to pump her for details."

Aidan snorted. *Basics? With a few falsehoods added for entertainment, you reckon?*

"You are such a serious sweetheart," Joan said. "Next time you talk to that brother of yours, tell him you have this beautiful friend who's dying to meet him, okay?"

"Aaron's married, last I heard."

"Ah well, can't blame a girl for trying. Yeah, I'll tell you everything from my perspective, if you want to know. It's not a secret. If Laney thinks it is, she forgot to tell me to keep my mouth shut." She peeled a chenille throw from the sofa back and wrapped it around her legs. "I don't mean to be so blithe about it. I miss him just as much as they do, you know? Something Jared and I had in common, to laugh rather than cry. I miss him for that most of all."

Trying not to think about his own avoidance of the past or how he made himself sick over the same, Alex said, "Seems a healthy approach."

"I think so. Anyway, that night, about quarter after one, the phone rang..."

Alex listened, not applying broad prejudice in light of his own deception, however small, and respectfully requested Joan clarify only when necessary—although it became increasingly difficult to concentrate, what with Aidan pointing out every inconsistency that arose between Joan's version of events, and Helena's.

## CHAPTER 25—OVER THE DAM

Like glass spiders skittering across the hood of the car, rain pelted sideways. Sweater over her head, Helena hurried into the house.

No lights. No note. No Alex.

And no point rushing after all. Should have lingered over dessert. His car in its slot, the fridge revealed the dinner she left. Not at all usual for him to disappear without a sign. Where the hell did he get to in the pouring rain? Unless someone picked him up. An unwelcome vision of Lydia surfaced.

Nope. Not going there. Not even in idle threads of thought. Always so much easier said than done.

Perhaps Sam was correct. Alex caught a whiff of the surprise party, misread it, and...

Found solace.

The possibility tasted like soured milk. Would it have hurt to tell Alex that she and Sam held vigil for Jared, and for the last time? Why was it so God-damned difficult to raise so much as Jared's name with Alex? Why couldn't she just learn to put lipstick on the corpse of her marriage and call it pretty?

On the wings of a vehement, vocal blue tirade, the cat scurried under the loveseat. Pitiful beyond even her own self-disgust, Rocky's tentative pink nose sniffing at her fear and anger demanded an edible apology. Cross-legged on the floor, she crinkled the crisp cellophane, begging his forgiveness. "Come on, Rock 'n Roller, I have goodies."



The shrieking seal too much for Rocky to resist, he zeroed in on the bribe via the most indirect route possible.

"It's okay, fur ball," she soothed as he circled behind her. "It's not your fault I'm an idiot."

A few tasty nibs later, all was forgiven and forgotten. In further penance, Helena abandoned the bag on the floor. Rocky would likely puke but cleaning it up would be additional atonement.

Not to dwell on negative figments, while she changed into sweats from the dryer, she told Rocky that she and Alex would work it out, no matter where he went and no matter who he went there with.

Wrapped in a blanket, she flicked through the wasteland of late night television, scratching the tom's forgiving ears. The Serenity Channel, a/k/a Nick at Night. A *Lost In Space* marathon. Exactly the distraction. Alex would be home soon and she would have answers.

Still, the more she tried to ignore them, the louder her qualms rattled on, with the one she feared most jumping up and down, demanding attention.

What if he had a nicotine fit, decided to hell with quitting, walked the six blocks to the store for smokes, and some drunk jumped the curb?

What if a predator slithered down Second Street, looking for a target, and saw Alex strolling along?

Or, what if there had been...

*An accident.*

She let the thought stop tap dancing and come to rest in front of the other terrors. Odds had to be against it happening

to her twice. She pretended not to strain for the sound of sirens and turned to more reality-based worries in defense.

What if he had indeed grown tired of her old butt and found one that still defied gravity? What if he got sick of their scrapping, lost patience with her opinionated ways and found some young, malleable girl instead?

And buried at the bottom of the heap, what if he discovered he wanted children after all?

No. Do not dwell on that. Better to worry about more concrete things, like the party.

If they broke up, what in God's name would she say to his brother? *'Sorry old chap. Alex left me and you can't stay here.'* And what is the proper way to cancel a surprise party? Did one overnight-express cards, or did one call each and every person on the list and personally explain how your December-May romance went to shit?

Tears threatened to compete with the rain by the time she heard the bottom door thump, followed by slow feet on the stairs. The apartment door rattled and she braced for the worst, yet stayed put since standing up promised nothing but blubbering.

Shaking rain from his hair, Alex peeled off his jacket. The scent of wet man filled the room—her love of his smell above all others made it difficult to keep a mask of neutrality in place.

When he stepped into the living room, he frowned. "What's the matter with you?"

Not waiting for an answer, he ditched sneakers, jeans, shirt and socks before sauntering across the room in his briefs.

He flopped into the middle of the sofa, alcohol cologne wrapping her more tightly than his arm.

Beer. He went for a beer! Relief opened the floodgates. She clutched him like an upturned tap root. "I didn't know where you were," she gulped fresh tears, "I thought you were mad and left."

Alex smoothed hair from her face, although his tone was far from conciliatory. "Where in bloody hell did this come from?"

"Sam and I toast Jared every year," she blurted, "I didn't tell you because I thought it would make you uncomfortable. I didn't think about how it looked. I should've—"

"I know, Joanie told me. I went to her flat. We played Scrabble."

Helena squeezed her eyes shut, stemming a flood of happier tears. "I'm so sorry! I thought maybe you—" Unannounced hiccups took a bow, her cheeks shamefully burning. Pathetic. She assumed disloyalty or infidelity, while Alex spent a quiet evening with Joan.

"Bloody Nora," he added a final nail to her self-crucifixion, "you thought I went on the prowl? Reckon it serves you right. I've worried for days that you and Sam were—Helena, it's time we talked about a few things."

"No, it's not. We're okay. I'm just full of shit. I love you so much and if anything happened..." She straightened to look

at him, needing to see her love returned. "God, Alex, losing you would hurt worse than ... anything."

"And no doubt you'd call Sam the second I'm gone."

Feeling her eyelids lower and raise with reactionary precision, she blinked. "What?"

"You banging as kids I accepted. You doing him on a regular basis after Jared died is different."

*Oh shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.* Defense hastily rearranged, she said, "Before we met, I was celibate for—"

"I don't care how long you were celibate. You go on about honesty but you've obviously not given me the same consideration. Sam was the bloke you fucked before you fucked me." He abruptly put space between them, continued from the other end of the sofa. "You lived together. Something you conveniently failed to mention. Did you simply hope it would never come up?"

Venom coated her tongue. "Actually, Sam wasn't last. I picked some guy up six months after we split."

"Not what I mean and you know it. One night stands are inconsequential. You and Sam playing house is definitely not. I have to wonder, is that how you thanked him for calling you a slut? Reckoned you'd prove it and there would be no hard feelings?"

Trembling, Helena proceeded as calmly as she could. "Alex, please. If we need to fight, we need to fight. But let's not say anything we can't take back—deal?"

It struck home. He reined in and gruffly acquiesced. "You're right. I'm sorry. But I won't apologize for being bloody

angry. It's difficult to believe part of you doesn't still want him, especially when I hear his name in our bed."

A new rush of ire almost snuffed her desire to remain rational. "When has Sam ever invaded our bed?"

"Last week, when you gave me the show. You called me Sammy. Deny it if you like, I heard it."

"I did no such thing!"

Through clenched teeth, he replied, "Then tell me, if you can manage straight truth, what exactly—precisely—were you thinking about? Because as clear as clear, you said, 'Pound me, Sammy'."

It only took seconds to vividly recall the moment because of Alex's odd behavior at the time—and almost immediately she recognized what triggered it. "That's why you stopped. You thought I was fantasizing about Sam? For Christ's sake, Alex. I said 'pound me, *slam* me', you insecure, jealous bastard. Listen up: There is no room in my head for anyone else when we're fucking."

"Sla-slam me?" Realization, comprehension, self-dismay—thankfully belief—all hit his eyes.

Alex's flustered concern neatly vented the worst of the situation and Helena shook her head. "Slam me," she repeated. "Don't even try to tell me you never heard it before, because I say it all the time and you know I do." Anger evaporating into offense, she added, "I thought something was wrong, but you covered nicely. Don't ever do that again. If you think you've lost my interest, you better speak up, immediately."

"Shit. Must admit you do say that quite often." Fully penitent, he dropped his eyes, the dead air crippled only by the television.

Silently cursing the fragile male ego, Helena let him stew until, in an uncanny pastiche of pop culture, the Robinson's robot foretold disaster: '*Danger! Danger!*' She tried not to look at the television, not to listen—not to laugh insanely.

As she opened her mouth to call truce, he said, "Sweeting, I'm sorry." Swiping frustrated hands through his wet hair, the mimicry of Sam spooked. "I really am. Suppose I heard what I wanted to hear, simply because I am jealous—that cannot be helped, no matter how hard I try. And I do try. Even when it tears me up. But when Joan said you two..."

"Joan," Helena said, "needs to mind her business."

"She thought I knew," he said. "Which I did. Sort of. From the fellas. Don't take her to task over it, yeah?"

Helena raised the white flag. The argument was, after all, her fault and hers alone. "I didn't tell you because I wanted to hide it, but because I was afraid this would be the result. It *is* over, Alex. What's more, it didn't end well. There's absolutely no chance we could be lovers again."

No way to avoid explaining the statement's indisputability, she tried to read the hazel eyes, divine how much detail she needed to supply, even when she knew anything less than full confession was pointless.

Before she could begin, Alex scooped her into his arms, held her so tight she could barely breathe. "I love you, sweeting, more than I ever thought possible."

"Love and intimacy are different things," she said. "One is easy, the other requires a boatload of trust—there's few things in life as difficult as that separation."

"I do trust you when I'm not being a paranoid twat. I know you and Sam have a bond I'll never be a part of. And while I can embrace that intellectually, I can't help resenting any part of you that's not mine."

Tears fortunately didn't obscure the ability to read the emotions parading across Alex's face. "I know," she eased into the opening, "but it might be easier if you understand a few—"

"I do understand. I don't feel this way about Jared. Although, I reckon if he were alive, I might."

Or not. "There's nothing wrong with how you feel, boy-o." She required no pact other than a kiss, a searing of his love into her soul, yet they would only postpone the inevitable. No more side-steps. Time to unearth her black box, fling open the lid and let consequences fall where they should. Safe, strong walls surrounding deep intimacy would only be built stone-by-open-stone with plenty of faith for mortar. If she didn't participate in its construction right now, they would be left teetering atop a haphazard battlement that the first foul wind would easily reduce to gravel.

Setting up precarious defense on a penetrable wall wasn't a war she wanted to wage. Not again. She would not repeat past mistakes. She would instead believe in hard-learned lessons for the future.

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

Even properly girded, her voice quavered. "Fear is a symptom of ignorance. My fault. I pretend you don't need to know everything. Deep down, I know damn well that's a lie.

"So come along to bed, boy-o. Light a fire, hold me under the covers. Help me find enough courage to tell you about the night Jared died—and how the three of us were on the road to hell long before he did."



## **Part IV**

Many waters cannot quench love,  
  
neither can floods drown it.

—Song of Solomon 8:7

### **Chapter 26—Far and Near**

Here I am again, wanting to explain things I've done my best to rationalize away. Between a rock and a hard place, Sammy likes to say. That's me, all right: turn one way, there's a wall. Turn the other, there's a pit. I always want to balance, not choose between the bricks or the plunge. I want to remain on a narrow island of foolish, baseless conviction, where no one can get hurt.

Doesn't work. Living has inescapably sharp corners. What I've learned—or should have learned—is stepping off the beam isn't any more painful than maintaining balance while those corners jostle and jab. Because no matter how motionless you stand, the rest of the world insists on moving. In the end, all it comes down to is, if you take chances, you'll have company; never take a risk and you'll balance—fundamentally isolated and alone.

Still, as Sam was once reluctant to give me a run down of all the women he's bedded, I find myself reluctant to share the intimate details of those years he was missing from my

life. I didn't profoundly pine away. Jared and I were happy for a long time, our marriage pretty damn successful as marriages go. But, since no one's life can be compressed into a few poignant moments and even a hasty biography can't be told in a vacuum, although I won't flounder through creeks of little consequence to the pond, I will try to explain how things were, before I lost my mind.

\* \* \* \*

Our last week at Windspray, I accepted Jared's proposal. I decided that's what people do when they're in love, they get married. It wasn't a long engagement. A fancy, Cinderella wedding never entered my mind. Old enough not to need anyone's permission, by the end of the summer, for all intents and purposes, we already lived as man and wife. So, on the way home from Ocean City, we just slipped down to Maryland first, and did the deed.

The parents weren't overjoyed. They weren't, however, terribly surprised either. After some tears, lots of shouting and tons of defiance settled into the dust, heartfelt good wishes for the future were expressed all around.

The Madisons offered free room and board for six months. Jared got a job at a gym and I found one as a waitress. Between work and school, our days were almost too busy to breathe for a while, but by the time Thanksgiving loomed, we had saved enough to get a place of our own.

During that time, although we had received a congratulatory card from Sam, we didn't actually talk to him

until one night when, the house to ourselves, Jared and I sat in the kitchen, combing the paper for apartments.

The phone rang. Nearest to it, I answered with a cheery, "Hello?"

After a pause, Sam said, "Hi, Laney."

A bubble of pleasure popped, quickly squelched under the still-tender sting of his nasty exit. "Hi, Sam." I looked at Jared, hoping I sounded neutral. I never told him what his twin said that night, nor was I about to. "Where are you?"

"Jersey. I ship out to Germany tomorrow."

So close and soon, so far. "Germany?"

"Really?" Jared exclaimed. "Cool beans! Give me the phone!"

"Tell him to hold on a second," Sam said, "I want to ask you something first."

My trip across the kitchen slowed. "What?"

"Are you happy, Helena?"

Wanting to demand why the hell he would care, I said, "Yes, I am."

"Good. I'm—glad. I also want to—I'm an asshole. I didn't mean any of it."

Assuming it to be an apology of some kind, I shrugged. "Okay."

His sigh could have filled a library and although I gained some satisfaction from it, loss twinged my stomach when he added, "I'm sorry I didn't say good-bye the way I should have said good-bye."

"Yeah, well," in response to Jared's questioning look, I shrugged again, "me, too."

"Are women so scarce," my husband hollered, "that he's got to call long distance to talk to mine?"

"Tell him to pucker up and kiss my motherfuckin' ass."

"He says—" I started to repeat. Jared held out his hand and I surrendered the phone with relief. Sam didn't deserve an opinion about my happiness. He neatly excised his portion of my heart and I wasn't inclined to ask for it back.

Yet I also decided that it would be acceptable to worry about my brother-in-law and freely eavesdropped on the rest of the conversation, simply so I could assure the family that all with our green Grunt remained well.

Jared wagged his brows at me and said, "Or what, you'll kick my ass?"

Idle listening aside, curiosity got the better of me. A tilt of my chin inquired further.

He shook his head, held up a finger, less amused than a moment before. "I see ... fair enough, Sammy, if you say so ... yeah, man, talk at'cha later—and take care of yourself."

As he hung up the phone, I demanded, "Why's he going to Germany and what's he want to kick your ass for?"

"He beat every single USMC record for sharpshooters," Jared explained with pride. "They made him a sniper."

I thought about the Blue Jay. "That should be interesting."

"As for kicking my ass," Jared added a hollow laugh, "he said I better take good care of you, or else."

"The Chivalrous Sniper."

"Yeah, he's Mr. Chivalry all right." Jared returned to the paper. "He said if I don't, he's going to be too busy rescuing you to bother kicking my ass."

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

I'm here to tell you that despite my convictions arrived at minutes before, Sam's unbrotherly warning fluttered through my chest, brought my nipples to attention, then headed south with the speed of a bullet. In that moment, I accepted the slut's reputation Sam leveled at me, and forgave him for bluntly labeling it. Further embracing the notion, I also allowed myself to savor a horniness that welled from recollection of his talented tongue—a pause for which, I might add, Jared promptly received a blow-job.

I never wondered what he thought when I dropped to my knees after our missing third called. We never talked about what happened when we were more than two—not until too many years had passed to matter. Oh, the subject of Sam came up but we never acknowledged him being more to me than a brother-in-law or friend. And that was all right. I never felt any need to discuss Sam. Or, should I say, I never felt comfortable enough to discuss Sam.

In hindsight, I wish we had talked about it. Maybe if Jared and I had openly admitted the ménage as surely as we embraced sex without his twin, the first time I sat astride my husband and confused him with his brother, I may have found a way to vent images that stuck with me, images that gave rise to a curiosity I couldn't shake. Images that created the first If Only in my collection:

If only I'd gone into the barn with Sam, alone.

## Chapter 27—Rain

Five years passed before we saw Sammy in the flesh again, years in which Jared and I embraced life as any independent twenty-somethings do. We heard sporadic news from the twin away, along with an occasional hit-and-run call, but he always had excuses for not coming home. Jared missed him, even if he rarely said so. Although Sam's abandonment confused him, I never had the guts to share my explanation—as usual, I balanced, let those around me find their own footholds.

Still, some things can't be ignored. Life has a mean habit of forcing you to face what you don't want to—a lesson, it would seem, I've yet to grasp, even with higher powers beating it into my head for decades.

So it was, Fate's teacher showed up with that particular lesson plan during the spring of my fifth year as wife, on a day where the mortal gear decided to stutter, hitch and, in the holding-its-breath moment before it moved again, eradicated the extra-effervescence in simply being alive.

It began as a fairly normal Saturday. The sun rose, made a brief appearance, then parted cloudy curtains to introduce a sea of rain. The tears of every angel in heaven flooding the streets, Jared and I waded through errands, the windshield wipers doing their best to keep up.

Headed for K-Mart, at a stoplight on Locust Lane, we discovered an old Lincoln stalled in the middle of the

intersection. The guy in the Town Car was also old—I mean really old—and in the time before cell phones, very upset.

"Be careful." I eyed the traffic swimming past the dead car.

"Poor guy," Jared pulled to the side of the road, "he needs a push."

"I'll help."

"No, stay here."

With that he hopped out, trotted over to the car and, while the sky pummeled his back with renewed vigor, evidently discussed his intentions with the elderly driver. Then, although the Lincoln must have been heavier than an elephant, Jared did exactly what he said he would, and set about manhandling the monster out of harm's way.

Digging for leverage on the slick macadam, Jared gritted his teeth, put his shoulder to the task and willed the tons of steel to move until it sat safely off the road. After fiddling with the engine to no avail, he dashed back to our car for the newspaper and shielding the gray head, escorted the man into our back seat as quickly as his ancient legs would bear.

"Seems Mr. Rogers here," a grin as Jared buckled up exposed a laugh, "needs a ride home."

Mr. Rogers was so thankful. He offered Jared money. Jared would hear none of that. Nor, upon delivering her husband to their door, would he accept a towel from Mrs. Rogers.

Of course, no sooner did he step off the Rogers' porch, than the rain ceased as suddenly as it started that morning, and the sun checked in to say there had been a little confusion with the weather god.

Jared slipped gingerly into the driver's seat.

"God," I exclaimed, "you're drenched! You should have taken the towel."

He yanked at the inseam of his jeans, cursed the wet denim tightly molded to tender regions. "It's just water. I'll dry soon enough."

"I hope not too quick." Damp curls decorated the nape of his neck and his t-shirt clung deliciously to his chest. "Manly display of strength like that, babe, I'm not sure you're the wettest thing in the car."

"Pervert. Will you come on the spot if I take off my shirt?"

My reply lilted sassy and saucy, "It's entirely possible."

He stuck out his tongue and, along with squishy sneakers and socks, deposited his sodden shirt in the back. "Christ, I'm out of my mind," he fished under the seat for rubber thongs that lived there, "but I couldn't just leave him."

Luckily, the flannel I wore over a tee had been liberated from his closet. "No, you couldn't," I offered him the dry shirt, "you're a regular bleeding heart and that's why I love you."

He didn't bother to button the soft cotton and more damp curls taunted from his chest while he wiped a growing mist from the windshield. Scanning the sky, he said, "You just want in my pants." Once again arranging sufficient ball room, he winced. "Which is probably damn near impossible right now."

"Seriously, that was really nice."

"No big deal, y'know. You see an old guy in trouble, you stop and help. It's what people do—what people should do anyway."



I wanted him then and there, the good man I proudly called husband. Helping myself to a handful of thigh, I slid a questing hand over his confined crotch. "I bet your fly's got no trouble with a little rain damage. What say we skip K-Mart?"

"Oh no. If you want it, babe, you have to wait."

"Meanie." I sighed dramatically. "Figures it stopped raining the second he got inside."

"Of course it did." Backing out of the driveway, he continued in dulcet radio tones, "Do not be alarmed. This has been a test of God's Emergency Broadcast System. In the event of a real emergency, you will receive instructions on how to revive old men."

I laughed. The more I laughed, the more my heart swelled, making the trip to K-Mart quite the interesting experience. Those jeans were indeed too damned wet to peel past midthigh. I had to settle for sucking Jared off in the parking lot while he stroked me to orgasm. Not only did it lend an air of frivolity to shopping, the second we got home, it sent us to bed for the remainder of the day. Sex was still our favorite pastime in those days—and we would have spent the entire night messing around, too, if not for the phone call around eleven.

When I think of that day, oddly one of my favorites when I think of Jared, I must also remember his face when he answered the phone. John Madison had died as suddenly and comfortably as any of us could wish for. Before going to bed, he sat down to watch TV and his heart stopped cold.

I held the man I married, urged his sorrow to flow even as I struggled to remain focused. Death gives us few choices and unless you're veritably reptilian, you do what's necessary to comfort those in pain. I loved John but he was not my father, he was their father.

So I moved among all the 'I'm sorries', doing what I could to look after the myriad details entailed when one is a good daughter-in-law. As I accomplished those things with strange, mechanical motions, my mind danced around a new truth, a new level on the spiral of life: Man is mortal. I am mortal. Those I know and love are mortal. We will die—all of us. No way to avoid the inevitable, it's only a matter of who is next. Stroking a sobbing Joanie's hair, I even considered how she and I would repeat the very same scene again and again, until one of us lay in the coffin.

Did you ever notice how men deal with death much differently than women? Men cry a few tears, muster some ill-believed strength to pretend they're not scarred or scared, then they march into the rift and do their best to get it over with, make it all go away.

Women, however, wait with quiet sorrow, hold whatever hands need held and soothe as many tears as possible. Perhaps it's our job to do the lioness' share of grieving simply because everything has its price. Women bring life into the world and our payment for the privilege, whether given it or not, is to also ease life out of reach.

That being so, while I did my utmost to support Joan and Margaret, Jared rallied and took charge. The Colonel's son through-and-through and in Sam's absence, sole head of the

family, the new Patriarch went searching for his twin. Unfortunately, Sam's rarified place in the scheme of military operations imbued the task with almost insurmountable difficulties. Phone call after phone call filled the house with Jared's screaming as he hacked through the red tape, determined to make someone—anyone—understand they had better return his brother from whatever duty he was assigned, because their father, Colonel John J. Madison, USMC, Retired, was dead.

But he never let me in to help. No, too stubborn and too proud to do that. He may have wept for an hour after the news but then gruffly shrugged off even pats of comfort, offering no inroads even to me. I never wanted to help anyone as much as I wanted to help him, or as much as I needed to help him.

On the second day of bereavement, Jared stayed home, still manning the phone, while Margaret, Joan and I went to the funeral parlor to make the arrangements. When I returned to our apartment hours later, he was in the middle of another interminable hold. No portable deemed reliable enough for his mission, he paced as far as the cord on the kitchen wall would allow.

"Find him?"

Jared shook his head. "He's definitely not state-side."

"Where?"

"Who the hell knows." The receiver slammed down with a snarl, he glared at it, snatched it up, then slammed it home again.

"Do you want to go over to Joanie's for a while?"

"No." The denial lacked conviction, bled need.

"I don't know what to do, Jared." His tears so close to the surface invited mine to go first. "Tell me what you want. If it's just to be left alone, it's okay."

"I want—want to..." Tears broke. He yanked the receiver from the hook and bashed it into the mount, over and over and over. I didn't try to stop him, just let his anger and helplessness drain by pounding the phone into a mass of broken plastic and wires, beating the instrument of his frustration through the plaster until, wedged tightly between the studs, no amount of force would embed it any further.

"Fuckers," he muttered finally, sorrow and rage again safely encapsulated in a heaving chest. "They say he's unreachable, but at least I got some fuckwit General to say he'll get the message delivered."

"You know the Colonel would understand."

"I'm not worried about the Colonel. You know how Sam is about Dad. I can't stand knowing a stranger will tell him. He should hear it from me, Laney. Not Joan. Not Mom. Me."

As promised, the message eventually worked its way through the chain of command. In the middle of the night the phone rang and, shouting to be heard over a transatlantic connection to a field phone, Jared finally spoke to his twin—en route to the States and expected within forty-eight hours.

You know, no matter how the movies make it look, old friends and long-lost relatives don't call to catch up in the middle of the night. If a phone rings when the decent folk in your part of the world should be asleep, it's never for good

reason—and ever since that day, whenever the phone rings in the wee hours, my blood runs cold enough to frost my skin.

\* \* \* \*

John's funeral remains a blur. Mom, bless her heart, propped me up while I tried to prop everyone else up. Margaret put on her usual pragmatic face, Joan stayed an understandable mess and Jared tried to be the stoic man his father would be proud of. The only time I feared he would crack was just before the service began, when it looked like Sam might not make it.

But Sam arrived just as the minister took his place at the podium. In full Blues, he strode through the mourners, squeezed my shoulder in passing, and went straight to his brother's side. Other than that, it wasn't until the day waned that we had a chance to exchange more than a few polite words.

The wake over, after I helped Margaret to bed, I started to tidy up the kitchen, only to have Jared shoo me outside to look for a missing Sam. Joan wanted to talk to Jared alone and while I wasn't thrilled with my newest task, I certainly didn't want to intrude on a brother and sister's mourning. Particularly if Joan could manage to reach Jared in ways he denied me.

So I went outside, wandered around the pond and up the lane with no luck. Seems obvious I should have checked the barn first. I think I unconsciously avoided it as long as I could.

The sun licked the horizon as I rolled the cattle doors open, capturing the last minute of daylight. Ten feet inside, the rhythm of heavily shod feet overhead tipped Sam's presence in our clubhouse. An old lantern sat in its usual spot and I sent heartfelt thanks to both John's sense of order and the Duracell gods when it worked.

The barn dusty as ever, heading for the loft, I stirred up enough hay residue to cause a sneezing fit. Nothing like hay's tenacity. Even when it's breaking down, beginning to rot, it retains the scent of the fresh fields of its birth. Digging through wads of tissue lining my pockets, locating one dry enough to blow my nose, I was struck by a familiar, womb-like coziness, as though I arrived home.

Shaking away what I considered an illusion brought about by a longing for less complicated days, at the foot of the ladder, I called, "Sammy? Everybody's gone. Are you coming in?" The pacing halted without an answer. I waited.

Nothing.

Praying I wouldn't drop the light and accompanied by a creaking hymn, I climbed the even ricketier rungs.

"I know you're here," I said loud enough to announce myself, although the ladder's lament would have been clear. "Jared wants to know if you're okay."

"Just how fucking okay am I supposed to be? He's turned into a regular general, the shit."

Surprised, I paused outside the dim mouth of our old haunt. "Don't call him names. He's just worried about you. I'll tell him you're fine. Should I leave the light?"

Response nothing short of morose, he said, "Sure, so long as it's a light beer."

Although it sounded like Sam could use a hug, since I hadn't talked to him for more than a minute at a time in five years, I wasn't sure he would welcome mine. Besides, touching him might not be smart. Not when I spent most of the wake trying not to stare at him like a stranger, trying not to acknowledge how handsome he looked in uniform. Part of me wanted to leave everything alone since he would be back on a plane before morning.

Another part of me wanted a closer look, curious whether Sam ever thought about me the way I thought about him—the same part of me that ached to hold him and let him cry. All day it had been obvious that although cry was precisely what Sam wanted to do, it was also the last thing he would let anyone see.

No real decision needed made. I couldn't leave him alone in the dark without proffering a modicum of comfort. "If you want a beer, I'll get you a beer. Be back in a—"

Ignoring the offer, he bellowed, "Are you going to keep your ass out there all fucking night, or are you going to come in here so I can see who the fuck I'm talking to?"

My hackles shot up. "Sam, I'm trying to be nice. If you're just going to be a total jerk..." What with him grieving, I resisted adding 'again'.

Still a disembodied voice, he said quietly, "Sorry. I'm used to being a loud-mouth bastard these days. I forgot where I am. Pay no mind, Laney, I'll be okay."

His tight control pulled me through the doorway—still crooked and still solid—where the lantern found Sam sprawled in the center of the moldering sofa, hands behind his head, legs stretched before him like spatial pillars of defense. The doors to nothing stood open, the rising moon filling the loft with muted indigo. Placing the lantern in the center of the room, I discovered the rocker wore the Marine's crumpled coat, but the striped blue trousers still bore knife-edge creases—except where steely thighs strained the wool to its limit.

The light also revealed the extra stretch in the undershirt spanning my old friend's chest. Wondering just how taut his abdomen was and guessing it equaled the rest of his torso, I imagined the trail of fur leading from navel to groin had gained new prominence, the same as his brother's.

I itched with want of confirmation. Suddenly aware of my heart's increased cadence, I instead tried to concentrate on the narrow red stripe running down the side of his pants. In the artificial light, it seemed oddly bright, like a bullfighter's cape.

Admiring those hard, strong legs suddenly flooded me with shame. Shame for enjoying the sight of him on such a dismal day. Ashamed that after five years, I still had a yen for him, a man the spitting image of the one in my bed every night. Ashamed that I hadn't—couldn't—put him out of my mind even knowing what he thought of me.

Most of all, ashamed of the things that room had seen. Not ashamed of what we did but ashamed it still excited me—



ashamed to be breathless in the very place I regretted not going the last time Sam and I were alone.

Despite a growing suspicion it had been sheer lunacy to enter the barn at all, I said, "Don't apologize, it's been a rough day. Your dad was a good guy and everybody will miss—"

"Laney, can we not talk about Dad right now?"

My turn to apologize. "Sure, I'm sorry. I'll let you be."

"You don't have to go," he said as I turned to the door.

"Stay and talk to me. If you can stand to, I mean. I'll understand if you can't."

In the name of grief, I let bygones be bygones. With a curt nod, I picked up his uniform and plopped on the rocker. Folding the coat into a neat square, I caressed its ribbons and medals, searching for something to say.

"So," I finally asked, "is the Corps everything you dreamed?"

"I love it. And I'm—well, I'm pretty fucking good at it."

"That's great."

"How about you? Is marriage everything you thought it'd be?"

A loaded question. Marriage is never what anybody thinks it will be. I already knew it took work, but also believed the results were worth the effort. Although, without hours upon hours to expound, I couldn't explain it in small talk.

Habitually stroking my lip, I laughed it off. "Yes and no, but ups and downs are what life's about, I guess."

"Are you still happy?"

"Yes. I am."

"Good." He squinted at the walls, at the words scrawled everywhere, words that had begun to fade. "Jared says you're looking at houses?"

"We need more room," I said shyly. "We want to have a baby."

"I like the sound of Uncle Sam."

"I'm not surprised."

He snorted a laugh. "I guess it is kind of fitting."

"So," wondering if he had a shoulder to rely on once he left us, I tried again, "how's your love life?"

The look he leveled made me immediately wish I hadn't asked. "Real good," he stretched like a waking lion. "Lately, I've been beating 'em off with a stick."

In view of those pile-driver legs, no wonder. A noise escaped my throat, even though I bit my tongue to stop it.

"Go ahead and laugh," he mocked, "but I've become pretty fucking good at that, too."

Much too tempting to pass up, having been said twice. "Pretty fucking?" I flapped my lashes. "Is that performed to *Swan Lake*?"

"Smart ass."

"Thank you."

We grinned, years peeling away.

"I miss you," he said simply. "I think about the old days a lot. I always wonder how you're doing and hope you have no regrets."

Truth escaped before I could stop it. "The only thing I regret is not coming up here with you that night."

Surprise doesn't begin to describe Sam's reaction, although he recovered in an instant. Eyes brimming with intent, he leaned toward me, reply gruff. "Don't tease me, Helena. Not today. I'd be too tempted to give you another chance."

Trying to ignore every nerve ending on red alert, I hissed, "Jesus. I have no idea why I said that, Sammy, it just popped out."

"We both know exactly why you said it."

The declarative purr trickled down my spine like fingers. "Yeah, well..."

"You know, so happens I've got six hours before—"

"Incoming!" Joan's shout shattered whatever proposition he intended to make. "Jeez," she added with awe, "I haven't been up here for years."

"Pretty amazing, isn't it?" Sam tore his gaze from mine to smile at her. "It looks the same, it smells the same. It even feels the same." He turned back to me. "Doesn't it, Laney?"

Appearing on the tail of Joan's shadow, Jared said, "I still come up every once in a while. It's scary, makes me feel like a real grown-up. I mean, I still feel twelve here," he tapped his chest, "even if thirty yells louder every day."

"It makes me feel exactly nineteen." Sam's crossed arms dared Jared to pursue *that* train of thought.

"Same old Sammy. What are you guys talking about?"

His grin glowing in the lamp light, Sam said, "Laney was telling me she's trying to get pregnant. If you need any pointers, you'll let me know, right?"

I shot a nervous glance at Joan, who wore confusion over a tentative smile. "From what I've seen," she said, "I think they have baby-making well in hand."

Jared hooted, "Have you been peeking in our windows?"

"You know what I mean!"

"I'm not sure I do."

"You!" She hugged him tightly and announced, "I love you, Jared. You too, Sam. I'm lucky to have brothers like you." Sam frowned like Joan went off her gourd, and she rushed on, "Don't look at me like that. What with Daddy gone, I wanted to tell you how I feel ... I don't want to never ... oh ... shit..."

"Oh Sis..."

"Joanie..."

"It's okay." Sam surrounded his siblings in a flash. "We love you, too."

I remained where I was until as one, the twins held out arms inviting me into the ring—where the four of us stood locked in tears and grief, forever linked as we headed into the mountainous terrain of the future.

## **Chapter 28—When the Bough Breaks**

Sadly, baby-making didn't go well. Oh, we tried. We tried like rabbits, like minks. I wanted to be a mommy and Jared wanted to be a daddy so bad, he could taste it. Once we decided the time had come to start a family, a baby is all he talked about. But the months passed and my period continued to show up, while already lucky parents shook their heads, told us we were trying too hard.

Eventually, we made the rounds of fertility doctors, where we were both pricked, stabbed and filled dozens of little cups. The first problem quickly discovered, we became well versed in endometriosis. Ominous as it sounds, it simply meant pregnancy was possible, only my womb wasn't prime breeding ground. Unfortunately, a double whammy hit when they found Jared's sperm concentration to be almost non-existent. After more exhaustive tests and medical history examinations, the specialists agreed Scarlet Fever had likely been the cause.

Sounds like lots of guessing, doesn't it? Fertility doctors deal with probables. A significant number of couples never conceive and never know why, no matter how much they're poked, prodded and put on a plate. But while I resolutely took my meds, Jared refused to give up and tried anything suggested, from choking down noxious herbal concoctions to wearing different underwear.

We did investigate other options—in vitro, surrogacy, adoption. They were not only prohibitively expensive, they

also carried the same risks of disappointment. In the end, money didn't precluded alternatives as much as a fear of failure neither of us wanted to face. And as my body passed the peak childbearing years, I finally had to accept there would be no children.

Beyond that disillusionment, we settled into domesticity and were content. At least we said we were—we believed we were and that's what really counts. Comfortable with each other, with our nice suburban home, our good—and in Jared's case, lucrative—jobs, we lived in a bright crystal globe, surrounded by glittering bits of confetti that sparkled all the more for a few hard shakes.

Meanwhile, Sam continued his military career, infrequent calls indicating he picked the right life. I can't tell you how vibrantly his enthusiasm shone when he tackled Recon. Despite the high ratio of Marines who fail to pass muster, if he had any misgivings, he didn't share them with us.

Yet no matter how full of general news, no matter how off-hand about another relationship gone sour, on the rare occasions I spoke to Sam, he never once forgot to ask if I was happy, and I never once hesitated to say yes. I liked my tidy little life. There isn't much more a woman can ask for, especially when people search all their lives for the security of a man who loves them. True, familiarity extracted a price in the name of passion, but I believed it the natural order of things, with comfort indeed its own reward.

It was that well-camouflaged bog which would suck me under, try to suffocate me before I even grasped the ground softening under my feet. I've said I know about relationship

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ruts. I know because I ignored the small ones with Jared. I believed adding bits of plastic to our confetti-filled globe in the name of sexual dissatisfaction could only cloud it with things that don't really matter.

I would pay for my chimera, suffer under the weight of each and every omission as they coalesced to create the Mother of all chasms, leaving me without so much as a frail rope bridge spanning the divide. Shying from honesty only prepared a surface more fertile than my body, upon which those little things bided their company, increasing in number until the time was ripe for revolt. I should have realized that like old Mr. Rogers, into every existence rain must sooner or later fall in sheets—and if you don't signal to your fellow travelers when you stall, no one will notice when you start to drown.

\* \* \* \*

I'm not sure when I became cognizant of the first stirrings of discontent. I didn't, like Mariel, wake up one morning and think 'I'm miserable'. Nor did some guy turn my head with 'what if' like my cousin Ruth. I only know random thoughts of things I should have done, should have paid more attention to, began to frequent my brain. Each patter of rue grew with unimaginable speed, and soon regret's flock of frolicking satanic children taunted me without cease.

Academically, I knew it wasn't unusual to hit a personal turning point at a certain age. I tried to dismiss my horde of doubts as nothing more than maturing pains, a hormonal rabble preparing me for middle age. I never suspected them

to mount a unified front, hook arms and demand my full attention with cat-calls of Red Rover come over.

I do clearly recall the first time the roiling thoughts and emotions gelled into a single entity, promptly birthing progeny pre-mustered for psychic mutiny. I was making dinner. Jared sat at the table, telling me about his perfectly normal day selling equipment to gyms. The '90's had arrived and with work-out facilities popping up in every neighborhood, business was—buff.

"They're going to take eight sets," he referred to his most recent client, "which is three more than I hoped. The commission will be excellent."

"That's great, babe," I said, toying with the idea of taking a sabbatical and not really listening. I always hoped to get a doctorate. Then seemed as good a time as any since Jared made money hand-over-fist. I had to do Something. If I didn't, I would run through the streets, screaming with sheer, baseless, frustration and, truth be told, boredom of an indefinite nature.

"Joanie says she's flush this month," he continued, "maybe it's a good time to put a new roof on Windspray."

"It needs one." I adjusted plans to include a part-time job. I worked while I studied before.

"We should replace the deck doors, too. Maybe some reflective coating upstairs, where you can see out but not in. Could cut the air-conditioning bills in half, for one thing and, you know ... then we can screw our brains out and watch the beach at the same time."



"Uh-huh," I poured milk into a buttered baking dish, "that would be nice."

"You're not listening to me, are you?"

"Sure I am. More machines, new roof, one-way glass."

I heard his sigh over the rattle of the newspaper more clearly than anything he said since arriving home. Then it sunk in that he had offered a pleasant bait I didn't even recognize, let alone take. Hastily, I back-tracked. "Why would we want to watch the beach?"

"I don't know. Forget about it. Just an idea."

As I hesitated, not knowing how to respond, I suddenly realized that my friend sat at the table, a friend I loved but who wasn't any more than that. We had sex because we were married, not because I desired him, and I couldn't for the life of me remember the last time I thought of him in terms of a lover.

Sounds simple when it's said out loud. But it's not—it wasn't. After all that time, all those years, we never managed to Pass Go, collect our \$200. Somewhere along the way, we missed the space leading from Bodily Passion to Passionate Intimacy. Sex had run from discovery to play, to routine, to rote, to boring, to ... disinterest, yes, that's the word—in fact, sheer apathy would be more accurate.

And without an underlying foundation of real intimacy to rely on, without children to fill the cavity, we were doomed to a lifetime of lackluster, habitual cohabitation.

The worst part, even as I realized how I felt, I knew the associated psychobabble but couldn't recall even one way to fix my heart. Fundamentally stunned, I double-egged the

casserole—it turned out an interesting, semi-solid block straight from a psychotic's nightmare—while trying to not stare at my husband like I never saw him before. God, the fatal questions that rang in my head: Was there such a thing as I imagined missing? Or did I romanticize something that didn't exist, something wives the world over struggle with, then move beyond? Had familiarity bred such contempt that I no longer physically wanted him at all? Why was what we had not enough? And, most frightening of all, had I ever truly loved him?

I started to watch other longstanding couples with desperate interest. On the one hand, I discovered many live the dry, friendly existence I feared without being unhappy. On the other hand, was that who I wanted to be? I can't count the times I tried to broach the subject with Jared, but sharing innermost fears had never been our forte.

I suspect it had always been that way between us—when you're young, you can't grasp the necessity to risk more. It's not important until you realize there's no way to let the habit be conceived. God might be able to part waters and expose soggy ground, but humans ... exposing our soft underbelly in a relationship takes more courage than most of us can bear.

So I also took to watching Jared, hoping to find pieces of what I once thought irreplaceable. If I could, surely everything would fall into its correct place and stop spinning in circles of despair.

Unfortunately, the more I watched him, the more I believed he recognized the emptiness, too, but seemed willing to let well enough alone rather than chance losing everything.

Some women, finding their marriage not what it seemed, would run to the first available lawyer. Yet somehow, divorce didn't interest me either, since the crux—the stubborn heart and soul of the matter—was despite my sad discoveries, not waking to those blue eyes every morning paralyzed me with whole other kingdoms of terror.

No surprise that with a growing, inexorable doom, my average place in the world began to chafe, eroding my satisfaction with who I was inside, until I literally could not look in the mirror. And there still isn't a scintilla of rational reason for any of it, other than summing up shit that happens with a knot at the end of the string.

And just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, the chafing transformed into raw need. I ached. I wanted. I yearned. Specifically for what, I had no idea—although I could list hundreds of possibilities without naming It. To verbalize that period of black epiphany is to immediately trivialize it. Yes, it's senseless. It runs no less deep because it's senseless. Occasionally, someone understands my struggle without explanation. Only those who crawl through the darkness on their knees truly grasp the amaurosis I'm talking about.

Although, for the purpose of understanding what followed, I must explain as best I can: It felt similar to when we moved to Blue Mountain. But I was thirty-four not seventeen. And suffering under shredding angst a hundred times more dismal and ruthless, everything inside me felt unequivocally wrong. Bolstered by an additional gnawing awareness that some basic, intrinsic changes in my life must occur, most days I

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hovered too near exploding from the sheer pressure of inaction. Every cure I envisioned led to more uncertainty. Every compromise, to more certain misery. Frozen in helpless suspension, all my confidence fled, leaving in its wake a fathomless mire of fear, disconnection and undefined longing.

You know, describable or not, there is a name for it. We civilized humans choose to call it—with simplistic, insipid and vacuous cheerfulness—Midlife Crisis.

## **Chapter 29—Time in a Tinderbox**

Time insisted on passing despite my petrified mortality. I spent almost two years frantically scooping up shards of glass that had once been my pretty globe. Their sharp, incisive edges tore, made me bleed, and in the existential drops of blood were repeated over and over all the things I would never have, never be. I would never have children or grandchildren. I would never make a mark in someone's life. I would never get my doctorate. I would never do research. I would never find a purpose.

Those nevers were only the hopes I once entertained. There were dozens of nevers I hadn't thought of before. It seemed no matter which way I turned, there lay yet another thing beyond my reach, beyond my age, beyond my ability to accomplish. I would never, I would never, I would never. Like a mantra of destruction, those long slivers punctured my heart, my head, my deepest core.

I should have sought counseling. I should have, at the very least, shared more than the surface of my self-destruction with my girl friends. But I didn't. Embarrassment, maybe. They all seemed so well adjusted. Or maybe I simply didn't want them to know how fragile I was.

And there, damn near rock bottom, I stalled. The waterfall of fate poured over me, urged me to jump into the spray, give up and land God knows where. Clinging to the underlying surface for dear life, unable to inch upward, equally as unable

to let go, in the end, all it took to ride the rush into a foaming pool at the bottom was a single word.

School had wound to a close, spring unwillingly made room for summer, and I sat in my neat, green, oh-so-well-tended backyard, staring at the empty gallows of truncated time stretching before me and sniffing like a teenager.

Expecting Jared to call, when the portable phone in my lap rang, I answered it.

"Laney," the familiar tenor caressed my name, "what'cha doing?"

Not Jared, Sam. I dialed faux cheer. "Sitting in the yard. Where are you?"

"Nowhere special."

"Sounds exciting."

"Yep. I thought I'd check in, see how you guys are doing. Is Mom feeling better? I tried to call over there, but no answer."

Margaret had spent several weeks battling the flu and I launched into the thankfully me-free subject. "She's much better. The doctor gave her an all clear day before yesterday."

"That's great. I was pretty worried."

"So were we. Joan ended up with it, too, but she kicked it pretty fast."

Relieved Sam didn't hear anything out of the ordinary in my voice, we chatted about Joan, the rest of the family and all the gossip friends and relatives generate. When the call began to wind down, I should have known the question was coming, should have prepared myself for a neat lie.

"Okay," he said, "leave's a-wastin' and I have to get someplace." Barely pausing, he added, "Are you happy, Helena?"

My mouth opened with every intention of spouting a merry yes. Then truth overcame reason and as if someone else were talking, I heard myself say, "No."

Silence thundered. Panicked, I scrambled to explain. "It's not Jared, Sammy, it's me—like I'm sinking and can't stop."

Tight and low, his next question wasn't so easy. "What happened?"

Something inside me snapped as fraying reins of control broke, and my desolation wailed, "That's the problem! I don't know! I just don't know!"

"Stop crying and talk to me. Don't worry, Laney, we'll figure it out."

Wherever Sam had to go, he didn't get there. Because talk we did, for hours. In hindsight, confessing my plight to Sam might not be the wisest choice I ever made, but it certainly wasn't the worst, either. Because it helped. One by one, I laid out my thoughts, shone a light on each shard of glass embedded in my feet, yanked them out sliver by sliver, analyzed, rationalized and convinced, until nothing remained except clean wounds ready for dressing.

Through it all, I went out of my way to be sure Sam understood his twin hadn't done anything, that only through Jared's grace did I keep a toenail's grip on sanity. I explained how he held us together while I couldn't summon the strength to love him like I should, how his determination bolstered me but also ate into the heart of my weakness. It

was my shame, my penance, to live with the guilt of Jared's selflessness compounding the rest of the stupidity spewing into my consciousness.

And that certainly was the truth. Despite my frantic deterioration, my husband continued to treat me with loving respect and as much kindness as he could muster under the circumstances. There were times his confusion and frustration showed, but he never once stopped caring.

Regardless, by the time my tearful conversation with the missing twin concluded, I felt better than I had in a long time. Somewhere in all my sobbing and Sammy's encouragement, I found a river of fortitude leading to a stubborn streak I forgot I had. I would not surrender. I would wade through the choppy pool at the foot of the falls and brace myself for whatever would come—and something good would come. I would make damned sure of it.

Whether Sam's call should be labeled coincidence or fate, I do wonder if, had Jared pushed instead of going with the flow, I would have eventually confessed the same things to him. It's hard to say. In many ways I think Jared was too close. I truly believe my outpouring that day had less to do with old yearnings than with allowing Sam's disembodied concern into my inner sanctum—or with shunning pride to admit I couldn't go it alone. Whatever the specific reasons are, under everything, under whatever cloaks and masks Sam and I donned over the years, the barest truth is we remained, first and foremost, friends-of-the-heart.

Afterward, despite my boon companion's suggestion that I also talk to Jared, no matter how moronic it made me feel, I



no longer felt any urgency to explain. Why should I? The crisis had been mine, free and clear. For all his faults, Jared himself was never my problem. If ever any tangible proof existed of his unconditional love, it showed for all to witness in the way he didn't abandon me to my demons.

Because after that spring day, while I floundered out of the shallows, Jared tended our existence like a fragile crop, watering it with willing acceptance of the woman emerging in place of his wife. It was then I realized he remained more than my friend—he was my champion and had been from the second I discovered him staring at me from the loft. Time after time, it seemed the answer resided in love at first sight being where my heart lived. Even as I worked toward rediscovering myself, I never doubted we would stay married. I swore before God to be his until death did us part and I took that vow seriously. My view of the world may have tilted completely off axis, but I still cared for him, even if it wasn't the kind of care a decade and a half of marriage should reap.

When all is said and done, although Jared wasn't responsible for pushing me over recovery's starting line, he was responsible for keeping me moving once I did. He refused to accept my nevers and instead, encouraged me to break them down, list them out, start at the top, make them happen. He insisted we re-investigate adoption abroad or even foster parenting, anything he thought might make me happy, might help me find my way.

So it went that although it could no longer be held up as an icon, our marriage indeed survived, a rising Phoenix from my ashen heart, bringing with it hope for the future. Yet the

magical beans of satisfaction sprouting tiny, questing roots demanded a toll from Jared, and those youthful, always-laughing blue eyes faded and matured into worried denim.

And while the last vestiges of a boy who mesmerized me from a hayloft slipped quietly into oblivion, I found myself shedding more than a few tears for his passing.

\* \* \* \*

There was, however, a further downside to enlightenment. Even though my heart regained warm waves of perspective which lifted me further and further out of the pit, nothing genuinely thawed the frozen tundra of my libido, and sex that had already disintegrated into mere physical release further lost its luster.

While I scrabbled around, gathering nuts of self-confidence and avoiding intercourse, Jared insisted he was fine with our sporadic couplings and wouldn't want me doing it simply to please him. I didn't quite believe him and he knew I didn't, but for the sake of more important things, we let it slide.

Little did I know how much fortitude he employed. Always very sexually motivated—even at its dullest, he sought sex several times a week—the fact he made only a single mis-step remains remarkable.

Even so, it might have been better if he had aggressively sought another outlet. If he had spurned our bed entirely, maybe I would have been forced to examine feelings I still avoided.

Of course, I also wouldn't be here, trying to be as open now as I should have been with Jared. And just to show my

lessons continue to be ill applied, when I said Jared was faithful, I lied—although before I spout a dispassionate recital of the deed, I must also state that I have no lingering recriminations or illusions of being wronged. The act simply served as a foregone conclusion in one book, tagged with a harbinger chapter of a coming attraction. Cold as it sounds, even with my tenuous complacency at the time, the impact of it carried a blow no stronger than a snowflake and the only person Jared wounded was Jared.

I suspect when self-inflicted hemorrhaging turns gangrenous, it always ... Huh. I never thought of it like that before. Gangrenous, yes, septic even.

The incident occurred a month after my birthday—a birthday, I might add, where I had been relieved when Jared didn't approach me for sex after a perfectly lovely dinner. He went out with Stan and Curtis and, the story goes, was promptly hunted down by a barmaid little more than twenty. Jared blamed his nonresistance on deplorable weakness, some sort of misconceived pride in his prowess. I blame it to this day on nothing more than pent up sexual frustration. A man in his prime deserved the kind of attention I didn't give him. I don't mean that in jest—satisfying sex requires a two-way effort, to be sure—so, like I say, I couldn't then and don't now fault him for what happened.

I learned of it almost immediately and fortunately not in any of the nasty ways some of my friends found out they were cheated on. No, lucky me heard it straight from the horse's mouth, in an angst-ridden, beer-heightened babble within hours of it happening.

Jared explained that despite feeling guilty for even thinking about it, he accompanied the young woman to her car to smoke a joint, knowing full well the high they had in mind required smoking something bigger.

Petting like teenagers while they toked, my pugnacious twin got no further than an immanent blow-job. It seems having gone so long without, the mere proximity of her face to his dick set him off with embarrassing lack of restraint, resulting in a sticky surprise for which the girl had definitely not been grateful.

Jared repeated a dozen times that the whole sordid mess lasted no more than ten minutes, as if his premature ejaculation would numb a hurt he surely inflicted. If I didn't know what the stupid scene did to him later, I might be able to smile about it now.

The thing is, while he pleaded with me to understand, I didn't need to understand. I felt a little disappointed perhaps, a little envious that some bimbo recognized a potential I could no longer see. I wasn't angry. I wasn't upset. I'm not even sure I was all that annoyed. I heard my husband tell me he had, at the very least, attempted adultery and found I couldn't summon much distress over it.

Finally, Jared swore it would never happen again and in return, I swore I could live with knowing what he did. Saddest of all, I accepted the agreement without another thought. And it was easy. So easy, red flags should have risen up all over the place. Yet the next day arrived and we went about our routine as if nothing out of the ordinary happened—just continued on our merry way, pretending. We pretended we

were happy. We pretended sex was fine. We pretended we didn't miss the days in bed that left us limp and satiated, so long as our friendship remained.

Now. Did I regret having married Jared by then? No. Did I start torturing myself with how different life would be if I had chosen the other twin? Unfortunately, yes.

Although my reason for doing so had little to do with Jared's failed affair and much to do with repairing my friendship with his twin. From the day he took my proverbial hand, led me through mucky shallows onto dry land, Sam managed to call at least every other week—and went out of his way to make certain it was only when his brother shouldn't be around.

I believed those calls to be indicative of Sam's same old careful concern. Jared could judge the ups and downs of my days in person, but Sam needed to check in to know I still progressed in the right direction. Oh, we chatted about the usual things mostly but a portion of every call touched on that darker ground. And while I did my best to verify my affirmations, I now know he wasn't convinced in the least. Not that he ever said so—although, had I been foolish enough to tell him about Jared's infidelity, I also know Sam wouldn't have extended the same understanding.

Cart before my horse yet again. Jared's slip, our sorry sex life and Sam's calls aside, I eventually reached a plateau where nevers didn't pall every waking moment. Finding regret infinitely easier to swallow than sorrows, I traded them for what ifs, discovering the notion that if you don't feel

lighthearted, insist you are and maybe—just maybe—you will be.

So I crawled along, searching for the mental spaces providing enough room to stand, and as those spaces came with increasing frequency, I laughed again for no reason, Jared looked less worn and together we made an effort to play more. It seemed despite life's problems, we had found some sort of silver lining in the belief that carnal relations were one thing, our unity another. I even found myself inordinately proud to think that other marriages may collapse under pressure but we proved that we were made of sterner stuff—the kind of stuff even God can't render into failure.

But, while I did my best to proceed toward a time where we could canter apace, my conviction must have been a slap in the face to whatever deity takes responsibility for foolish assertions. Like White Star Lines, I would suffer the consequences of my arrogance. Although fate didn't immediately strike me down with a disaster akin to the Titanic. No, she is much too sly for that. Instead, she simply sent along the one human with enough power to destroy my marriage.

She even let Jared give him a reason to do it.

## **Chapter 30—Homecoming**

Needless to say, when Sam announced he decided not to re-enlist after eighteen years of Service, everyone was very surprised. I demanded an explanation and received a rambling non-answer about how the Corps wasn't what it used to be, how he loved Recon but long ago exhausted the amount of time any Marine could be allotted for it and finally, how he couldn't abide being on the training side of it any more.

"Teaching's your thing, Laney," he said. "I just don't have that kind of patience."

He insisted it had nothing to do with our conversations during the previous year. I worried, and rightfully so recalling his old threat, that maybe he decided to check my happiness in person rather than accept things too easily disguised over the phone. Still, since he could do that with a few days of leave and remained logically convincing otherwise, I took him at his word.

I wanted to believe him, simple as that. Although I damn well should have known my excitement over the prospect of seeing Sam harbored nothing good. At first, since our conversations had morphed into the same jabberings we spent many lazy days indulging when we were young, I thought it would be nice to recapture some of that lost innocence. Unfortunately, while my musings began with exactly that type of decorum, it was only one step from there into the barn.

Not only the barn of our adolescence, the barn the night of John's wake.

No doubt if Jared and Joan hadn't shown up in the clubhouse when they did, Sam would have finished offering and I would have accepted. Which led me to think about things I should have dismissed as too dangerous to even fantasize about. But I didn't. No, I did not.

Instead, after receiving Sam's news, after saying good-bye and staring at the phone for long minutes, despite the ignominy of revealing it even now, I masturbated—and put a capital M on that baby.

Ignoring a fleeting impulse not to let my hand creep beneath my panties, I foolishly believed I could get it out of my system, give vent to all my covert Sam dreams by allowing them to be full blown fantasies, if only for a few hours. I would mentally savor a feast of fuck 'n suck that never was and once satisfied with every conceivable scenario—and a few inconceivable ones as well—I would be done, he would be purged and everything would be dandy by the time Sam arrived in the flesh.

Oh yes, a more wantonly selfish woman never existed. All my curiosity rolled into a ball, tap-danced into my belly, gushing to freedom between my thighs. Thoroughly wet within minutes, breathlessly aroused and horny as a peon parolee, I tweaked myself silly. And we're not talking a quick wank, no we are not. We're talking the best part of the remaining day—not even the marathon ménages of our youth could compete with the number nor intensity of my orgasms.



Yet I had waited too long. I should have fantasized about Sam from the second I realized I still desired him, then by the time he showed up, the power of those lecherous thoughts may have faded like any good fantasy tends to do. What's more, I never considered it strange to be so wound up imagining a body that, by nature's design, couldn't be much different from the one whose advances no longer excited me.

But by then, tired of trying to justify that irony, I followed my hours of weakness by convincing myself it was convenient sleight-of-hand, an illusory replacement for a youthful time and place I hadn't finished mourning. I loved my husband and that was fate's design. Otherwise, the instant I fell in love wouldn't have been when a boy stared at me from a hay loft, but when a different soul behind identical eyes glowered at me over a bent nail.

Yep, I told myself what's meant to be, will be and what's not, won't. It's the way things are, the way the ball bounces, the cookie crumbles, the sun sets west and the bird—a Blue Jay, naturally—sang his song.

\* \* \* \*

The airport teemed with people the day Sam came home. Even though the place hadn't been a major Air Force base since '69, soldiers outnumbered civilian passengers arriving and departing that Saturday.

Idle observations aside, I was there because Jared asked me to be there. I had no compunctions since there existed no real reason to think Sam thought about me the way I still

thought about him. After all, his mention of several loves found and lost proved he, at least, had moved on.

I also knew the difference between fantasy and reality. Fantasy is invisible. Fantasy was the guy at the gas station—I had no difficulty looking him in the eye and asking him to fill 'er up. Reality was, he would probably be horrified to know what I had him filling in my head. So applying that to my situation, I would simply not think about the barn, period. How hard could it be? People choose not to think about things all the time, right?

Beyond those sorts of general, rambling threads of philosophy, while I sat in the terminal, I spent the time being seriously entertained by my reality's over-exuberance. Which, I might add, was clearly visible to anyone and everyone because from the moment Jared woke up—before me and before the sun—he was six years old and off to Do Disney.

Asking the same question he repeated like a defective Dictaphone all morning, my twin demanded, "What time is it?"

Affixed to the standard ass-numbing terminal chair, I replied, "Two minutes later than the last time you asked."

"Sorry. What time was it?"

"Twenty-six minutes after eleven."

He leapt to his feet and paced—again. "I'm just excited."

"No! You're the picture of serenity."

Ignoring my sarcasm, he twisted to frown at the military counter. "I hope he didn't get bumped. Do you think he got bumped?"

He wore jeans, a sleeveless t-shirt, sneakers, just a big kid disguised as an average guy—although several interested female glances reminded me how not average he was. Smiling with proprietary pride, in that dulcet governess tone only wives can get away with, I tried to soothe. "That Jessica lady said she'd tell us if he got bumped. Stop worrying. There's ten minutes until the plane's even due." Settling deeper into my seat, I checked my watch. "In Corps time, I think that means we have half an hour, at least."

"Remember, don't ask him about his early out. Since he's still Reserve, he's still officially a Marine and might not be able to explain. I'll find out what's up but I don't want everybody mobbing him."

I promised Sam he could give his own reasons, so everyone buzzed with supposition and conjecture. All agreed whatever the reason, it must be a humdinger and may keep gossip wheels turning forever. I, having accepted his explanations, sided with Joan in believing it ultimately had to do with a woman.

"Okay," Jared asked, "please?"

"I'm not addle-brained. I told you I won't. So has Joan and your Mom."

He snorted but didn't disagree. "Do you want another cup of coffee?"

"No, and neither do you if you want to sleep tonight."

"Coke?"

"Sprite. No caffeine."

"Maybe Orange Crush then." Digging up a scant handful of coins, he made a beeline for the soda machine. Then, with a

dramatic roll of his eyes, flapped a bill at me and charged off in search of change. I took the opportunity to stretch my legs, ignoring startled stares at the lunatic woman laughing for no apparent reason.

Of all times for the United States Marines to be ahead of schedule, that had to be one of them.

"Helena," the caress of my name came from behind, "how are you?"

Expecting to see Sam before he saw me, it took a minute for his presence to sink in. When your mind's eye is fixed in the past and you're suddenly face-to-face with the present, processing the difference is strange. He seemed taller than I remembered, his shoulders broader. I expected the cropped hair, but forgot how the burr emphasized his eyes—eyes at once familiar and foreign, smoldering with an incongruent clarity.

"Sammy! Look at you!"

"Yeah, a little different, I guess."

"You look great." The unseasoned boy replaced by a man supremely comfortable in his own skin, simply standing there in Blues trousers and a khaki shirt, he radiated confidence.

"You do, too. Better than I remembered."

"I don't know about that." I went shy under the praise. "I still don't sleep much. Leaves a girl a little rough around the edges."

"You never could take a compliment. You do look great, Helena, and I bet you know it. Now," he said with a teasing-twinkle I well remembered, "say 'thank you, Sam'."

No stopping my grin. "Thank you, Sam. It's nice of you to say."

"There you go." Scanning the area with precise efficiency, his attention returned to me. "So..."

The fond way he studied me made me uneasy. "Please stop looking at me like I'm a bug."

"I'm just happy to see you."

Expressive blue eyes went unreadable without so much as a blink—a new talent I observed with surprise. The man before me definitely wasn't the Sam I once knew.

He scooped up his duffle, shouldering it like an old friend. "Did they send you on your lonesome? I thought Jared was coming."

On cue, the devil himself bounded up. "Hey! Look at the jarhead!"

"Jared! Fuck me, man, you're getting old!"

The twins reunited with brotherly half-wrestling, back-pounding bluster and the difference between them slapped me hard. They still looked alike but it wasn't difficult to tell them apart. Jared aged more gently than his twin, retained an open baby face. Sam had become all angular cheekbones, weathered lines radiating from his eyes that made their hue more startling. My husband was muscular, lean and trim as his profession demanded, but his brother was a sculpture in stone—at John's funeral, we saw only the roughed-out shape for the work of art Sam would become.

Distracted by a carved marble thigh—patently solid even through the blue wool—I quickly turned my attention back to their exchange, and found myself thinking about how things

were between the three of us when last we were alone in one place. Even worse, when Jared wrapped his arm around his brother and I recognized the tiny white scar left by my teeth once upon a time, instead of a simple flash of recollection, I plunged into total recall, memory painted in breathtaking living texture, all six senses experiencing it anew:

*The barn. Thrumming pleasure. Shoulders on Jared's lap, my elbows clutch his knees. Sammy labors over me, icy tears of sweat tumbling onto my breasts. Jared tweaks my nipples, Sam fills me, a final, gushing, groaning thrust, the sensations merge in my stomach, explode, implode, I cry out, body milking him harder, pulling him deeper...*

*My panties didn't go damp, they went wet. My nipples shot so stiff, I swear they were visible from the parking lot.*

"Babe? Is that okay?"

Jared's question sheared into the vision, dumping me back into the crowded terminal to find him peering curiously at me.

If I could have prevented what I did next, everything may have been different. One of our paths might not have forked, the other may not have jogged and I wouldn't have pushed the button starting the countdown to destruction.

I met my husband's eyes—and I blushed. I blushed from my scalp to the soles of my feet. Jared tilted his head, almost in question, and gave me an odd grin. Over his shoulder Sam stared at me, too. Jared looked intrigued, amused. His twin looked anything but amused. He looked decidedly predatory.

"I'm s-sorry," I stammered, "I wasn't paying much attention. I was wondering if we're going to have lunch before we go to Joan's."

I struggled to keep my real attention away from the new Sam Madison. The one at the funeral had been a stronger version of the boy, one who still deferred to his twin. The man shooting me surreptitious glances that spoke of everything and nothing didn't look like he accepted being second to anyone.

I pried my eyes from Sam's as they hinted at a revelation I didn't want to acknowledge, turning firmly toward Jared.

"What did you say, babe?"

"We'll get the bags while you go for the car. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, sure," I said much too cheerfully, "save time, okay."

On the way home, I sat in the back seat. No way could I put myself within eye-shot of either of them. Embarrassed, faintly chastised, the twins' absorption in each other gave me time to self-apply every foul curse I knew. In the company of the man I tried day-in and day-out to adore as his earned right, I let my head be turned by his twin—a mirror image once again supposed to be a friend.

A dangerous friend it would seem.

Simply recalling that moment, humiliation burns my cheeks even now. To be fair, it shouldn't be any wonder I reacted as I did. In the middle of a sexual wasteland, presented with an alternate version of a man I desperately wanted to fall in love with again, I should have expected a visceral reaction—both to the memories and the men causing it.

Yes, men, plural—as in both. Because although the sight of Sammy sparked it, there arose in me a hunger for Jared that

I had almost given up on experiencing again. Regardless of the reason for my underwear being balled into a sopping mass between my thighs—I definitely rued the skirt—all I wanted was to get my husband alone, somewhere we could freely dust off several indulgences that needed dusting off.

So while everyone crowded Joanie's living room with hugs and squeals of welcome, I hit the bathroom and stuffed my sodden silk panties into my handbag. A mistake, of course, since I certainly wasn't any drier when I returned to the kitchen, and without the cotton crotch to stem the tide, my lower lips slid luxuriously against each other, caressing my tender parts like a lover's tongue.

Equipped with a tall glass of ice water to cool the fever, I pondered the best way to get Jared out of there without fuss or muss—well, maybe some muss but none that anyone would notice. Wondering whether a second trip to the toilet would go unremarked and whether I could get him to follow me, I searched for my husband's eyes to issue silent invitation—and met the wrong eyes issuing an invitation of their own. Smiling over his sister's head, Sammy gave a bare nod and licked his lips.

That was it. I had to get out. The familiarity we re-bred over the phone had been a godsend and Sam certainly contributed to my new bravery. I had foolishly imagined him on the other end of the line as a fuzzy, feral cat, not a green-tinted tiger with no intention of dying his stripes.

It didn't take much to escape, I must say. Cutting Jared neatly from the herd, I drove him into the kitchen, backed him against the counter and kissed him with unmistakable



ardor. Then I whispered that I wore no panties and suggested he confirm it.

Grinning, his hand traveled up the back of my thigh with agonizing lack of speed before cupping my naked cheek. When further exploration affected an audibly wet separation, he said, "Yes, you are ready ... to go home."

"Up to you." I loosened my knees, increased his range.

"Up for you," he replied and turned me loose. "We're outta here."

In record time, he made excuses about helping Stan and promised to collect Sam the next morning for a long visit. I sailed out of there damn pleased. Not only had I extricated myself from the homecoming but escaped with a re-energized lust for Jared to boot.

We screwed ourselves silly. That's the only way to describe the rest of the afternoon. Clothes flew the second our garage door closed and, leaving a trail of creative penetrations from the car into the kitchen and only later into the bedroom, we did our damndest to dampen the ravenous appetite springing from my no longer dormant desire.

God! I felt so alive! Like I had been swaddled in too many different skins and with each new rout, sloughed off another layer. And at the last, when we reached the cocoon of our bed, I perched astride Jared's hips a fresh butterfly, beating my wings until flight carried me to the sun's surface.

Later, while the clock ticked off our unexpected reprieve, in silvered pewter quiet we stroked contentment over each other's skin, until Jared propped on his side and studied me. "What's the first thing you thought when you saw Sammy?"

Out of place and without preamble, the question took me off-guard. Not like him to wonder what I thought—or at least not like him to ask. "He looked older than I expected," I said. "You?"

"I thought about the barn," seductively possessive, his finger caressed my jaw, "and so did you. When you blushed, Laney, my cock turned to steel."

"Jesus, Jared." I looked away, expecting to blush again. "I'm sorry, I don't know what—you hugged him, I saw this," I traced my mark on his shoulder, "and my brain just..." A fraction of a second's hesitation, and the lie slid easily from my perjurous lips. "It's not like I've given him more than passing thought in years. It was, a little weird, like I forgot you're twins."

"You don't have to justify it. I'm glad you thought whatever you thought."

Astonished, I blurted, "You are? Why?"

"Because you woke up. I don't care how, I only care that you did."

Under the stab of his honesty and not sure whether my response was truth, I still replied with my first instinct. "No, babe, it didn't wake me up. It reminded me what I already have."

"Maybe so, but ... If it takes both of us to make you happy, Laney, I'll do it now, same as I did then."

"Happiness isn't in numbers."

His smirk was delightful. "That depends on what you're counting."

"Does it now?"

Drawing a contemplative line over my breast, he said, "I can't stop thinking about the first weekend we had the farm to ourselves, after we started to ... do you know the one I mean?"

"Yes," I breathlessly allowed memory to bloom, "you wanted to see how long we could go."

"No, we wanted to see how long you could go, by taking turns." The other hand splayed over his abdomen, as if resisting an urge to stroke to memory. "And it was absolutely—I've never seen you hotter, babe, and I've never been so turned on as I was watching you go off over and over."

Narrowing the subject back to the two of us, I said, "You can't do that by your lonesome?"

"Maybe once, but not anymore. I don't think the Little General could take the abuse."

Grateful for an easy out, I said, "If that's all that's stopping you, a trip to a big kid's toy store could supply an imaginary second."

"That would be very interesting." He sucked his bottom lip while the single-minded soldier between his legs nodded acknowledgement. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Of course not." Then I thought about blithely sailing into the adult boutique downtown and pointing out my preference. "Well, if you send me there alone, I'd mind. If you come, too, I won't."

"How about Monday after work?"

"Perfect. Still," he kissed my neck and I added a caveat that faintly surprised me, "fantasy is as far as it goes. I mean it, so don't even ask."

Jared obviously chose his words, digging for a new forthrightness, too. "That's okay. But if you change your mind, I won't think less of you for it. I'm definitely willing to do again." Before I could respond, he added, "It doesn't have to be Sammy, you know. There's always—"

I stopped him with a kiss, not wanting to plumb the depths of that keg, and equally wanting to eradicate the parade of his buddies threatening to traipse through my head. Jesus! I didn't find one of them remotely attractive.

"No way, Jose," I said when we parted. "You keep your horny friends away from me, y'hear?"

"Whaddya mean?" He tickled my ear, deliberately choosing one man he knew I would cheerfully grind to a bloody pulp. "You don't think Rob's a stud?"

I shrieked. "Stop, stop! I don't want that in my head!"

He made a choking sound. "On second thought, me either."

"Euy-uk and then some." I shuddered dramatically.

"But seriously. Taking into consideration my twin's the only guy I'd drag out the Johnson with, you say the word and I'll arrange it."

I considered his seriousness. There existed three possibilities for his determination:

It could be unselfish love. He demonstrated time and again that he would do whatever was necessary to make me happy.

It could be a simple greed for excitement, a condition I whole-heartedly understood. But as I had already opined, the situation could be remedied without outside participants.

Or—and I suspected the third reason as most likely—Jared might fear he could no longer satisfy me. If that reason was culprit, the burden lay squarely with me—yet another guilt I should rightly take on—and repeating our adolescent adventure would make any perceived inadequacy worse.

Or it could, in some twisted way I wasn't sure I wanted to understand, make every shred of his insecurity disappear.

No. The experience would not be repeated, no matter what my fantasies contained. Real Life is Real Life. It does not include sleeping with your brother-in-law, with or without your husband's permission—or participation.

Or did it? While I turned to Jared's rising desire without further comment, the question burrowed into my mind. Hastily covering it like evidence of a crime, I wrestled with myself as I wrestled with the rediscovered lover I called husband, pretending not to notice the past bleeding into the present's pleasure. Yet, the more details assailed me, the harder I tried to send those bad things into the cornfield.

That's right, into the cornfield—banish them into oblivion. Never mind. I'll explain my affinity for Rod Serling some other time.

Basically, I battled temptation through the night until I unequivocally decided no way in hell would it happen again. I found Sam attractive. Big Deal. Since I married his identical twin, a no-brainer. Responsible adults do not mess with that kind of psychological gunpowder. They do not have

threesomes and even if they do, they sure as shit don't do it with siblings.

Although, as I woke to the morning sun in the aftermath of good sex, snug in the security of self-instructing—a feeling, like Sammy's eyes, at once familiar and foreign—I realized the message Sam sent would be a separate problem entirely.

I tried to hedge my bet, turning to uncomplicated memories of the four of us, then the three of us and before I knew it, complications be damned, the two of us—specifically, Sam and I the night of his bon voyage. It may have taken almost twenty years but I finally heard the meaning behind the words that shaped my life in too many ways, and feared defeating that ghost would be more difficult than anything midlife ever threw at me.

Stroking Jared's brow as he slept, I came to the conclusion that never being alone with Sam Madison was my best course. He could send all the smoke signals he wanted. If I didn't signal back, he would stay dead in the water. After all, I was not the naive girl he once spurned nor even the weak-willed woman only recently left behind, and he would not wedge under *my* new skin so easily.

## **Chapter 31—Fireworks**

At first the problem seemed ridiculously easy to avoid. People came out of the woodwork to drag Sam back into the old fold of friends and relatives. And although he and Jared were understandably glued together, when Sam dropped by, I simply found excuses to be elsewhere until he left. Other than that, I saw him at parties and get-togethers, exchanged the usual hi-how-are-you's. All very civilized in a stiff, we're-avoiding-something way.

Still, just in case an occasion arose where I got stuck and Sam decided to broach uncomfortable topics, I spent a good deal of thought on what I would say. Nosirree Bob! There would be no hem-hawing should the Ghost of Fuckings Past unexpectedly appear. It would require a calculated amputation as neat and sweet as Sam's the night I didn't go into the barn.

Then plans got underway for the annual 4th of July blast at Windspray. Upwards of eighty people were expected to eat, drink, carry-on and watch fireworks, leaving me no graceful way to get out of going to the shore for the long weekend. And while part of me wanted to get out of it, a bigger part still wanted to go. Besides, there would be lots of people. I could manage him in a group. I just didn't want to be in a position where anything we said would, or could, be said in private.

Easy. No problem. I could deal. And hey, what with our rekindled romance going so well, chances Jared would let me

out of his sight for more than ten minutes seemed remote anyway.

Idiot me. I should have realized I faced a man who had shed his own suffocating skins, emerging with different perspective, stronger resolve. Even so, in retrospect I'll venture that since the unpleasantries were dealt with and out of the way by party time, I enjoyed myself more than usual.

Or at least I pretended I did.

\* \* \* \*

Wrapped in never-ending paper lanterns halfway up an unsteady step-ladder, I searched for the deck rail with my foot.

Warm fingers circled my ankle. "Toward three o'clock—I mean, to the left." Sam pressed my sole onto the rail. "Do you want me to hold the plug end while you string?"

"No. Let go of my foot." I stepped onto the rail and strained for Jared's voice in the living room. I was afraid to look because it would mean facing his twin. With no choice but to ignore Sam until he went away, I began to snap lanterns onto their hooks.

He didn't go away. "Laney, this is horse shit. Can we please attempt to act like normal people?"

I looked at him then, thankful for the height and sorted through rehearsed scripts for a proper retort—but sometimes the best response is no response at all, which turned out to be the case.

With no further niceties, he dove into our waves. "I didn't say this on the phone because I wanted to say it to your face.



You were never a slut. I was mad and took it out on you. That's no excuse but I was young and stupid, and I got a little confused over what we ... over things. You have my sincerest apology and regret, Helena. I'd erase it all if I could."

Erase what we did or what he said? Damned if I would ask for clarification. "And apologizing to me now matters because..."

Perversely satisfied when he winced, I returned to lantern duty.

"And for the record," he added, "I never wanted to fu—do that other thing. I only said it to be mean. I'm sorry about that, too."

Carefully guarded as the older Sam was, I believed his remorse. Yet instead of simply accepting it and moving on, I had to ask, "Why?"

"Why am I sorry?"

"Why did you say any of it in the first place? I think I know, but I want to hear it."

Quickly scouting the deck's empty battlefield, he said, "Jared wanted to marry you. I wanted to be out of the way so you wouldn't have to choose."

"Choose?" Rotted cinnamon, old anger stained my tongue. "I never knew there was a choice. You waited until the last minute, then tried to woo me over with accusations."

His frown fluttered and disintegrated. "I was a fucking asshole for even opening my mouth that night." Like the boy-Sam, the man-Sam ruffled his hair. "You belonged here with him, not following me from base to base like Mom and Dad. But I still couldn't leave without—I still wanted to—never

mind. I didn't mean to make a federal case out of the past, only wanted to tell you I'm sorry in person."

The lump in my throat said, "Why didn't you try harder, Sammy?"

My question hung in the air long enough to regret its wistful flavor.

"You know the answer to that. Let's not play games. Will you accept my apology or not?"

"Okay." I meant to string him up like the lanterns, extract a drop of retribution and leave him uneasy enough not to care if I avoided him. "I'll think about it."

"Well," his laugh hollowed my stomach, "I never guessed that you grew up to be a bitch. That's okay. I grew up to be a serious bastard. So if you wanna play, sweetheart, by all means, let's play."

The challenge pissed me off. "I am not playing. Maybe I'm trying to show a little decorum."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You know the answer to that."

"No, I don't."

I was playing and yes, it was childish. I sighed and made a mental note to smack myself later. "I can't divide my loyalty this time, Sam. I might have been capable of it once but ... now I just ... can't."

"Can't or don't want to?"

"Both."

"Things all fixed nice and neat in your head now, is that it?"

"They're getting there," I allowed him some honesty, "but if I give you a piece of me that should rightfully be his, I might as well stop trying."

"Christ," he muttered. "I only want what's mine—and our friendship is mine."

I rolled my eyes.

"Oh, I see." Long, strong fingers stroked my calf, recaptured my ankle in their prison. "You're talking about something more indelible."

I didn't like the innuendo only because I liked his hand on my skin, working-man rough, distinctly moist, and so very far from parts aching for his touch. "Jesus, Sam, give it up and let me be. I don't leap into boxes of dynamite just because I've got an itch to scratch." Where the hell did everyone go? I threw a casual glance toward the house.

"They're out front." He continued to pretend his hand was nothing more than a steadying force. "They're looking at Hubie's Mustang."

Irritated at being so easily read, I huffed, "So?"

"So we have a few minutes of privacy. So you might as well put away the fucking pissy attitude. You can't steer clear of me forever. Hell, you can't avoid me at all—be surprised how many excuses I can come up with to be where you are."

Sarcasm drooled, "Lovely. Just lovely. You did become a bastard."

"And then some. This can be easy or hard, your choice."

"Look, it doesn't matter anyway." I abandoned the lanterns. "There is really nothing to talk about. You've been

gone a long time and things are—they're a lot different. I'm a lot different."

"Yes, you are. So am I."

It dawned on me that in all our conversations, the subject of Sam's life wasn't addressed near often enough. I knew little about the man whose thumb stroked my instep with insidious purpose, other than atoms about a girlfriend or three. I should have paid more attention. I should have discussed more than my latest whines. I should have outright asked him how he felt.

In pure self-defense, I blurted, "You might not like the woman I've become."

He went on as if he hadn't heard. "Jared's changed, too, but I've been getting to know him again. I only want the same opportunity with you. We used to be friends before—we used to be friends," he repeated and released my foot, "maybe we can be again."

Not an unreasonable request. He made his play, failed and went for the next best thing. At least if we were friends, uncomfortable scenes would be history.

"Fair enough. But I have an addendum for you, Sammy. Anything beyond normal, every-day, sister- and brother-in-law stuff is off limits. No exceptions."

That raised his brows. Yet my triumph was short-lived. "Is that my idea of normal, every-day in-law shit, or Jared's?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's his considered opinion the two of you need a third."

"*What?*"

"You heard me. Although a ménage a trois is not what I had in mind this time—and Jared says that's okay by him, too."

"Stop right there!" I held up my hand, quickly raking together thoughts skittering around like dead leaves. "If Jared's up to tricks, I'll deal with him. Meanwhile, you can just file that possibility up your ass under It Ain't Happening—got it?"

If I had been a rabbit and he an eagle, I would have trembled under his appraisal. A lot went on in Sam's head that even his tight self-censure had difficulty keeping at bay.

Savoring some choice words for my spouse and wondering exactly what bedroom secrets were shared, I repeated with force, "Got it?"

Sam's answer a low growl, it filled the air with mocking, ulterior intent. "Oh, I hear you. But you might change your mind when you find out what kind of man I've become."

Did I feel his taunt pour over me like a waterfall? Yes I did. Did I like being informed I was no more than his next conquest? No I did not.

My tongue clicked disapproval. "Pretty damn sure of yourself."

"You have no idea. Just so we're crystal clear, I intend to recoup a certain experience I was deprived of—and I'm not talking about your still gorgeous ass."

I knew precisely what he inferred. "Is that the kind of man you've become, the kind who would give his brother horns? Don't hold your breath on either score. The kind of woman

I've become doesn't throw away two decades of marriage just to satisfy some ghost of what once was."

"My mistake."

He wasn't the least contrite and I delivered a dubious sound of disgust.

"I mean it," he said. "I thought Jared spoke for both of you and you just wanted to make me squirm for being a jerk. Otherwise, I wouldn't have—I'm sorry, really." The hasty retreat and cover indicated while some things about Sam might be different, some things remained the same.

"Yo, Sammy!" Jared bounded onto the deck. "Come get a load of this car, bro..." Met by two killer glares, knowing full well he stepped into a pile of it, he muttered, "Shit."

"Jared, did you—"

"Man, you said—"

Time rolled away to expose friends once again dealing with their overly enthusiastic cohort. It should have taken more to win me over but it didn't. In that moment, I realized I missed Sam, too, and I couldn't throw away the chance we could be friends any more than I would throw away my marriage.

To Jared's credit, as he nervously chose his ground, he ignored his brother and addressed me. "Laney, babe, I know you said—I'm sorry. It was a bucket of Jack talking, just shit spouted over boilermakers."

"We're not going to discuss it here." I didn't want to discuss anything. I wanted to grab him by the ear and drag him upstairs for a tongue lashing of the worst kind.

"Don't mind me," Sam said, "if you guys need to talk, I'm gone."

Hands on my hips, I did my utmost not to snap at Jared until his brother moved out of range—although I will say the fear and self-loathing on my husband's face tempered my anger.

"Helena," the prodigal twin called from the doorway, "I am sorry. For all of it."

"Thank you, Sam," I never took my eyes off of Jared, "I accept your apology."

\* \* \* \*

Contrite, Jared confessed everything. How he told Sam the details of our trip to the sex store, what we bought and why we used it. Evidently, he also filled him in on every second he missed, as well as adding information Sam wouldn't have been privy to even if he never left. I admit some things he already learned from me, although Sam hadn't admitted as much to Jared.

But that wasn't really the point. My husband sharing our remodeled covenant since his twin's return is what I resented. Still, Jared had always been incorrigible when it came to proving himself the better man—another thing I either conveniently or quite honestly forgot.

"He's my twin," he confirmed my suspicion, "I tell him stuff without thinking."

"Well you better think from now on. I've never threatened to leave you, but if you insist on dragging Sam in—I mean it, Jared! I'm not dicking around."

Poor choice of phrase, perhaps, yet he got the idea. "It's not the smartest thing I've ever done. I promise not to tell Sam anything I wouldn't tell Mom from now on, okay?"

Before I could reiterate the reasons he better not, he added, "You're right. I know you're right. And the messing around—I tried to be funny. I made a joke that got out of hand and I'm really sorry."

"All right," I blew out frustration. "You're an asshole but I still love you. I should have my fucking head examined, but I do."

"Why is it," he asked with solemn sincerity, "that women always tell guys how dumb we are, then when we do something stupid, you're surprised?"

I couldn't help it, I spluttered a laugh. "I don't know, babe. That's a damn good question."

"We're okay then?"

"Yes," I sighed with infinite patience, "I guess we are."

"Well then," he popped the top of his cut-offs, "what say we make up before dinner?"

\* \* \* \*

July 4th dawned clear, a perfect day for fireworks. Guests arrived throughout the morning, and by midday two grills produced non-stop burgers and steaks. In the old days, Jared would circulate while Sam sat quietly off to the side, but times had changed and they worked the crowd like stock brokers at a Vanderbilt reunion.

Come midafternoon, I basked in a sea of pleasure. I'm usually not much of a beer drinker—a couple when I'm out,



maybe two at home during the week. Unfortunately, the shore's always an excellent enabler and that day was no different. Hotter than hell's busiest day, I'm afraid I poured more lager into my stomach than food, and pretty soon didn't give a damn about anything outside of my cares being quelled.

The women lounged on beach chairs, soaking up astringent salt air like a spa treatment, when Sam emerged from the house. While his Lycra trunks didn't exactly qualify as Speedos, they were seriously small enough to garner a plethora of attention. Much to the amusement of we riveted female-folk, every assembled male over fifteen rocked under an ego-blow, falling into an uneasy silence the seagulls were happy to fill with screams.

The first I had seen Sam without a shirt since his return, the tattoo surprised me as much as anybody—although unlike his horrified mother, I found it a stunning piece of art.

Standing back from the small crowd examining the green-eyed Angel of Vengeance spanning his back, I recognized the design as his work, although the motto—'Let God sort it out'—surely belonged to the Corps.

Even less pleased up close, Margaret tsk-tsked. "There'll be no mistaking who's who now."

Despite her disapproval, the young cousins were certainly impressed. They hounded him until he launched into tales, regaling them with stretched stories of strange lands. Their rapt adoration drew other youngsters and within an hour the inked twin had gathered quite the mesmerized following.

Somehow they got on the subject of Sumo wrestling and the kids wasted no time drawing a ring in the sand, where Sammy was forced to take all pint-sized comers. In typical man-to-boy fashion, while the boys shrieked, flinging limbs and sand everywhere, he eventually let each one pin him under a mighty unrecoverable blow.

Of course, her children being thoroughly childlike drew Naomi like paparazzi to naked royalty. I do believe my cousin was born with a flashbulb in her hand—it doesn't bother me, mind you, although one day somebody's liable to make her eat that Vivitar.

Near the end of a film roll, she asked me to grab her camera bag from the house. Since I wanted copies of the pictures, I braved the throng of males at the deck rail, every one loudly considering whether or not they should join the fun—including Jared, who snagged me for a kiss.

After I made my delivery, Ruth and I dragged our chairs ring-side, ostensibly for a frivolity close-up. I was making sure I had sunblock in all the right places when, with her usual straightforwardness, my cousin spoke her mind.

"Damn. He's just so ... rock solid."

I didn't have to ask who. Behind the anonymity of sunglasses, I took a good long look. "He is that," hidden parts of me warmed in agreement, "solid as unblemished marble."

To the kids' infinite delight, Sam waved his arms, made the angel's wings flutter.

With a low, guttural groan, Ruthie added, "Promise you'll keep an eye on me if I get too loose." She swigged her beer to prove the point. "Blotto, I just might try to lick that thing."

Snorting, I said, "Hope you're talking about the tattoo."

"Maybe. Maybe not." As I laughed, she continued conspiratorially, "Tell me, cousin-to-cousin-who-cuts-your-hair, how's the rest, um, stack up?"

"How the hell should I know?" I said hastily.

"Jared, you silly shit. They're identical, aren't they?"

"Uh-uh. Think I'll keep that secret to myself."

"Greedy. Least you could do is tell me whether it's a big secret or a little secret."

"Better get your glasses checked, Ruthie, 'cause those trunks don't leave much to the imagination."

"Ah, but is he a grower or a shower, that's the rub, isn't it?"

I laughed so hard she had to pound me on the back, and while we continued to assess one twin's athletic attributes, the other hollered something to the effect of Sam thinking he was Atlas. Sam claimed to be quite capable of carrying the earth on his shoulders, because the Marine Corps made Atlases from men. Then U.A. chimed in, betting his speedboat that Sammy couldn't manage more than one small boy in his beery condition.

Jared and Stan immediately sided with U.A., piling on more razzing about Sam's strength. Next thing I knew, I was airborne, swung aloft by a striking leopard.

I yelped surprise then outright yelled for help as Sam turned me in circles, a growling, demented Minotaur. Cheerful roaring and hot taffy cat-calls swirled around me. I remember the taste of salt-spiked beer in my mouth. I remember how my oiled thighs slid hitching over his hairy chest and my slick

palms couldn't find purchase against his back. Finally slung over his shoulder, face-to-face with his angel, I also remember the uncanny sense of looking into my own eyes. Through it all, I also expected to be summarily plunked on my head, so long as I didn't puke first.

Another spin and he lifted me again, bouncing my butt like a beach ball. The sand seemed much further away than the eight feet it was. "Sammy," I hissed, not wanting to make a big deal, "put me down before I get dropped, ya bohunk."

Jared came into view, leaned over the deck rail, pointed at us and, in one of those moments in a crowd when the wind has inhaled, clearly demanded, "Put my wife *down*, you stupid son-of-a-bitch!"

Shit on your shoe smug, Sam bellowed, "Why don't you come over here and make me?"

I heard the click when Naomi captured us. Then someone laughed—I think Joan—and everyone else followed suit. Within minutes, an even sillier wrestling match among the older generation started, complete with a rotating referee.

But my buzz started to fade along with the sun, throwing long shadows from my head as well as their feet. I watched the twins enter combat, rolling in the sand longer than the rest, calling truce with no clear winner. The draw lent the affair a decidedly waning tone, a tone I quickly abandoned in favor of another beer.

It took four to return to my earlier elation and another four to dampen what I couldn't easily dismiss. I'm not sure if I started on the tequila before or after the fireworks but by the

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

time I passed out, I had managed to blot out two disturbing bits of information:

Despite private posturing to the contrary, Jared didn't like me being in his brother's arms.

And Sam—well Sam didn't care if he liked it or not.

## **Chapter 32—Of Hunters and Prey**

I didn't realize how much stress avoiding Sam caused until I stopped worrying about it. True to his word, other than the human-merry-go-round debacle, from the day of his apology, he treated me with solicitous, polite respect. Not a word, not a glance, not so much as a quiet sigh indicated any more interest in me than any friend of the opposite sex. In the wake of the midsummer holiday, I found myself appreciative enough to put the whole drunken fiasco behind us.

Our renewed friendship got underway with very little effort. I suppose the very first step came with music. Out of the pop culture loop so long, Sam took to raiding my CD collection, creating compilations and attempting to discover what, if anything, he missed. It got to the point riding in his truck bore an eerie resemblance to the K-Tel ads of the '70's, albeit it with the less-than-stellar '80's bubble gum.

It soon dawned on me that he didn't talk about books and I assumed he lost his youthful voracity for them. So when he mentioned he still read at least one a week, I leapt onto the literature bandwagon as quickly as he did the music one. And although rehashing our shared favorite classics gave us common ground, it wasn't until I tackled the subject of new classics that things went haywire.

At the end of August, equipped with a fresh pitcher of iced tea, Sam and I hid from relentless humidity in the house. Jared due home in an hour or so, we planned to head into Harrisburg for the traditional Labor Day festivities we natives

call Kipona. Meanwhile, Sam and I cooled our heels and discussed several ideas he had for a business. He wanted something more satisfying than his personal security job. I suggested a specialty book store, since the last local one recently succumbed to the more-for-cheap of Borders and Barnes & Nobel.

"That's a good idea," he said, "one I'll give serious thought."

"And if you're really convinced the self-defense classes could work, there's no reason you can't do both."

"Actually, intellectual one day and physical the next could equal sheer perfection." He grinned. "But I'm not quite ready to give up on raising St. Bernards either."

"I'm sure they're great but I can't see one without thinking *Cujo*."

"That movie was stupid. I would've snapped off the gear lever, stuck it in the dog's mouth and—"

As colorful a picture as that presented, I hastened to say, "The movie was a pale comparison to the book. You know translating from page to screen is never as good."

"I didn't read it. I think the only Stephen King I've read is *Carrie*. We read it before he got big, remember?"

"You're kidding! Not even one more?"

"Nope. Never was much for sci-fi."

"I wouldn't call it sci-fi." I hopped off the sofa, scanned our bookshelves, yanked *The Stand* from its slot. "Here, this might be the best end-of-the-world story ever written."

I refilled our drinks while he perused the fly-leaf. "It does look good."

"I'm afraid to ask what you've been reading," I pursed my lips, handing him a glass, "lots of oo-rah and war, I bet."

"Just the opposite. But if I tell you, you'll laugh."

"No I won't."

"Yes you will. I would."

"Then you won't be surprised. C'mon, spill."

He examined his drink, tracing patterns in the condensation. "Romances," he said finally, "I read a lot of romances." Considering the gathering droplets swiftly erasing his finger-painting, he added, "The steamier, the better."

I laughed all right. "No! Quit messing with me."

"Yes," he said quite seriously, "and I'm not."

"What the hell for?"

"Do you want my pat answer or do you want the truth?"

"The truth, of course."

Without hesitation, as if purposefully bringing the subject to bear, he said, "It involves women. More than that requires impingement on forbidden territory."

The statement hung so heavily between us, I held my breath, waiting for it to hit the floor. I still knew so little about his past, other than the broad strokes in which he painted his military career. If I wanted to know about the years he was gone, I needed to accept there may be times I wasn't entirely comfortable.

Yet, before that point, when it came to women in his life, all questions were met with a patent unwillingness to go into detail. And between Sam's reluctance and my growing sense of bravery, by the time we sat companionably in my living room, my curiosity finally got the better of me. I suspected he



had, like me, made some choices based on what occurred between us, and to talk about his relationships, he may have to broach the unmentionable.

Finally feeling secure enough to risk skirting proscribed issues, I nodded. "Thanks, I appreciate the warning. I think I can handle it if you can."

Seemingly satisfied, he opened and promptly closed his mouth. Settling deeper into the center of the couch, more unreadable than usual, he ruffled his hair. "Are we ready for this, Helena? Because it has to do with what I wanted to talk to you about over the 4th, before you outlawed it."

"Whatever skills the service taught you, Mister, that blank look drives me crazy. I have no idea what to say with nothing to go on. Spit it out. If I get uneasy, I'll say."

"I thought it would give me an advantage."

"The blank look?"

"No, reading romances." He kindly let his guard drop enough to show embarrassment. "I thought I could figure out what the hell women really want."

Pleasantly surprised, I exclaimed, "Oh! That's actually not a bad idea. Are you still trying to figure it out, or do you just enjoy the read now?"

"Mostly the read. I prefer historical to modern. A lot of historicals coincide with wars."

I cocked my head and, ready to hear the litany of girls he left behind, prompted, "Did reading them work?"

"Yes and no. It made me—how do I put this? It made me an expert at the hunt, but damned if I still don't understand what goes on in the mind of the prey."

"Metaphors away."

He chuckled. "Some things never change."

A little confused, I backtracked. "How is this forbidden territory?"

"The book that started it—*Sweet Savage Love*—was yours. I nabbed it when I left. The title seemed, well, appropriate."

So it was. "You read that in boot? What did the sergeant think?"

"Not in boot, at my first post. Gunny took some convincing. As for the rest of 'em—after a couple scuffles ended resoundingly in my favor, they gave me the benefit of the doubt. Most of them thought I was nuts, I guess, but a few thought I might be onto something.

"Along with using big words, it sort of became my trademark. They say you have to be three-quarters crazy to go Recon. I always wondered if maybe somebody put it in my record. I know the predilection to practice what I preached put me in a position to push the fraternization boundaries more than once..."

Innately nosy woman that I am, the dreamy way he trailed off made me wriggle with girlish glee, itching for more. "Since you're so versed in the art of women, I don't have to explain how we love all the gooey-gushy details. And, since I'm your dear, dear friend, I won't point out that you know way more about my love life—past and present, thank you very much Jared—than I do yours."

He feigned confusion. "So? Have I breathed a word of it to anyone? To you, even? No, I keep my considered opinion to myself."

"Oh bite your tongue!" I said, tickled we could tease without over-straining any gates. "Do I have to drag every last fucking detail out of you, you rat bastard, or are you going to tell me about the women you've dallied with?"

"I might be persuaded."

Relishing the game despite my earlier reservations, I rubbed my hands together. "Good. I have to start a list of friends who are right for you but need to know the ins-and-outs of your methods first."

That earned me a gawking, trying-not-to-laugh, response. "Pardon me? Have the rules changed?"

I tossed a cushion at his head. "Shut. Up. You know what I mean. We're doing good here. Don't screw it up, okay?"

"Okay."

Silence.

"Well?" I wanted to laugh, too.

"Where do you suggest I start?"

"With the first one, through to the last. Chronologically, please."

"Jesus," he snorted, "how much time we got?"

"That many?"

He nodded gravely. "That many."

My turn to snort. "All right, how about the special ones?"

"They were all special, just not one special enough."

"I can see how well your research worked already."

"I don't know where to start, Laney. In all honesty, I set out to be the biggest swinging dick anybody ever saw and did a damn good job of it. Other than that, I won't give you a run down of every woman I've ever slept with."

"C'mon, I'm trying to find out if you've had an ounce of real fun in eighteen years. You make it sound like there was nothing other than the holy sacred Battle Hymn."

"That's not far from truth. Have I really got leave to speak plain here?"

"Sure," I witlessly didn't discern why he needed to hedge, "I want to know everything."

That quick, our friendly chat went to shit.

Sam sat his glass on the coffee table and regarded me with unmasked eyes. "We had something you and me, something I can't shake. I've had women since—dozens of them—but I never remotely felt for one of them what I feel for you."

Cursing my stupidity under my breath, I decided if we were going to talk about it, I would really talk about it. Challenging him on the 4th reaped positive results, perhaps finally thrashing out the heart of the matter would put everything to rest, once and forever.

"For heaven's sake, Sam. First of all, we never had anything. Jared and I had something and you were there, too. Did you ever consider, even then, that I didn't feel the same way?"

Despite my determination to face facts, I sat there, head down, arms holding a liar's chill at bay. I had loved him. Much more than I knew at the time. Still, choices are choices, I had made mine a long time ago, and no matter how misplaced, they were what they were. I would continue to stand by love at first sight and put my faith in fate because of it.

After a pause during which we both found the carpet fascinating, I tried to explain—and whether I meant it for his edification or my own, I'm not sure. "I fell in love with Jared the second I laid eyes on him. To this day I can feel the bolt when it hit."

Sam sighed, as if I foolishly tried his patience. "Yet it's not what it was any more."

Regret for confiding in him washed over me. We both knew I couldn't refute it.

More silence followed that I should have filled with something. Before I could figure out what, Sam said, "You know, everybody wants to know why I didn't re-up," his frown pinned me in place with piercing candor. "I tell them I got tired of the life but the real reason is, I always pictured you and Jared living this idyllic, middle-class life. I wasn't prepared to find out all's not well in paradise."

"Bullshit. You asked me over and over again if I was happy, waiting for me to say no." I was thoroughly disgusted at my lack of vision. "You were never stupid. I should've realized what you were up to."

"I wasn't up to anything at first. I thought if you kept telling me you were happy, sooner or later it would rid me of ... hope."

Suddenly recalling his first conversation with Jared after we married, I said, "So after you heard I wasn't happy, you decided right then and there to come home and chase me? After two decades of water under the bridge? For fuck sake, Sammy!"

"No. That's not it at all. Yes, I decided not to re-enlist after we talked. Not because I wanted to make you admit you love me. I did it because after you said you weren't happy, I ran right out and ruined a good relationship without a shred of excuse other than I would never love her the way I love you. That's when I knew if I didn't face what I feel, I'm going to spend the rest of my sorry-fucking-excuse for a life alone. What I didn't count on," he murmured sadly, "was getting off the plane to find you looking at me with a hunger out of my best daydream."

"Did I?" No wonder he examined me like an ant in the airport. He saw through me from the start and his habit of doing so was pretty damn annoying. Nonetheless, I proceeded gently. "I'll admit to some, shall we say, impure thoughts when I saw you. That doesn't mean—all marriages have troubled times. You know I'm working on things with Jared. I shouldn't have to remind you that you're twins. There's bound to be some sort of mental overlap in there somewhere. Still, even putting that aside, I've had plenty of chances both then and now, but I've never once said I was in love with you."

"That's the problem. There were lots of times you said you loved me."

"I specifically recall telling you I loved you but wasn't in love with you. Those romances didn't do the trick or you'd know there is a difference, I didn't make that up."

His reply scraped rough enough to abrade. "Is there? Or are you stuck on some stupid, girlish differentiation? Love is love, Helena. It's the same fucking thing, no matter which

way you slice it. Saying you loved me but weren't in love with me is the worst fucking excuse for indecision I've ever heard.

"But tell you what," he continued more amicably, "tell me I don't still own a piece of you. Tell me and I'll never mention this again."

He closed the gap between us in an instant, his heat filling the smaller space, warming my skin. Fiercely willing my heart to beat slower, I forced myself to breath even and deep. Forced myself to raise my chin, to face his glowing lapis adjudication.

"Don't," I whispered, "please don't put me in this position."

"If we had more time," he growled, "I'd make sure it was a much more interesting position."

Eyes blue as the skies of my youth, blue as the bird Jared killed, unveiled, hiding nothing, Sam held my stare until, voice like blackstrap molasses, he dared me, tempted me, urged me as he should have done before time warped everything. "Go ahead, Helena, say it. Tell me you don't want me. Tell me you don't remember how it feels when I'm inside you. Tell me, and I'll give up my dreams."

He was going to kiss me. I knew he was going to kiss me. Would I stop him? Probably not. Love him or not, in love with him or not, then, before, in the future, it didn't matter because I did want him, had always wanted him. Nevertheless, pushing the words past my heart, I said faintly, "I don't want you."

"Liar," he drawled and moved in for the kill.

The only thing that stopped his lips from meeting mine was the sound of an engine—Jared's four-by-four. Just loud

enough to be heard over the neighbor's dog welcoming the familiar traveler home, Sam said, "When you blushed at the airport, I knew. I let you off easy last time. This time, I'm giving you the choice and you will make it. And I'm not going anywhere until you do."

One ear on the door, attempting to summon what resolve I could, I blurted, "You're a serious bastard."

"Yes, I am. The kind of bastard you can't ignore." Unhurried, he leisurely switched to the recliner, ass barely settled when, as if on cue, the door opened with the last of his challenge. "Think about how that makes you feel, Laney, and we'll just see what happens."

A dozen emotions splattered across my face. I couldn't be sure how many Jared deciphered, although probably enough to have a clear idea that Something occurred.

"Heya, Sammy," Jared tossed his briefcase into the hall closet, "what's up?"

Sam responded lightly. "We're talking about Stephen King."

Not looking like he believed it for a second, Jared smooched my lips. "Hi, babe. Are you okay?"

Oh, I could have told him. Simply. Easily. Readily. But I didn't. No, I said, "It's the heat. It's killing me today."

"Did you eat since breakfast?"

I shook my head.

He said to Sam, "I keep telling her, hot or not, she's got to eat."

"Salads," his twin said, "they're good when it's hot. Keeps your stomach quiet."



"Then if everything's okay," my husband said, "we're supposed to be at Joan's in half an hour."

\* \* \* \*

Ready to leave a few minutes later, Sam headed for the truck and Jared held me back. "What was that all about? You weren't talking about books."

Did I tell him then? Get it out in the open, air my concerns, let cards fall where they may, be honest, truthful and for once stand up for my own feelings? As per usual, I did not. Instead, I came to the conclusion that, all-in-all, start to finish, the whole screwed up situation was Jared's fault.

So with the talent for equivocation women hone so well, I said, "He brought up your joke that got out of hand. He seems to think we should try it solo."

At least Jared presented the frown I fished for. "Yeah? What did you say?"

Not the offended spouse's reply I wanted. "No dice. I told him he could forget about it."

"Okay. But I was thinking, you know, since, um..." He ducked, peered at me through a lash blind. "I stepped off the path once, babe. It's only fair you have a chance to even the score."

I gaped like he lost his mind. If I hoped for Jared to save me from myself, I was sorely mistaken. "And just what the hell would that prove?"

"It wouldn't prove anything," he said, "it would make me feel less guilty."

"Look at me." I pulled his chin up. "I don't need to even anything. Besides," I added a wry observation meant to lighten his eyes with a smile, "what you did wasn't all that torrid, now was it?"

I wouldn't call it a blush, although it was one of the few times I saw him color. "Guess not. Even so, I've always stood by what's good for the gander is good for the goose. And if there's going to be another gander on the farm, Sammy's my first choice."

Although clearly sincere, his offer further complicated my frazzled thoughts. "Are you determined to make me unfaithful?"

"No, not really." Meeting my scrutiny, he explained like a worried youngster, "I care about growing old with you, Laney, about being sweethearts when sex doesn't matter any more. I'm not jealous about the physical stuff, so long as I know what's going on. If it ever looks like something is going to happen after all, promise you won't lie to me, okay—promise you'll tell me before you do it?"

"Nothing is going to happen," I said with resolute conviction, "no matter what." And faced with Jared's tentative earnestness, I almost convinced myself it was true.

"Humor me, Helena," his growl echoed Sam's as boyish reserve faded beneath a man's intractable surety, "and promise."

"I promise," I said, licking fate's envelope and sealing it with a kiss.

## Chapter 33—Handbasket Rider

If mid-life crisis had been confusing, it was nothing compared to the next eight weeks—weeks in which an old children's rhyme ran nonstop through my head, albeit with appropriately perverted lyrics:

*A-Tisket, A-Tasket  
on the way to hell in a basket  
love the man who married me  
or try the one who wants it  
Who wants it, who wants it  
should try the one who wants it  
but the wrong blue eyes might eat me up  
and put me in his pocket*

Crappy singing aside, the ditty suited me. I felt like some huge, deviant, pinker-than-pink Easter Bunny hopping around with a basketful of goodies and everybody wanted more than their share. I scurried from task to task, place to place, responsibility to responsibility, hoping not to stay in place long enough to think while I hid my eggs. Why? Because ignore it all I liked, Sam indeed bided his time and the more I tried not to think about it, the more I thought about it, until temptation threatened to consume me from without and within.

Although, under everything, a question rattled around that I wanted—or to be honest, needed—an answer to before I could seriously consider participating in Sam's challenge or Jared's not-so-veiled suggestions. As a sex education teacher,

time and again I outline the dangers of promiscuity. Sam apparently screwed his way around the world. How safe could sleeping with the man be, no matter what I wanted?

The more I considered the dangers, the more I believed it to be my get out of jail free card—until, as a unit, the twins invalidated it.

One Saturday morning, after tossing and turning per usual, I fell asleep around 5 a.m. When I finally dragged my butt out of bed around eleven, I found the twins at the kitchen table.

I shuffled toward the coffee pot as Jared exclaimed, "You're kidding me. Glow in the dark?"

"Glow in the dark," Sam said, "there's flavored ones, too."

"So you can sprout a licorice stick in the dark, like some warped alien."

"Morning, guys." I poured sustenance into my favorite cup. Sam nodded. "Laney."

"Did you know," Jared demanded, "that condoms come in flavors and some glow in the dark?"

"Yes." I shot Sam a suspicious glare from behind Jared's back.

Without acknowledgment of my pique, Sam continued the conversation I interrupted. "Besides, technically you can get court marshaled if you turn up with an STD. So yeah, I sure as fuck didn't want any bastards but I didn't want my ass to end up HIV positive and sitting in Leavenworth either."

Jared grinned at me—although his poke clearly aimed for his brother. "I think you need to get Sammy in to school. He can give a lecture on the modern climate."

Sam snorted. "They probably know as much as I do if they've got half a brain," he turned to me, "right?"

"What exactly are we talking about?" Armed with caffeine that couldn't take effect soon enough, I plunked at the table.

"Safe sex," Jared said.

"Oh." What the hell brought that up? Through the fog of exhaustion, I wondered if I talked in my sleep or if Fate just felt like playing with my head.

"I went with to the PX this morning," Jared explained. "Sammy bought rubbers. I didn't know there were so many different kinds. You should see the display—Trojans are the Kia's of condoms now."

Coffee splashed into my rolling stomach, a hydrospray of napalm my morning cigarette threatened to ignite. But I didn't put it out. Smoking gave me something to do, a way to avoid the discussion. It also sex-waxed the coffee's bitterness to the inside of my mouth when I received an answer to my question neatly, succinctly, and without having to ask.

"Anybody who's smart uses a condom every single time," Sam said. "I have. The last thing I want to do is endanger my perfect match because I was stupid."

"That's true." Jared got up to refill his mug. "I'll tell you, Sammy, better get cracking on finding her, too. One of us has to have some kids or Mom's going to burst a blood vessel. Since Joanie says she's in no hurry, that means it's all up to you, bro." He returned to the table and patted my hand. "Isn't it, Laney? No matter how much I wish they were, my boys just aren't up to snuff."

Sam clapped his brother's back sympathetically, shooting me one of those unyielding stares that made me feel like a psychological illiterate. My nod of agreement wooden, I couldn't find an appropriate response. At least I couldn't find one that wouldn't sound as tremulous as my guts—because every last one of my internal organs had, cheerfully and without a care, liquefied under Sammy's scrutiny.

\* \* \* \*

Final intellectual contention negated, I scrambled for another defense by setting Sam up with anybody and everybody I thought might be his type, and some I absolutely knew weren't. If I could help him find his proverbial perfect match, he would be beyond reach—and happy.

It certainly didn't prove difficult to get him a blind date, not once a prospect heard he was my husband's identical twin. Mr. Stubborn accepted every one with a raise of his eyebrows, too, along with a look that said he humored me with the greatest patience. Still, despite my fevered wish that some other woman make the situation moot, nothing stuck.

As if I could subvert his determination that easily. I swear there has never been a woman more blinded by her libido than me.

The biggest bitch about the situation came when I realized Sam was right about decisions—I would rather not make any decision than risk making a bad one, one that others would frown upon. Out of self-disgust over that comprehension, I finally began to examine *my* wants and needs, what *I*

demanded love be. Did I make a girlish differentiation? No, I just couldn't believe I had.

Like most women who love a man, I treasured the instant my heart first belonged to Jared, when I followed the ebony flash of a crow toward the loft, only to meet his sapphire eyes. That's when the current was born. That's when I fell in love with my twin.

Although recently recovered from a series of relationship earthquakes, Jared and I were on the way to being as secure as we once were. We worked at things a little harder, did our best to be open—and sex was getting better, too. He wasted no effort in pursuing my pleasure along with his own, even on those occasions when I wasn't fully, so to speak, there.

I definitely had feelings for my husband I couldn't blithely dismiss, no matter how attracted to his twin. I know sometimes love itself isn't enough, but we had more history between us without Sam than with him. Jared and I were old friends, familiar lovers and our marriage wasn't perfect, but whose is? I also wasn't arrogant enough to believe if I pursued a carnal relationship with Sam, with or without Jared, and anyone found out, that the scandal alone wouldn't kill me. I couldn't imagine what our friends would say, let alone the family, and keeping my head up would be brutal.

In the same vein, were I to leave Jared for Sam, I certainly wouldn't be the first woman on earth to trade a man for his brother. I know two women who married a brother-in-law after the death of their husbands. To do the same thing while the original choice is alive might be more uncommon, although probably not as rare as one might guess.

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

Which led directly to my very last option: I could leave Jared and tell Sam to go to hell. I could start a life of my own. It would be the biggest upheaval. But I also couldn't quite forget the yen for some sort of monumental change. Perhaps a fresh start was my best choice. The most impossible choice? Close. Difficult? Certainly. Messy? Oh yeah. Could it make me Me again—make the woman I saw in the mirror a welcome sight? Yes. It could.

So, as I considered giving up on both twins, I once more found myself grateful for Sam's austere handling of emotions I refused to examine. His methods may rankle, yet he moved me to be truer to myself than I had ever been before.

Still, like it loves to do, truth brought me even deeper dilemma and the only certainty I took with me from that horrible autumn of discontent is that some lessons cannot be learned through mere grave thought, but only through experiencing the ordeal.

And if that's the case, in the end, when our allotted time on this plane expires, whether fate has written every line of our lives or not, the only thing any of us has to lean on is how faithful we've been to ourselves.



## **Chapter 34—Shattered Shells**

November began with a great Friday morning. Although Jared had to drive two hours to get to the Poconos by nine, we stayed up extremely late the night before—it hadn't seemed prudent to skip mutual desire over a trivial thing like sleep. So while I never saw his dragging butt come daylight, proof of his unrepentance met me when I opened my eyes. That boy loved stickie notes—mirror, fridge, whatever—and a florescent blue one stuck to my clock said 'I'll see you tonight—we're throwing them all out early' and 'I love you'.

No, I told myself, whatever fanciful thoughts I had, if I left Jared, I would regret it. I worked too hard and too long at making marriage work to throw it away. I would instead have to find a gentle way to refuse Sam with as little fuss as possible, no matter how drawn to him I might be.

Relieved to have finally made my decision, I even decided to enlist Jared's help. I would sit him down as soon as possible, explain the way things were—and should he arrive home with sufficient time before our guests arrived, I would do it sooner rather than later.

We were hosting a casual dinner party that night: the Millers, Nat and Curtie, Joan and a new man, Sam and, I stressed on the invitation, his date. Originally just another scheme to force Sam to ask someone out, perhaps in the public, social situation Jared and I could put him out of his misery without a distasteful scene.

Morning classes zipped by, me in such good humor that I tossed the regular lesson plan in favor of an easy pop quiz for third period. Meanwhile, chaos gleefully gathered in the sky, the first hitch occurring when my cell rang during free period.

"Hey, baby," Jared said, "sleep good?"

"Like a rock."

"I didn't know we had two rocks in bed this morning. I almost woke you up to show you mine."

"You should've," I purred, "I'll remind you to show it to me when you get home."

"Yeah, listen, that's why I called. I'm afraid I've got a problem about tonight—guess who's supposed to show up tomorrow?"

In husbandese, he would not only be late for dinner, but likely absent. "Who?"

"The District Vice President for Penn Pocono Ltd. The general manager here says four other resorts need updated, too. Now," he rushed on, "I know you're looking forward to the party but I can't pass up a chance to sell this guy. Five resorts could equal everything I made last year."

I didn't like it a bit but wasn't angry. Work is work and sometimes it interferes. Although sorry to spoil our plans, he would be home before Saturday supper and would make it up to me with a fancy night out.

So much for having a talk before dinner. I mentally rearranged my table settings along with the Sam-plan. I like to entertain and could certainly still enjoy myself without Jared's help as host or blocker. The situation a long time

developing, another day before it came to a head wouldn't kill anyone.

Unfortunately, the Pennsylvania winter decided it, too, had different ideas for the weekend. By one o'clock, snow that had teased with flighty previews showed up in full recital garb, ushering in large, dense flakes that accumulated like applause. All the reporters, taken completely unawares, helpfully assured us it would taper off. Soon. Eventually. Somewhere around dawn. Maybe sooner. Maybe not. After it got heavier.

Score one for the meteorologists.

Snow piled up in the parking lot, I couldn't keep an iota of my students' attention and soon school, as you might guess, was dismissed.

Ronnie bowed out next. "Hey Laney," she chirped from her car to mine. "I'm on my way home and it's getting chunky. I don't want Mom coming out in this shit and without a babysitter, doesn't look like we'll make it—I'm sorry, honey, I really am. Maybe we can do it next week?"

Numbers dwindled, yet still enough guests to have a raucous good time. Only a little snow, after all. We get snow every winter. If you can't deal with a few inches of snow, you need to live somewhere besides Central P.A.

Then the phone started ringing the second I set foot in the kitchen.

Caller ID showed Natalie. Curtis works for the Department of Transportation driving heavy equipment. I guessed her news before I even answered.

"Helena," she wailed, "Curtie just got the call!"

Salt trucks rolling meant even chemically treated highways were difficult to navigate. A quick call to Joan proved the blizzard dazed the entire Commonwealth, with her date stuck at the Pittsburgh airport. Guessing travel anywhere via Volkswagen to be a bad idea, I told her to stay home, too.

That left Sam and his date. I tried calling several times but he didn't answer at home or his cell. Promptly at five, I had a panic attack.

Although he hadn't pushed his mission with any more strong advances, Sam continued to pursue increased bastard status in many small ways—oh yes he did. And every one of them sugar-coated, every one of them also served as a reminder of his diligent vigil. So as the frozen afternoon melded into evening's ice cube tray, I grew increasingly cognizant that his damned truck could easily trudge through six feet of snow. I could actually end up faced with entertaining him and a lady friend—and whoever the poor woman, she would end up blind in the middle of a seriously fucked-up state of affairs.

The phone rang and, relief at hand, I ran for it. Not Sam, Jared.

"Hey baby. I wanted to see if you're okay. The radio says it's snowing like a bitch there, too."

"Yeah, I had to cancel dinner."

"I figured. I guess everybody is disappointed."

"They are. I talked to every one except Sammy, but I left messages."

"He's probably got every kid in the neighborhood sledding."

"I hope so. Then at least somebody's having fun. But hey, I want to talk to you about him when you get home, okay?"

"Sure." A bare pause and he added a sly question. "Is it about what I think it's about?"

"No." I grinned despite myself. "It's not that, you incorrigible brat."

"Okay. Just checking."

"Really, Jared, I'm serious."

"I know. We'll talk." He sighed before echoing our subject, albeit unknowingly. "Don't worry, Laney, we'll figure it out."

\* \* \* \*

By the time the doorbell rang just after six, I had talked myself down from the ledge, prepared to deal with an intimate dinner for three.

I wasn't at all prepared for the sight of Sam in a snow-powdered black overcoat on my doorstep, alone. Blue eyes shining through cloudy puffs of excitement hinted he planned to drag everyone outside to make snow angels after dinner. For a few precious, timeless seconds, he was the Sam I loved before everything got confused—and with that thought, all my earlier convictions scattered among the snowflakes blowing across the parquet foyer, and melted into nothing.

I may have reached a decision but would always wonder what life could be like with Sam. And since either path I chose contained measures of misgiving, if that question became my private song of lament, if I had to live with the inescapable conclusion that attraction lay between us from the beginning and may always beat with cadences of unfulfilled desire, so

be it—besides, of the many new talents I possessed, I had become exceedingly good at resisting temptation.

"I asked Mariel to come," Sam kicked snow from his boots on the door frame, "but Rob decided not to show up for the kids."

I shrugged, faintly surprised by my ability to give a casual reply. "Used the snow for an excuse, I'll bet."

"Yeah, he's a real asshole."

"Won't get any argument here."

"I talked to Stan. Hear a big dinner's a big bust."

"Try checking your messages. I left one at home and two on your cell."

"I haven't been home. I saw these kids sledding. And I lost my cell again." He was always losing cell phones—still does on a monthly basis. I think he single-handedly keeps Motorola in business. "I hope you don't mind I came anyway?" he went on. "I figure the rest of you will provide adequate entertainment. Or," he peered past me into the house, "does keeping me on the doorstep mean no single guys allowed?"

Not only had I left him standing in a snowdrift while I mentally meandered, I was heating the outside with fuel oil at a buck a gallon. "Sorry." I waved him inside and, intending to get it over with, announced, "It's just you and me. Jared's stuck at Pocono Peak, Joanie doesn't want to drive and Nat and Curtis," I indicated the frosty window, "goes without saying."

He inclined his head, that aggravating neutral look plastered in place. "Really?" Stripping off his overcoat, he gave it a shake. "Whatever shall we do?"

A day which started so well suddenly tasted like cinders. Why I thought it would be easy to stick to my convictions, I have no idea. I should have suspected he wouldn't do anything to make it easier. "Sam, don't," I said softly. "Just for once, let's—just ... don't, okay?" Not waiting for an answer, I headed into the kitchen.

Gear piled to dry, he eventually followed, although he remained in the doorway, watching. Being observed like a sniper's target even more unnerving than his blank eyes, I waited for him to lift his nose, scent his prey. Not looking directly at him, I concentrated on transferring a covered baking pan from the fridge to the oven.

Still supporting the door jam, he asked, "What's for dinner?"

"More Greek chicken than two people could ever eat."

"I love leftovers."

"Then I'll stuff plenty in Tupperware for you to take home."

"Ah yes. The traditional bachelor brother-in-law care package."

Applying nothing more than a leveling glare in response, as he sat down at the table, I shook my head.

"What?" he demanded, like he honestly had no idea.

Either we would spend an interminable evening dithering or I could simply bite leather and put a stop to everything before it gained momentum.

A shrew facing certain death in the jaws of a fox, I squared my shoulders. "Is it possible, if I talk about this ticking bomb you've dropped in my lap, that you'll listen? Not hear me, Sam, but really listen?"

"That depends."

"On what exactly?"

"On whether you're being honest or whether you're still tap-dancing. Explain all you want, Helena, all I care about is the bottom line, yes or no."

"No."

"Fine. Now convince me."

Therein lay the difficulty. When someone doesn't want to hear no, it's almost impossible to prove the negative.

My sigh resolute, I folded my hands in front of me. "I'm going to stay with Jared. At this point, I'm putting up with your bullshit for his sake—for family's sake—not yours."

"All right. Cards face up, balls to the wall. Are you happy with him? Because I don't believe you are. That's the reason I'm still here."

"I'm happy enough." I began to equivocate, but I had to make a stand, start saying what I really meant and stop worrying about what anyone else thought. I joined him at the table, squelching an impulse to sweep the plates aside and bash my head against the cleared wood surface.

"No, that's not the reason," I attempted to indicate how much thought I gave his motives as well as my own, "you're still here because Jared has something you've always wanted. You two have waged a pissing contest since you emerged from the womb and I'm just the unlucky one caught in the middle, getting pissed on." That cracked some of the unreadable blue glazing. Resisting a satisfied smirk, I pressed further. "Is that convincing enough?"



Evidently not. "If you really believe that, why stay with Jared? Why not tell us both to go to hell?"

"That's between me and him and is absolutely none of your business. Just because you share DNA doesn't mean you have to share every last thing under the sun or in the night."

"So you blame us for your unhappiness, but me more than him?"

"Jesus!" I smacked the tabletop, rattling china. "You are absolutely infuriating! Listen to me, Sam: Yes. I do blame you more than I blame him, so your precious suffering's intact. Jared's motive came from a boys' libido. Yours comes from a man's cunning. I forgave him and he's never really given me reason to regret it." I dropped my voice, in danger of breaking into a howl of frustration. "You, on the other hand, not only require forgiveness in an unending stream but give me reason for regretting it on a regular basis."

He didn't grace me with even a god-damned inch. "But you still want me. Your eyes alone tell me what you can't—or won't."

"And I almost let you convince me that's reason enough to hit the self-destruct button and run for the hills. I'm thirty-seven years old, Sammy. I don't have the luxury of following whims into the sunset no matter how much I'm attracted to you." That earned his undivided attention. "I think it's because you're half of the man I fell in love with." I hesitated, wondered if my thoughts would make sense spoken aloud. "You and Jared are halves of a whole. And if him without you isn't quite right, you without him might not be any better. So

why," I finished with conviction, "should I tear my life apart just to start digging the same hole?"

Sam's face remained unreadable, but his jaw twitched through a search for any weakness in my defense. I cut him off before he realized there were dozens of loose bricks. "Do you remember the morning after you switched, when you said you would make it up to me, whatever I asked—anything, anytime, just name it?"

"Yeah," he said with such petulance I wanted to grin, "meaning?"

"Meaning it's time to pay up. I'm naming my price. You will not interfere in my life any more. End of story."

"That's a tall order. What if it doesn't work out with Jared, and some guy comes along who's got a notion to smack you around?"

"Get off it," my control of the situation felt good, "you know precisely what I'm talking about. I'm cutting you loose, Sammy. I'm turning to a fresh future, isn't that what they say?"

"There's no such thing at our age. We're like artifacts, we take our history with us."

"Then mine will be revisionist history."

"All right." A duck of his head predicted one more hurdle, which he positioned casually on the track. "Then as a last request, since we've got the place to ourselves, let me make love to you. Let me have you just once and—I can stop thinking about it all the time."

I spluttered a laugh. "You're fucking kidding me, right?"

"Nope. I'll even say please."

His calm too careful, suspicion raised goosebumps down my spine. "That's a crock of shit. You just want what you want."

The false serenity melted. "Maybe I do! But you've been stringing me along for months. I don't think putting me out of my misery is too much to ask." For once, frustration—and desire—bled from his eyes with unadulterated purity. "I guarantee you'll enjoy yourself, and we both know your husband," he spit the reference to his twin out like spoiled meat, "won't give a fig or a fuck if you do."

I paled, distinctly felt the blood drain from my face. "You fucking self-centered, egotistical prick."

"What's that?" He put a hand to his ear. "Did I hear you say, 'yeah, Sammy, you're absolutely right about that, Jared's got a kink for sharing his wife'?"

Not much I could say to argue the point. I tried to ignore a traitorous moisture threatening to well beyond the inner sanctum of my thighs, and wondered if once and done would do it for either of us. Could it be that easy? Jared surely encouraged the option. Did he realize something his twin and I didn't? Then I remembered they were questions I already answered.

"So what," I said. "You know God-damned well you're right, but so, fucking, what."

"So you can't stop thinking about me either. Your body language screams it, Laney, screams it like nothing I've ever seen." Oak stockade breached in a flash, one hand on the table and one on the back of my chair guaranteed I couldn't move until he finished growling out twenty years worth of

unexpurgated truth. "You can't forget all those times we did it over and over. I can still hear you begging me for more—and you always knew the difference between us. You pleaded with me when I fucked you, not him. And don't try to tell me it had anything to do with Jared being there, too, because you did it for yourself. You did it because what we share is more than physical and you knew that from the second I took your virginity. We can't—"

Cornered, I spat, "Sit your ass down—right now!"

Instead, with a snarl that drew the hair on my arms instantly in his direction, he leaned closer. "It's going to take a hell of a lot more than that to stop me this time. There's nobody here to save you and I'm not taking no for an answer."

I didn't fear he would force me. He didn't have to. His presence and persistence could easily guarantee surrender.

Not a threat. A warning.

"You know," I said quietly, "Jared wouldn't let me say no the day I wandered into your sanctuary either—he kissed me anyway. Maybe it's just a matter of fate. I saw him first, fell in love with him in an instant, before we said a word. I can't change that even if God knows I should. And neither can you."

Sam frowned. "Are you talking about the day we met? When he helped you up the ladder?"

"No, before that. I thought nobody was home and when I looked up, he was staring at me from the loft." I tapped the table. "That's when I knew I loved him. It was ... a two-way

electric pulse. I saw it reflected in his eyes and he saw it in mine, I think."

"Have you ever told him this?"

"Sure, lots of times."

A plow trundled down the road, its whump-whump-whump echoing my heart while Sam examined me with that vexatious empty stare. I thought I won with simple logic.

But I was wrong—ultimately oh, so, wrong—learning just how wrong when at last he dropped back into his chair and said gruffly, "Helena, that was me. Jared knows it was me. And you're right, I was yours body and soul the second I saw you."

I gaped at him, sure he played a trick. A lie. Had to be. Because if I didn't see Jared first, then everything I ever...

Frantically groping, I retraced the details beyond blue eyes that burned, felt the sunshine, smelled the grapes, and the love of my life leaned casually on ... a slab of wood. Plywood. Recently torn from another location. And in the loft, Jared proudly claimed the crooked doorframe and deeper in, pounding at a hinge sprouting a single nail from that hunk of plywood was ... Sam.

How could I have been so blind, so stupid, so abso-fucking-lutely imperceptive? I cursed softly as every last trace of my twisted-to-fit, hormone-laden, pseudo-love-logic dissolved into meaningless muck, boiling my eyes in tears.

"Jesus, Mary, Mother of God. It was you."

"Rock Paper Scissors," he said.

Confused, I shook my head. "What?"

"We played Rock Paper Scissors to see who got to bring you up. I did rock, he did paper."

"You—drew straws for me?"

"I guess we did."

"God help me." I shook under the earthquake, gripped the tablecloth like a life preserver, tried to stop my hands from trembling. "Jared's never said a word, the shit."

Everything I ever believed in split open, yawned beneath my feet, tempted me to jump in and die fast instead of bearing the agonizing truth of my unmitigated stupidity. Speech a disease, I still had to acknowledge the irony out loud. "How pathetic is it that I always thought I could tell you apart." Attempting to rectify too many scrambled thoughts, I continued out of pocket, "Why didn't you tell me before this? For pity's sake, Sam, I've based my entire life on it being Jared."

"If I thought for even a second..." His eyes closed briefly, and when he opened them again, they were full of an anguish profound enough to melt mere muscle and bone. "I thought you knew."

"I made a serious mess of everything." Tears blurred my throat, burned my eyes. "You'd both be better off without a silly, shallow woman that—"

"No. I'm not better off. I've tried to obliterate what I feel on three continents and in more beds than I want to remember. I don't have anywhere left to run." Eyes obstinate lapis, he presented the barest honesty he had ever given me. "With my twin's full permission, I'll have you this time, Helena, even if it's only one night. Because no matter what I

do, every fuck, every god-damned fantasy since that day leads me back to you—standing in the sun and looking at me like an incarnation of Aphrodite herself." Conviction melted into the rumble of old sorrow. "You had leaves in your hair, did you know that?"

Damn him to hell all I wanted, it didn't stop burrowing thoughts about Sam between the sheets from popping up like Spanish flies, nibbling through the tender parts of my brain, feasting on concentrated cells of need. I desperately tried to crush each one with hard-soled reason, only to have them multiply exponentially.

I made my bed on a mistaken bramble of thorns. Too many years gone to fix it, I would give the twin I should have shared my youth with his consolation. In the end, my fall from grace comes down to the simple fact that I loved him.

Accession tumbled from my lips. "One night then."

My adversary better prepared for the outcome, I ended up in his arms, holding him, kissing him. And when his tongue claimed mine, I knew I had irrevocably stepped over a line drawn in the earth twenty lost summers before.

"Of all the things you regret," he said hoarsely, "tonight will never be one of them."

Afraid to speak, afraid I would cry, I clung to him, willed away a lingering uncertainty.

With a quiver that shone in bright contrast to the way his mouth devoured mine, Sam eased me gently back a step. "Helena," he started, and hesitated. "Will you do something for me?"

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

Through visions of wild requests, like sucking him off in the middle of my kitchen table, I nodded.

"Will you go ahead, wait for me naked?"

Interesting. Definitely not a way to begin that I ever imagined. "How come?"

"I've dreamed about it for a long time," he said with shy simplicity.

"Sure, Sammy." I wondered if the lion would turn out to be nothing more than an overgrown tomcat after all—and found I didn't care. "Any place in particular?"

"Anywhere," he said, "except my brother's bed."



## **Chapter 35—Dreaming's Not Free**

You once asked if Sam is a skillful lover. The answer is yes. Very. And while that information is something you probably want to file under Sorry I Asked, it's germane to what took place the night I pretended I hadn't irreparably screwed up all our lives, and pretended giving a meager ration of happiness to the one I hurt most, would be sufficient atonement.

Intending a quick trip to my room to put on a spritz of scent and run a comb through my hair, nerves insisted I spend a good amount of time brushing it into a gleaming mane. Control of trembling small motor functions returned, I took stock as a woman does, patted on a little face cream, took a deep breath and left my sanctuary—and sanity—behind.

Where didn't take much thought. After a hit and run to the bathroom—my bladder was nervous, too—I scurried into the guestroom, heart pounding my lungs more firmly into my throat. For the fourth time, a different CD began to play, only to abruptly stop. Glimpsing Sam in the living room, fussing with the stereo, helped settle my quivering stomach.

A cavernous chamber large enough for a sitting area, I turned down the blankets, fluffed the pillows and lit a ylang-ylang candle to scent the mood. One would think I would have, should have, used the time to carefully consider not only what I learned about the past, but the possible ramifications of doing what I intended to do. I didn't. Didn't

think about my vows or my promise to Jared. Didn't think about anything other than having Sam next to me, around me, inside me.

Room readied to my satisfaction, and not wanting to miss a second of anything, I left the main lights lit, turned on the bedside lamp and climbed into bed. Yet no sooner did I get artfully arranged, than a truly horrifying thought struck:

Two 75-watt bulbs bouncing double-time off a bureau mirror might not be the best lighting for a gal south of thirty-five. The last time Sammy saw me nude, my boobs defied gravity, my tummy was flat as a pancake and my ass didn't comprehend the word caboose.

The toilet flushed over strains of the piano concertos Sam settled on, and I made a mad, semi-panicked dash to hit the wall switch, managing to whack my toes on the dressing chair in the process. Hopping painfully, muttering curses, I made it back to bed with just enough time to recreate my pose.

Illumination suitably softened, I hoped I wouldn't be a disappointment—nor disappointed. Every possibility existed for both of us to have expectations that, being crafted in the lands of What If, could never be met. There are so many embarrassing and awkward components to sex never included in fantasy, and for good reason. Tongue-in-cheek observations aside, my heart pounded my ribs so hard I heard the ocean in my ears, my stomach flipping with every wave of anticipation muffling doubt with salty desire between my legs.

The hall went dark and Sam stood shadowed in the doorway. "Hi."

"Hi yourself." I yearned to see his face, watch his reaction to the woman he rightfully should already know every inch of. He didn't move and my jangling nerves too near hysterical giggles, I blurted, "Are you going to stand there staring at me all night?"

"You're more beautiful than I ever remembered."

"That's because there's not much light."

"No, you're beautiful in any light." And with that, he stalked toward the bed.

Mouth dry, my heart threatened mutinous tears at his measured approach. Like a silhouette movie on a deck of cards, I experienced a strange few seconds while, in rapid, flickering succession, mental images of young Sam were overlaid by very real images of Sam at his prime. So many of the pictures in my head were of him as a youth—particularly those associated with my lurid daydreams.

I sold my dreaming short.

Maturity made it easier to discern which twin was which, as I learned the summer before, and applied its brush doubly to their bodies. A mass of sinewy strength and power, Sam was an artist's dream as he halted by the side of the bed, gazing at me with unblinded, unfettered famishment. I held his eyes, at first a little shy about looking at the rest of him.

Odd how genetically identical bodies can be shaped into such divergent forms. Sammy always gave the impression of being taller than Jared, though they were both six-two. I noted each contrast and similarity as my eyes traveled over a thicker neck flanked by rope-like traps, to the dark curls decorating his chiseled chest in a well-known pattern—

although also unknown, since the familiar fur spread with loose density over a completely different torso, one carrying not a trace of softness beyond meat riding on muscle. The delicious, hairy pathway from navel to groin was the same, likewise the falcon rising gracefully from its nest above pylon legs. There popped into my head an old saying, as silly thoughts are wont to do:

*It's not the wand that matters, but the magic that's in it.*

I laughed out loud and while it could be a sinker in any other pond, there it sent a ripple of relief pushing anxiety to shore, leaving the surface clear and lit by the moon.

Lips twitching, Sam asked, "Do I want to know why you're laughing?"

I shook my head. "But it's a compliment."

"God Laney, I've rehearsed this a million times but damned if I know how to start."

"Come here." I held out my arms.

With a strangled groan, he hit the bed. Stroking, petting, our lips sought confirmation that dreams can come true. The pillar of flesh pressed into my belly solidified with rapid reality, flooding my mouth with want of tasting it—as Sam once hoped I would, in the dark barn during our first, and only, sex without Jared. I headed down, filling my senses with the salty-sweet wishes misting our skin—but made it no further than his solar plexus.

"No." He abruptly rolled me onto my back. "Me first." And from the moment Sam parted my thighs, eased his bulk between my knees to kiss a reverent trail of worship from

breasts to belly and beyond, he took complete charge—and I had no desire to challenge his command.

Because command me he did, with the old-remembered oral prowess that had been honed into superior proficiency. I was indeed Aphrodite under his dexterous manipulations, and he a braver-than-myth Ares as we spared no thought for the absent Hephaestus. Returning to my mouth, he shared my flavor on his tongue until only a trace of it remained. And when he left my arms to resupply our kisses with erotic flavoring, I ached to hold him again—an ache that increased as I fondled his hair and ached for longer limbs, to stroke him like his tongue stroked my quivering center.

Only after thorough exploration did he return to my arms. I reached for his cock, anticipating my turn. He had other ideas. Knee between my thighs, he sucked my lips like candy, content to tease me with his organ pressed silky-hot into my hip. When he eventually wrapped his legs around mine, I was so slick his erection slid over thighs and mound with lubricated ease.

Though reluctant to stop kissing him, I finally begged. "God, Sam, please."

He positioned the head of his cock at my entrance, returning to devour my mouth as it slipped barely inside. I groaned against his lips while he possessed me with such slow incremental torture, I went lightheaded wanting the entire length. And just when I thought I couldn't stand the wait, would scream from the delicious need to be full, he fed me the remaining measure with a single thrust at the same

time he nipped my bottom lip hard enough to sting—a white hot flash that pulsed into my pussy's plumbed pleasure.

We didn't fuck, we joined. Arms wrapped tight, we arched into one another. Writhing in the embrace, Sam's tongue speared my mouth, echoed his rod's treatment of my lower orifice, while his satiny-rough pubic fleece ground into my well-stimulated clit, causing my body to milk his shaft harder. I would never have believed I could be so aroused without significant friction, but orgasm began to well from the sensation of simply having Sammy embedded in me. Kissing my eyelids, cheeks, hair, whatever his lips contacted, his labored breathing evidence he held back while urging me closer to lift-off with a series of intent short jabs. My groaned response melted into his mouth. Again, he captured my bottom lip in his teeth and presented a single, full-length piston.

My lips swollen, as over-sensitized as my clit, another sharp nip ignited a climax that burst from my innermost depths, spasmed every muscle my skeleton supported. Shaking under the onslaught of heaven, I cried against his tongue, sucking it in time to my pussy's greedy sucking of his cock—and when my vision cleared enough to be cognizant of his eyes boring into mine, Sam finally let go, hit his apex with a cry and whimper of my name.

Initial lust slaked, we petted and cooed, whispered of nothing and everything until our realized dream took hold. Only then, with no little giggling, did we get down to the business of having serious sex.

The second time I swore he read my body like a map, pinpointing routes and stopovers. Technically superb, if a little wooden, Sam seemed to concentrate on being sure he did this or that instead of simply enjoying whatever came along.

Trying to have a go at what I wanted to happen next for the zillionth time and again gently rebuffed, I finally complained. "C'mon Sammy, let me show you what I can do, too."

With a growl, he wrestled me playfully onto my back. "All right, all right. There's so much I want to do and if I've only got—just come on my tongue one more time and I'll let you have the lead."

Well any woman would be nuts to say no to that, right? Even though my sensitive parts were growing a little numb from the prolonged workout, Sammy's attention to responsive details showed in the way he accommodated my need for increased stimulation. Good God, he was enthusiastic! I traveled along the edge of Orgasm Canyon, enjoying the scenery, trying to jump from the ridge at every sighting of his face between my thighs, sprouting strands of excitement to bridge the gap between mouth and cunt.

How I strained to come! I reached and arched and bucked and groaned and cried and wailed and begged, thrashing like an insatiable madwoman. He licked and sucked and prodded me with long fingers that stretched and taunted. And then the other hand slipped between my nether cheeks, seeking, tickling, teasing—suddenly, joyously, his fingers filled front and back, plunged in and out in divine synchronicity with his lapping tongue.

Wet as I was, I marveled at the double penetration's intensity while he urged me with steadfast determination toward the precipice's crumbling edge. Finally, he sucked my clit from its hood, lips forcing constant exposure to his merciless tongue, and I plunged with screaming, supreme satisfaction into the rift.

"Hot damn!" I heaved, laughing like the lunatic I felt. Not willing to suffer even one more delay in getting his cock in my mouth, I barked, "On your back, soldier!"

"Ma'am! Yes, Ma'am!" He saluted with a grin I'm sure no female officer ever resisted—fraternization be damned—and flopped onto his back. "Permission to stroke my cock, Ma'am?"

"Please do," I breathed over the hardness he already had to hand, "then feed it to me, baby."

Once he was imprisoned in my mouth, I went to town. I thought I would never again perform such lusty, unbridled fellatio—I was thankfully wrong about that—and gave my all, my best, my pleasure, my purpose until he persistently squirmed. Although something Jared refused to try, endorsed by my own surprising enjoyment, I wanted to explore Sam's response to rear entry. When my fingers slipped beyond his balls, he drew a harsh, anticipatory breath, welcoming the advance. My oral attentions slowing, I tested the tight ring and realized I needed lubrication as well as a better position if I wanted to keep sucking him, too.

"Wait, let me help." Swiftly on his feet, he pulled me to the edge of the bed. "Give me your hand."



A little confused and a lot curious, I complied. With a slow smile, he teased my first two fingers upright and brought them to his lips. Tonguing them with the same deliberation he had my exposed clit, his eyes glowed in satisfaction. "This is something new for you, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"But technically? I mean, you understand the male mechanics?"

Dozens of illustrations portraying everything from the urethra to the prostate danced in my head and I huffed.

"Hello? Sex-ed teacher."

Eyes seductively hooded, he chuckled. "Brain fade."

"I wonder why?"

Grinning, he scolded, "Shut up or I'll have to spank you."

"Promise?"

That made him laugh. "I'm afraid it's not on my top ten." He returned to nibbling my fingers. "Let's see how far down the list we get."

"There's a list?"

"There is. So get back to sucking my cock. Your hand will be ready when you need it."

Realization dawning, I left my arm in his capable control and set about turning his erection into the hardest pillar that ever existed. Swallowing what I could, I massaged his balls, enjoyed the responding groans and twitching abdomen. I caught each of his moans in my palm as he suckled my fingers in tandem with the attention his prick. My free hand slid between his cheeks, where I tapped the entrance to his body, tested readiness.

Sam dropped my hand and widened his stance.

Afraid to be too rash, I slipped my lubricated digits past his well-tightened sac, discovering my saliva-slickened forefinger easily made the way clear, efficiently leaving the second ripe for duty. Sucking hard on his ruddy helmet, I pressed gently, passed the gated resistance.

"Yeah, there we go," he praised gruffly, hips stabbing his cock further into my mouth as I pushed deeper.

Uncertain how far to go, I hesitated, but a croaking demand renewed my confidence. "Fuck, Laney, that's so good. Go on, babe, a little more."

After a few shallow pumps, I plunged deep. The action solicited a sharp cry of satisfaction from my subject, a cry that resurfaced in my stomach as a comet trailing throbbing resonance into my clit.

God! If there is power in fellatio, there is omnipotence in filling a man while you suck. There is also additional salacious satisfaction in being the penetrater when one is designed to be penetrated. It didn't take long to realize that A, Sam was no stranger to what I did; B, he enjoyed it immensely; and C, anything that made his cock feel and act like a renegade fire hose between my lips could be nothing but a good thing.

Legs trembling, abdomen taut, with a guttural snarl he gripped my shoulders, doing his best not to gag me on his tremoring meat. With a rush of pride, I abruptly shrugged his hands away and took him down my throat. After all, I learned a few things over the years, too.

"Jesus! Helena, I—" Three words were all he managed before he came, a grunt accompanying each shuddering stream of his release.

I thoroughly enjoyed his astonishment when he could finally breathe. Growling, he shook his head like a wet wolf, swooping down to kiss me with dramatic flair. "Damn, woman, that was fucking *hot!*"

I laughed as he rolled his eyes, swooned, and dropped face down on the bed. When he promised I would enjoy it, he had sworn the truth and I was satisfied I gave no less than I received. And in reviewing the anal play, I experienced a quiver of erotic recall even immediately after the fact. At that point in my life, I didn't think there was anything new sexually I cared to experience. I wanted to talk about it. Settled astride his ass, I traced the lines of his tattoo and considered the best approach.

"Are these my eyes?" I ran my thumb across the angel's face.

Muffled by the pillow, he said, "Sure are."

"Should I be flattered or offended? She's kind of scary."

"Flattered. She represents everything that makes me who I am."

Perfect intro. "Which part represents your superior firepower?"

How he rolled over without dislodging me, I have no idea, but I suddenly straddled his groin while he searched my face.

"The way you look," he said with pride, "I'd say her eyes."

I took the plunge, so to speak. "God, Sammy, that last trick, the double thing you did to me, was ... really hot, too."

"I know," he pulled me down to kiss the tip of my nose, "I could tell you liked it."

"Would you..." I hesitated, wondered if he would find my request distasteful. "Would you like to, um, take me that way?"

Not fazed at all. "Only if you want me to." He studied me with open curiosity. "You've never done it?"

"Nope, never even tried."

"I never thought about doing it until I said it that night just to say it. But I sure as hell thought about it after that."

"So you've done it?"

Susurrating seductively, his affirmation burned into my belly. "And thought about you every time I did. It would be my pleasure to introduce it—if we can. I'm no King Dong but sizeable enough it might not be possible without a bunch of sessions to work up to it."

My clit fluttered and I waded into his eyes, breathless as a virgin. "Let's at least try. Just the thought has me gushing to go."

"We'll need something better than spit."

"KY?"

"Perfect."

"Can we do it against the dresser, in front of the mirror? This time I'd like to see you take my cherry."

Giving my buttocks a contemplative squeeze, Sam's mouth opened to reply but the words came from behind me.

"I don't know," Jared said. "Me, I'd rather watch your face when he does." The lamps burst to light, revealing him by the

door, draped over the upholstered dressing chair like a discarded shirt. "That way it'll be sort of nostalgic, too."

My stomach lurched, sent bitter bile to burn the back of my tongue. Surprised I didn't vomit on the spot, somehow I managed to blurt, "Jared! I thought you were—"

"Gone for the night?" A cadaverous smile matched his nasty tone. "I guess you did. My meeting was cancelled. The snow stopped. Stupidly, I thought you missed me."

Jaw tight, Sam nevertheless made the unreasonable sound reasonable. "You should have called."

"Like you would've waited for me, Sammy. But hey, if you wanna stick around and watch my encore, be my guest."

Flabbergasted, I tried to clear the air but couldn't form a sensible sentence. "I—you—he—we—I mean—"

"Yeah, I know," Jared drawled, "all that sucking's got you tongue-tied."

Sam the first to react with an honest response, he covered my nakedness even as he lunged for his twin. "Get out of here, Jared—now!"

Jared didn't flinch. "Fuck you, Sam. This is my house and that's my wife. The only reason I don't have a gun to your head—brother—is because I always did enjoy your performances. My dick hasn't been this hard in years."

My world crashing around me for the second time that night, I struggled out of bed to face consequences I dismissed too easily. "Please, Jared, don't," I begged, determined not to cry, "it's not Sam's fault, it's mine."

Whereas Sam masked his emotions, Jared rarely could and hurt seeped into his anger. "You promised, Laney. You promised to tell me."

Tears were mandatory as my heart plunged answerless through the Gates of Hades. "I'm sorry," was all I could summon.

"Only that you got caught."

Sammy glanced back at me, full of reproach. Returning attention to his twin, he announced, "I'm not sorry. Not one fucking bit. If you want to take a swing at me, you go right ahead. I'll give you a free pass just this once."

"What I want," Jared replied with caustic, measured loathing, all the while looking at me, "is to kill you outright. Are you going to give me a pass on that?"

At least I had enough sense to put myself between them, although being wrapped in nothing but a sheet made it difficult to appear circumspect. "We didn't plan it. It just happened." The lame excuse rang in my ears and I wondered how many spouses were, at that moment, uttering the same justification—though I had a clip of unusual ammunition. "You said if I was going to, Sammy was your first choice. I said I would warn you but you said you could live with it."

Jared bellowed, "Because I was willing to bet he's got better sperm. We don't need a fucking Petrie dish if we've got plenty of surrogate seed, now do we?"

"My God," I choked, "you don't mean that."

"Yes," he snarled, "I do. The way you two drool over each other, I figured why not tip the odds—who would know? Even some DNA test couldn't tell if it's mine or his."

"I hope," Sam said, "that you fucking rot in hell, Jared."

I really can't say what happened next, who moved first, but next thing I knew, they were brawling like baboons. I hastily unwound the sheet, scanning for my robe, intending to try and pull them apart. Before I could, Sam had Jared in a headlock and dragged him out of the room. By the time I caught up, they were in the kitchen with the table between them.

I turned on the light. Heaving by the back door, Jared demanded, "Who do you want to stay? Right now, Laney, right this second, you make a choice."

Stuck in quicksand until I knew his view on the past, I demanded something in return. "When did you first see me?"

"What?"

"When is the first moment you remember seeing me?"

Behind me, his twin said, "I told you—"

"Shut up, Sam. I'm asking him."

Obviously grappling with the question, Jared blurted, "At the bottom of the loft ladder. Sam said there was a goddess in the yard. We drew for who would go. I won and there you were."

"I did see Sammy first," I said more to myself than the twins. "I didn't know that until today, but you knew, Jared, didn't you?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know god-damned well I saw Sam first, but you've let me believe it was you for twenty years!"

"That love at first sight crap doesn't mean anything. Not then and not now."

Never suspecting what I would say, the decision came natural. "I want a divorce."

I heard Sam's intake of breath and likewise braced myself as Jared spluttered in shock. Despite his duplicity, I tried to explain with rational haste. "Babe, I can't spend the rest of my life pretending I'm happy. And you just proved you don't care if I am, so long as you get what you want."

If looks could reduce a person to dust, I would be One with the earth. Jared's angry glare fell on the cast iron skillet in the sink and he snatched it up. I had a flash of real fear and hoped he wasn't foolish enough to take a swing at Sam, or someone was bound to end up bloody. But with a howl of rage, Jared swung the blackened ballast into the wall, shattering the ceramic tile, sending shards raining through the kitchen. The ceiling fixture fluttered, died—and he was gone.

As we listened to the truck's engine gun in the driveway, Sam said grimly, "I'll go after him. It's going to be okay."

"No, don't," I was crying for more reasons than I cared to list. "Let him burn it off and I'll talk to him tomorrow."

"Jesus." The chosen twin ran exasperated hands through his hair. "I knew it could be bad, but still..."

Barefoot on the vinyl floor, I don't know if I shivered from cold or from the cloud that covered the moon, briefly plunging us into total darkness. What was done, was done, no turning back, and as the lunar glow returned, I found peace with my choices, good and bad. Shrugging into a mantle of practicality, I dried my tears, made my way through the razored wreckage, and examined the skillet's damage.



"I'll have to call an electrician in the morning." I sought Sam's hand. "I never dreamed making love to you would require a bonded professional."

\* \* \* \*

Long before dawn arrived, the professional I would need most was a mortician. Clipping a tractor trailer on the icy highway, Jared went through the guardrail at the 81/83 junction, the mammoth four-by-four tumbling like a stone down the steep, snow-covered slope into the ravine. Seatbelt held, airbags deployed, but when the B-pillar buckled and the headrest snapped, so did Jared's neck.

The unfortunate State Trooper assigned the task of informing a dead man's wife shook his head and said, "It might give you some comfort, ma'am, to know he didn't suffer."

So I suffered for him. I put on a nice lying face and pretended my love died in that truck and not in the kitchen hours before. I chose the casket, picked out the flowers, and buried my secret with my husband.

What I couldn't bury, not even under six feet of earth and four inches of concrete, was my guilt. No, that remained mine free and clear, and poisoned the last decision Jared forced me to make. That I loved Sammy first and best didn't matter in the end because I couldn't wake up next to the ghost of my sins every morning and stay sane.

Although we tried, me and Sam, stubborn fools that we are, for far longer than we should have—but eventually there was no way left to deny that as lovers, we were doomed the

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

moment our lost twin stormed into the night.

## Chapter 36—Firelight and Fresh Linen

Sniper-sudden, an ember exploded in the hearth and Helena jumped like she had been shot. "God," she gasped, "that scared me."

With a clandestine swipe at his eyes, Alex said, "I'll give it a stir in a tic or two."

"Do you need me to explain the rest? Like when everybody started to notice Sam and I were together?"

"Reckon that was fun. No, sweeting, I don't suppose you need do—I can imagine it all too well. Unless it's important for you to tell me?"

"No, I don't think so. Like I said, we were doomed the second Jared went out the door."

"No," Alex tried not to sound harsh, "you were doomed the second they drew lots." Certainly not his place to pronounce judgment on either Madison twin, there existed not-so-nice words he wanted to apply to both. As much as he identified with the boy's game, as haunted as he was by a similar round of Odds 'n Evens, the stakes he and his brothers played for were clear to all participants.

Helena hugged him like she may never let go. "I love you."

He kissed her forehead. "I love you, too." Her face already stained with sorrow, he still needed to make one thing immediately clear. Unfortunately, the first bit came out angrier than he intended. "Without a doubt, I love you more than either of your twins ever did." To cover all interpretations, he added, "Or do, even."

"I wouldn't have truly believed you yesterday, but the way you said that, Alex ... I know you do. I honestly know you do. But I don't want to change the subject yet. Anything you want to ask me about?"

None of his questions really to do with whys or wherefores, there were several things that left his curiosity piqued. To employ the honesty she so aptly demonstrated was needed to weld them together through years upon years, he may as well begin with trains of thought easier to face than his own secret. Absolutely no way to avoid that, before the week ended, he must confess his sin of omission or condemn himself to the same fate as Sam.

*This is no time to be thinking of yourself, Aidan spat. You've only yourself to thank for being in the cold.*

Properly chastised, Alex admitted Aidan was, as usual, absolutely correct. He could feel the raw edges of Helena's soul through her skin. She may be cleansed. She wasn't pain-free. He turned his attention to exactly what she may need. In her place, he would want reassurance no big questions were left unanswered.

*Right, Aidan said brusquely, get on with it.*

Venturing the easiest of the bunch, he asked, "How much do you reckon Jared saw?"

"I'm not sure. At one point I know I looked at the door. If he was there then, I would've seen him—I think. He could've been in the hall." She shook the thought away. "No, I want to believe only near the end. And just so you know, I'm not proud of what I did, but I do feel better now that you know everything."

"Nor should you be ashamed." Alex wanted to fume. No wonder Helena remained suspicious of intimacy. The men she gifted it to had used it against her. Bloody fucking idiot that he was, he was no different. But he would do something about it that her twins hadn't—he would sort it and take responsibility for the consequences.

Further enhancing his guilty shame through no intentional fault, Helena clasped his hand. "Are you convinced about me and Sam, Alex? I mean in your heart, not just your head?"

"About your view of it, yes." The least he could do is give honest answers without formulating how they may sound. "I don't reckon it changes how I feel about Sam. In some ways, I feel more antagonistic, though I swear it will never be an issue. Ever."

She sighed. "I shouldn't have said he's good in the sack."

"I'm glad you did. I'm pleased you were honest."

*You're bloody well nothing of the sort,* Aidan snorted.

Shushing his minder's blunt observation, Alex studied the pale, green-gold eyes before him, searched for a trace of old wants. Finding none and tremendously relieved, he discovered a monumental curiosity because of it—a curiosity that she would likely not care for. An abashed grin tweaked his lips.

Reading his mind, she snickered. "I know what you're thinking, boy-o. Evidently, if you put a couple six-packs in him, Sam will tell you all sorts of things, complete with colorful stories of colorful women whose names he doesn't always remember." With a delightfully wicked laugh, she

confided a bit of related gossip. "I hear Stan eats it up, Curtie blushes like a girl, and Mike asks lots of questions."

Ego somewhat dented, Alex found the reminder of how revealing conversation intra-women could be as disconcerting as her humor was gratifying. "Reckon that sounds like Mike. Though I'm with Curtis. I'm not certain I want to hear it either. But back to us. You asked me to believe you and I didn't. For that I'm sorrier than I can say."

"Don't be. I could float now. With no secrets, we will never have to hide how we feel."

Tears seeping from under her lashes constricted Alex's throat. The simple truth he should have accepted months ago sliced through his chest, stabbed his heart. "You're right, we don't." Currently responsible for one hunk of astray still sitting between them, he hastened to add, "I regret not taking you at your word."

"Don't regret it. Use it for a better purpose."

*Use it as a reminder, Aidan clarified unnecessarily, that sex is easy, but intimacy requires bravery.*

As usual, Aidan pointed out the ripe time for confession, although, Alex reckoned—also per usual for time immemorial it seemed—not what a fella would call the best moment for it. But he did have a final solution.

"Sunday's my birthday," he said.

"So it is."

"Let's have a right expensive dinner and then a long chat in the bar."

*Neutral territory, Aidan said approvingly.*

Blinking the pest away, Alex went on, "I suppose it's time I tell you a thing or two as well."

Her eyes narrowed, suspicious—or amused. "Are you going to spring something horrible?"

"Not horrible, simply—it's to do with things I can't control or change. You've dealt with enough painful subjects for one night and it's nothing quite so..."

"Disastrous?"

"No and yes. At the time, perhaps."

"You don't want to tell me now?"

Already set in stone to explain, several days to rehearse seemed prudent. "No. It can wait, so long as you can."

"I am a little wrung out. I don't mean to be selfish, but I can wait."

"All right, good." Despite Helena's glum story, Alex felt downright positive. For one thing, various comments she had made were now somewhat meaningless. At least he hoped they were. Meanwhile, one very small bit he remained curious—make that disturbed—about. "There is something I want to ask. About the thing you played with last week."

"Sorry?"

Not sure how to label the item without being crass, he said brusquely, "Your toy, Helena, is it the same one?"

"Same one what?"

"That you and Jared—"

She erupted with laughter. "If that isn't the most typical male question I've ever heard!"

Of course he blushed. "Bull dust. It's a perfectly reasonable question."

"No," she tickled his stomach, "it's a guy thing, through-and-through. Rest easy, boy-o. Jared would've had a seizure if I so much as looked at one bigger than him."

Digesting the information set different wheels turning in other directions.

"For heaven's sake," she spluttered through new mirth, "you should see your face! I have to tell you straight out or you'll never be satisfied, will you?" Grumbling about men and their measurements, she settled deeper under his arm. "In the name of no niggling doubts, I'd say about the same length but you're definitely thicker."

He grinned, feeling right proud of his luck. She promptly tickled him until he wrestled her arms over her head.

"Does my estimate satisfy you," she teased, "or do I have to drag out the yardstick?"

High on victory, he refused to acknowledge dread. Pressing her firmly into the mattress, he purred his delight, his heart, his life. "You always satisfy me, sweetie. If you ever doubt anything about me, Helena, never doubt how much I love you."

Rather than distress him, her tears said everything. Drowning in her love, Alex prayed for eternal forgiveness, and kissed each liquid diamond away.



## Part V

Let the past drift away with the water.

—Japanese saying

### Chapter 37—Wading Waist Deep

For the third morning in a row, there it was, the first cognizant thing in his brain the moment Alex opened his eyes. Wishing he could stop dwelling on it, he pulled the blankets over his head, hiding from the sunshine's attempt to banish his gloom.

He pressed Helena for answers, received precisely what he asked for, and now it threatened to destroy his sanity. To top all off, Aidan decided to employ his iniquity soapbox.

*Three isn't ashamed, the same mourned, they've all known. She'll certainly be able to grasp it. You can't think she's so shallow as to not. She isn't Da, is she?*

Burying his face deeper in the pillow, Alex groaned. "Aidan, please—please—one bloody day without your moaning."

Yes, he must, for certain, explain about Aidan, explain their misfortunes, because Helena's curiosity had attached to it. The morning after her confession, she prodded him about his scheduled one. He demurred, revealing only that Something required her uninterrupted attention.

Now. As he—and his disgruntled partner—well understood, come Sunday, he must divulge the only information he possessed that even approached the category of Something.

*I keep telling you, Aidan said in a rare moment of tenderness, she won't stop loving you for it.*

"Perhaps not," he mused, "though at the very least she's bound to be a bit ... annoyed."

*Indeed, Aidan snorted, Angel of Vengeance's eyes.*

With that erudite statement, Aidan was gone. Alex breathed a bare sigh. Daring to hope it augured several hours peace, he turned to the part of Helena's story that ate into his heart.

While Helena was the love of his life, he obviously was not the love of hers. He didn't doubt she loved him, certainly. Only he wasn't The One. No, that would be a tall bloke called Sam Madison. A bloke he couldn't help like despite the truth. A bloke that, had Jared's death not interfered, Helena would be with.

Painful knowledge that didn't change how much he loved her. For certain, the price of understanding. After all, how much of his own history hinged on choices and children's games?

Helena had left the door open if he ever wanted to talk about it. Yet enlightenment doesn't always require discussion. Other than that, there were things he would definitely not discuss, such as never trusting Sam beyond the surface.

Not to mention a few new insecurities. Helena correctly guessed he rued asking about Sam's skill. Because rather than be satisfied with her honesty, he tortured himself

wondering what Sam did that he didn't. Truth be told, he had prepared a bloody list.

It shouldn't matter a bit. She came out of a terrible place strong enough to love again. All that mattered. Besides, if her life hadn't gone awry, she wouldn't be in the kitchen, brewing the coffee wheedling its way through the goose-down doona to tickle his nose.

A sack of salt and old sardines hit the bed hard enough to rock its human occupant and uttered an accusatory, "Miaow-Ow!"

"Beat it, Rocky." He swiped the insistently kneading claws from his thigh. "You'll get fed when you get fed."

However the cat, displaying his usual positive gumption, simply transferred his kneading to a larger lump—that of his master's head. Intent on eking out a few final minutes of self-pity, Alex shoved his purring inquisitor away and returned to nursing his bruised ego—until a disembodied paw scrabbled under the blanket and, sufficiently hooked, began to tug it from and obviously recalcitrant feedbag.

Suitably distracted, Alex sprang up with a growl, put a bottle brush on Rocky's arse, and stretched off anxiety by laughing at the grumbling tom. No sense worrying over negative consequences. Things do happen for a reason. If his own trials hadn't been what they were, he wouldn't be in the States, let alone in love with Helena. He would do best to bloody well concentrate on that bit of wisdom.

But first, he must survive a day with the man who was haunting him.

\* \* \* \*

As Alex quickly learned, driving about the countryside and inspecting farmettes with Sam didn't much help in the acceptance of history department. But with the specter of another confession looming within thirty-six hours, he reckoned it was no time to brush the bloke off.

Yet as dinner hour loomed, Alex realized he either had to swallow his misgivings forever, or tell the big fella what was what.

*There is a third option,* Aidan said mischievously.

Or he could dong Sam square in the nose. The longer Alex held his counsel, the more appealing a kafuffle grew. Of course, it may result in a trip to hospital and not likely be Sam who required patching. Although Alex hovered on the brink of convincing himself he could still give the former Marine something to remember him by.

They arrived at the next property on the list just as the late day sun slanted into a cooling breeze.

"The house looks fairly sound." Alex turned to germane matters as Sam parked the truck.

"The barn's great." Sam climbed out to study the structure. "Seem big enough, you think?"

Alex's worries collaborated with his bruised ego, treating him to a vision of Helena and Sam writhing in another barn. Staring at the peeling, thankfully-red-not-white building, he asked as neutrally as possible, "How many students?"

"Sixty. At five hundred bucks a pop."

"Reckon it's better than karate."

"You can't imagine how good a woman feels when she can take on two or three guys, and not only survive but conquer—especially married ones, for some reason."

Too much to bear, before the last straw hit the dirt, words leapt from Alex's mouth. "Way I hear it, mate, married women are exactly your style."

Prepared for frosty slate, the flash of despair before Sam could get his mirror-glare in place took Alex by surprise.

"Fuck you," the big fella snarled, and stalked toward the barn.

*Well, Aidan said, that was right mature of you, mate.*

"Shut up, you bloody wanker," Alex said, aiming for his invisible companion.

Unfortunately, the jab reached corporeal ears as well.

"No. Fuck this." Sam abruptly turned back. "I won't put up with that, not even for Laney's sake. You got something to say to me, man, say it to my face."

Several meters away from the bristling Madison bull, with the packed dirt of the farmyard offering no cover, Alex felt as though he landed in the middle of some warped Leone parody—he only needed a cigarillo clutched between gritted teeth to complete the scene.

No room to dilly-dally. "Since I'm to my limit, reckon I will. I don't like the way you look at Helena. I am not your twin, or your brother. I won't share her, now or in future. So stop ringing her up every bloody day, stop taking her to posh restaurants alone, and stop pissing in my pocket, pretending to be my mate just to see her." Chin up, he awaited return fire.

Sam said nothing, but a grin bloomed, grew wide.

Offended in whole new ways, adrenaline produced a primitive snarl. "Do I amuse you?"

"No," Sam replied amicably. "You love her a lot, don't you?"

"You bloody well know I do. And you've had your chance—several, in fact. I won't stand by while you sabotage her life simply because you can't stand for someone else to have her." Satisfied he wiped the smile from his opponent, Alex plunged ahead. "If you love her half as much as I do, set her free, let her live."

The expulsion left him panting with anger, yet everything in the open has favored points.

"I know she told you everything," Sam said. "She also said you could live with it. I hate that fucking phrase. My brother said the same thing and look what it got us."

"I'm talking about what Helena can live with. She needs to believe she can depend on me, but so long as you're waving a welcome mat in her face, she may never even try. She's not coming back to you, Sam. She's going to spend the rest of her life with me, and you had better accept that right quick."

"Jesus, Alex," Sam huffed, ruffled his hair, "or what, you'll take your best shot?"

Defiant, conviction unequalled, he said, "Dead cert."

"I think you actually would." Sam returned to being amused. "C'mon, man, we're not kids. Although..." His scowl quickly calculated god knew what punishments. "Rest assured, you swing at me, I will put you in serious pain."

Anger expanding in his chest, Alex's reply carried quiet threat. "Reckon we'll see about that."

"Oh for fuck sake," Sam exploded. "Yes. I'm in love with her. Is that what you want to hear? Does it solve anything what-so-ever?"

No, it didn't. Alex reckoned the only thing left was to solve things the same way men had solved disputes over women since the dawn of sex. He took a determined step.

Sam halted him with a bellow, "Hold it right there, you stupid prick, let me finish before you dive in! Loving her isn't enough. I found that out the hardest way there is and I don't need some brat to remind me. I am not plotting to ruin her life by getting rid of you, because without you she'd be miserable, and her misery is my misery.

"So quit belly-aching and suck it up. Yes, if you let her fall, I'll catch her, dry her tears and set her on her feet. I'm not giving up the best friend I've got just because you can't handle our past. Is that clear?"

Alex refused to back down over a few easily spouted wise words. "Crystal clear, as long as you start respecting my boundaries."

"Where have I crossed the line?" Sam said—a bit sadly it seemed. "I thought I've been decent about it."

"Taking her to dinner last week? She didn't want to go, you insisted."

Sam growled and again shoved his hair from his face. "I didn't—nobody made—" He threw up his hands. "Because along with saying good-bye to Jared, we needed to talk about you, you fucking idiot."

"About me? What for?"

As if he hadn't heard, the big fella continued waspishly to himself. "Guess I've just been wasting my time, helping her plan a surprise for some asshole who's looking to beat my head in."

"Surprise?" Astonished, Alex remained wary. "What sort of surprise?"

"Would kind of defeat the definition if I told you."

"I'll act surprised as hell but I hate a bloody surprise more than I hate you hanging about. Best tell me what's going on while I'm inclined to listen."

That Sam weighed his choice of evils was evident. "Oh what the fuck do I care," he muttered at last. "I tracked your brother down. Helena thinks you're homesick or some shit. We thought if you saw him, it might help."

"My brother," Alex echoed, "you mean Aaron?"

"Have you got another brother floating around?" Sam testily examined his watch. "He's getting off the plane right about now."

Panic welled. "Aaron's *here*? Where's Helena?"

"With Joan, picking him up. You better act surprised at the party or I'm in—"

"Party?" All the blood boiling in his brain evacuated to his feet. "Shit."

Sam's brow creased. "Bad idea?"

"Far worse than bad." Hopefully Sam heard the words that tasted too thin, since repeating himself was not an option.

"Aaron's—we're..."



The stutter sagged along with his knees. Alex sat down hard in the dirt. Fear searing his esophagus, he reached for Aidan, knowing full well his familiar voice of reason would be absent.

Antagonism and amusement gone, worried blue eyes hunkered down, peering at him in confusion. "What is it, bad blood? Christ, man, you're white as a ghost."

\* \* \* \*

Companionably perched on the uncomfortable seats at Harrisburg International, Joan said, "Can I tell you I'm sorry again?"

"Sure," Helena replied, "I'll let you know when to stop."

"On my ninetieth birthday?"

Helena patted her knee. "Unless I do something just as stupid before then."

"Thanks so much." No one pouted more prettily than Joan. "When I think of all the crap I've let you get away with."

"Put a sweat sock in it," she said without an ounce of rancor. "Big mouth or no, to badly quote Nancy Drew, we're chums for life."

Joan had been quick to apologize for telling Alex stories out of school. Helena just as quickly found herself thankful everything dark had been backlit.

Passengers emerged from the turnstile en masse and she leapt up. "Here they come! I hope we recognize him. He told Sam to look for a red carry-on."

"Calm down." Joan patted her shoulder. "You told me that fifty times already."

"Have I?"

"You have."

"Sorry, I'm just—"

"Wound up, I know."

Helena eagerly scanned every face and bag, her stomach doing happy cartwheels. Alex would be so surprised! Not to mention, she suspected he dragged around a mountain of family baggage and a visit with his nomadic brother may unpack some of it. The least she could do after his assistance with her own stuffed suitcase.

Excitement climbed another notch in her throat. Blocked by the crowd, a thirtyish man slipped past. She craned her neck, hoping for a red bag.

"Wait! Is that—my God, Helena—over there."

"What? Is he a mutant or something?" She scanned her friend's white lips before following her stare.

Catching a flash of worn red canvas, she followed the bag to an arm, to a shaggy head of chestnut hair—which masked the guy's profile. "I can't see his face. Are you sure it's him?"

"Laney," Joan said carefully, "I think you better get ready for a surprise of your own."

Mounting anticipation obscured all meaning and Helena abruptly stepped to the side, straining for confirmation. He must be Aaron. He walked the same as Alex, had the same build, the same way of moving.

Finally, in one eternal second sitting beneath the world solely to pivot lives hanging in its balance, he turned and squarely met her eyes.

Shock didn't cover the stabbing pain expanding in her chest. She didn't know any words to describe what she felt. Empty might work. Gutted was better.

He raised an arm, returned Joan's wave.

Helplessly frozen, while the terminal faded into a surreal slide-show, Helena compared images of Alex with the man sauntering toward them—the man with a haunting, familiar, loose-hipped, long-legged grace. His hair much longer, his face not quite clean-shaven, it was Alex who approached, Alex who held out his hand, Alex who said, "Hallo, luv—you must be Helena. I'm Aaron Barnes."

Helena's mouth hung slack. She could feel it. There might even be a yarn of drool working its way toward her jacket, because she couldn't get her jaw to work, and above an aching, dry throat, tears gathering behind her eyes threatened to escape through her nose.

Joan shot her a flash-frown before mustering her meet-a-parent smile and shook Aaron's hand. "Hi, Aaron. I'm Joan, Laney's sister-in-law."

Quelling a renegade bout of maniacal laughter thankfully forced her jaw closed. Hoping no one could hear her glass heart shattering into a million glittering pebbles, she opened, closed, and opened her mouth—only to close it again. Suspecting she appeared a significantly weird and wholly mute fish, she cleared her still dry throat.

What the hell could she say?

The emptiness began to fill, a bitter red spray laced with capricious whimsy. "Hello."

That was easy. Maybe she should try 'how are you'.

Aaron chuckled, teased her with Alex's hazel eyes—no, not Alex's eyes at all. She didn't have to look very hard to tell either. She stifled a giggle—no longer the hysterical variety, thank God.

Tilting his head up where Alex would have tilted his head down, Aaron touched her shoulder with genuine concern. "Are you all right, luv? I'd forgotten this type of reaction. Knowing is never the same as seeing. Throws a body all off whack, yeah?"

She nodded adamantly. Only Aaron's eyes, through-and-through. Not a hint of his brother's, senseless as that should be.

"Alex never mentioned you're twins," her dear, dear friend explained.

Helena nodded again, so grateful Joan took the reins, she wanted to kiss her.

"He wouldn't," Aaron looked the tiny woman over appreciatively, "since we're not."

Almost losing complete track of her tongue, Helena caught hold of the wily muscle, insisting it make itself useful. "You look like twins. Identical twins."

"An easy mistake," he said with a winning, entirely unAlex twist of his lips. "In actuality, we're two-thirds of identical triplets."

"Wow," Joan exclaimed, "that's so rare, it's almost nonexistent. My brothers were identical twins. I've done some research."

"Now that's interesting. I hope you'll introduce me, yeah? But you're absolutely correct, luv, we Barnes lads are a rare

breed, a rare breed indeed." Spying his suitcase, hauled it from the luggage track, shouting over his shoulder, "Where is One, might I ask? Two's not said a word all day, other than to point you out."

Transfixed, Helena continued to catalog the differences. Dozens of obvious ones. Many more than Jared and Sam ever housed.

She tried to hang onto her anger, but discovered some of the shattered panes of her heart were evidently spun from sugar. Some edges wounded, yes. Amazingly enough, some simply melted into nothing.

No wonder Alex didn't want to visit his mother. Bet Maddy Barnes proudly and prominently displayed photographs of her boys right inside the front door.

Suddenly grinning like an April fool, Helena scraped up some semblance of sanity and once Aaron had secured his luggage, she said, "I'm sorry, Aaron, one what?"

"Not what, who. Alex."

Joan examined him like an attractive science project. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"The wanker's not said a single word about us, has he?" They started across the terminal. "Suppose I shouldn't be surprised. One never did care for our accident of birth, and Da did his bloody best to beat Two out of us."

"Well now," Joan said, "that explains everything."

"No, no, my apologies." He smiled, placed his free hand in the small of Joan's back. "It's really quite simple. Alex is One, he was born first. Aidan, the silly bugger, came next, so Two.

And me, I'm Three." He winked. "Bottom of the food chain, I reckon."

Frantically trying to sort everything out, Helena spluttered, "Isn't Aidan dead?"

"Dead, never gone. We still hear him."

"I get it," Joan pounced on the revelation, "like twins communicate without talking."

"Precisely."

Joan threw her an uncertain glance and uttered, "Fuck me."

Aaron raised a playful brow. "Am I to assume that's some sort of invitation?"

Taking full charge, Joan pursed her lips with dainty disdain. "Not for married men. Which Club Alex says you're a card-carrying member of."

"Ha! Shows you what he knows. The wife left me six months ago, she did."

"What, did you run her off?"

"Not at all. Lady Luck simply knew I'd meet you."

"Oh you're a regular charmer."

"You don't know the half of it, luv, not the half of it."

Relieved that Joan chattered and flirted with Aaron as if nothing were amiss, Helena ignored the repeated looks her friend sent.

But when Aaron begged leave to use the restroom, Joan herded her into an unoccupied corner. "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm—shocked as shit." The numbness starting to wear off, her feet and hands tingled.

"I know! But is it too weird? Will you be okay?"

"I'm going to jail."

Joan's frown deepened. "What?"

"I'm going to kill Alex," she said with a mixture of adamancy and barely concealed hilarity. She didn't know if she should be mad as a wet cat or cackle like a critic at a Broadway flop. Did Alex's secret matter? Did it really impact their relationship? She searched for a crater that should be threatening her balance, yet found only indecisive cracks.

Jesus Christ on a broken crutch. Just what the hell was she going to do? A lie is a lie and she should toss Alex out on his ass. But he owned her heart, and if the end of breathing came tomorrow, would she rue that choice?

Indecision yet again. Fucking ever-present, always-horrifying indecision.

Joanie thankfully understood. "I can see why you might want to kill him, but at least it explains why Alex is always talking to himself."

"He could have told me, Joan. He should have told me. I'm really, really pissed that he didn't." She couldn't banish a picture of Jared's face before he left her sight forever, so clueless about why his little lies equaled too much.

"C'mon," Joan urged, reasonable as always when a cool head needed to prevail, "it's not that difficult to figure out why he didn't."

"No," she agreed, "it's not."

"Seriously, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know, Joanie," she said miserably, "I just don't know."

## Chapter 38—Closed Doors

Alex arrived home to find their chain-locked door thrumming under Iron Butterfly's heavy bass.

"Give it a good bang," Sam said, "Ronnie's decorating."

He banged all right. He pounded the shite out of the door until the chain rattled on the other side. When it swung open, he faced Leo.

"Dude," his old roomie said, "you're not supposed to be here."

"Let me in, mate."

"I don't think—"

"Get out of the bloody way!" Unceremoniously giving Leo a shove, Alex charged past and looked wildly around. No sign of Helena—or Aaron.

"Hey Leo," Sam said behind him.

"Sam. What's with him?"

Alex punched the CD player into silence and Ronnie appeared from the kitchen.

"Alex?" She turned a glare on Sam. "You were supposed to keep him busy till seven."

"I know. Is Laney back yet?"

"Joan just called, they're on the way."

"Seems there's a problem."

"Yes," Alex paced, "there most certainly is."

Sam grabbed his shoulder, held him still. "This might not be the tearful reunion Helena imagined."



Scowling at the party steamers, wanting to rip them from the ceiling, Alex snarled at no one in particular. "I'm sure it won't be."

"Problem?" Leo asked, followed by a dawning expulsion, "Oh! Holy crap, Alex, you didn't tell her?" He shook his head at Sam. "I told him she would find out."

Sam and Ronnie asked in unison, "Find out what?"

He had hoped to save explanations for Helena—the least he could do was confess his perfidy to her first—but for certain everyone would know what was what just as soon as Aaron arrived.

"I'm a triplet," he announced. Receiving no immediate response, he repeated with acrimonious precision, "An identical triplet."

Ronnie laughed nervously. "Please say you're kidding."

The grip on Alex's shoulder increased. Practiced neutrality forgotten, Sam repeated dully, "Identical?"

"Three peas in a pod, I'm afraid."

The lone Madison twin spluttered a laugh that sounded more like distress. "Seriously?"

Leo said, "I've seen pictures. They are—or were."

Hot, cold, then back to hot, Alex silently berated himself. He refused to listen to Aidan's good sense and now he would lose the only woman he wanted. He found his Medici Aphrodite as surely as he breathed oxygen and what did he do? Avoided truth, avoided honesty, and neatly fixed it to receive only what he once wished for, and nothing more:

He held the mystery of Helena long enough to know the precious realization of his dreams. And then, through fear and

stupidity, he threw away any chance to hold her until death did them part.

Door still yawning, voices from downstairs announced his downfall's arrival. "Please Sam," he petitioned without hope, "let her fall, mate. I'll pick her up, I swear, but you have to let her fall first."

With an abrupt nod, Sam released him to his fate.

Even braced for a blast, Alex couldn't deny elation when his brother entered the flat. Sweet Jesus, such a sight for sore eyes, he wanted to weep. "Aaron!"

Evidence a gypsy life did nothing to dampen Three's particular brand of humor, he replied, "Is that a fact, One? The way these lovely lasses tell it, I'm a huge secret."

"Nah, mate, not a secret, really. More a carefully guarded one. Can't have you stealing my girls as you're known to do."

"Still holding me responsible for Nan, eh? The school beauty," he explained to Joan, "who preferred me to our love-sick One."

Excruciatingly aware of Helena, Alex searched for courage. On the brink of meeting her eyes, Aaron pounced on him. "Give us a hug, you silly bugger, it's been far too long."

Concentrating on his sibling, Alex allowed himself a few minutes of joy. Initial panic abating, he tried to believe everything would get sorted. Helena wasn't a shallow trinket. She may be angry but she would understand.

Though while he introduced Aaron to the others, a furtive glance at the love of his life sent Alex's heart plummeting. No, perhaps not. Perhaps he had well and truly arse-fucked himself beyond repair.

"'Tis grand you're here, Three," he said finally. "I need to talk to Helena for a tic—reckon you can make yourself to home?"

Ball already moving, Alex didn't pause for an answer but motioned toward the bedroom. "Sweeting? Can I see you privately?"

Cat-eyes at total odds with it, Helena's smile turned his stones into icebergs. "Sure thing, boy-o." To the rest, she said, "You'll pardon us?"

Amid the chorus of consent, she pointedly raised her brows at Sam.

Blatantly ignoring her, Sam offered Alex a bare smile before turning away, promptly launching into artist-speak with Aaron.

Alex didn't miss the disappointment Helena fired at Sam's back. Yet the bloke's cooperation created a ray of hope.

All the same, in light of her grim glare as they headed for the bedroom, he was right surprised she didn't grab him by the ear and haul him along like an unruly pupil.

\* \* \* \*

Carefully closing their bedroom door, Helena crossed her arms and leaned against it. "I'm guessing this is what the chat on your birthday game is all about."

"Yes." Alex found her stance even less encouraging than her suspicious eyes. Where should he begin? "Helena, you know how much I love you, sweeting—"

"Shut up. Don't *even* try to sweet-talk me. You've lied from the very beginning."

"You have every right to be pissed but I never lied, only avoided the truth. That," he hedged at the last, "is not actually lying."

With a deeper frown, she strode to the window, pre-empting any divination, and said nothing.

Nowhere to run or hide, he discarded all cautious rehearsal and plunged in with naked honesty. "Would you have agreed to see me again if you knew? It wasn't a secret at first. It likely would've come up within a few days. Then you said if you ever got involved with a twin, someone should shoot you in the head. I thought it prudent to wait a bit after that."

"What I remember," she addressed the view, not him, "is me directly asking if you were a twin and you saying no."

"Because I'm not. And it didn't seem appropriate to explain on the spot, what with Sam destroying Windspray."

When she turned around, Alex thought he detected a wisp of assent. "Perhaps. Yet you've had ample opportunity since and not a word."

"Every time I worked up to it, something else about the Madison twins would come along and..." Fear brewed indignation. Either she could accept his triplet status or she could not. Nothing would change it, no matter how much either of them wished it could be changed. He was not Jared. He was not Sam. He was not a man who willingly shared, manipulated or deceived the woman he loved.

"And what? Aidan told you to keep your mouth shut?"

A surprise she could only learn from one source. Fear and relief warred in his chest. "Aaron said about Aidan, did he?"

"He did. No wonder you don't miss Aaron. You talk whenever you want to—making me an even bigger fool."

"No, we can't. Not since Two died. Cut Three and I off like scythed wheat."

"You and Aaron can't twin talk at all?" Her frown hinted at empathy.

"We never called it that. And as I said, no, not since. Aidan's our ... conduit, I reckon. It's rather difficult to explain."

The knot from the depths of Hell torturing Alex's stomach began to fray. Angry, yes, as she most certainly had every right to be. Yet not raging, crying, or demanding he pack his bloody belongings and get out. Normally, he would rely on Aidan's clarity for insight, but either Three preoccupied him at the moment, else his brother decided against watching him take his medicine without a shred of sugar.

"And is Aid—I mean Two," Helena corrected herself, "always with both of you?"

"Only one or the other."

"Can you turn him off or are you stuck when he shows up?"

Very near to grabbing her, insisting she say she loved him, Alex blinked. "Sorry? Beg yours?"

"Is he there when you're balling me?"

If he meant to thrash things out, nothing short of truth could be uttered, or he may as well say good-bye forever. "Sometimes. Lately he only shows up long enough to kick my arse for keeping you in the dark. He's insisted I explain him

from the beginning. He thinks you're absolutely lovely and I'm a blooming wanker."

"Thank you, Aidan," she said to the ceiling, "we agree on something." To Alex, she said, "And thank you, for not telling me just how many men I've been sleeping with."

Balls shrunken almonds of fear, hope, frustration, Alex balanced on the edge of lost calm, grabbing at anger in defense. He had accepted her past—a past she had a hand in creating. He had no choice about his. To make him pay yet another price for things he couldn't control rankled.

In fine form, Aidan chose that moment to show up. *I do so like her*, he sighed dreamily. *I dare say she's playing with you, mate. You deserve every second she keeps you guessing. Though I will say, if she's not playing, you deserve that just as well.*

Obviously paying closer attention to his pauses, Helena leaned forward. "Is he talking to you now?"

"Yes. Says if you dump me, I deserve it."

"Does he?" Her laugh seemed genuine. "What do you think?"

Withering under a two-pronged assault, he sighed. "I reckon he's right. He usually is. Look, sweetie, there is nothing I can do to make this go away. Either you can accept I have a double or ... you can't." Upon discovering his backbone hadn't melted despite being bathed in dread, he went on, "Do give me what for as much as you need, or as much as I deserve, but don't torture me. If we're to be completely honest, you must understand why I avoided the subject."

"Before I decide," she unfolded her arms, "are there any other skeletons rattling around the Barnes' closets I should know about?"

"I don't believe so."

"You're sure now? Nothing whatsoever unsavory?"

"Perhaps several boyhood experiences that left a taint."

"Do they concern drugs, terrorism, illegitimate babies, mistresses, homosexual affairs, cross-dressing, or a sex change?"

Difficult to discern whether she concealed hurt or amusement. "Definitely not. Though my teens were difficult. Da crawled into a bottle after Two died, and when he found out Three and I talk to him, went out of his way to make us deny it as fabrication."

"Aaron said he beat you."

"Me less than Three." He shrugged. "Eventually it was easier to pretend I didn't hear Two than take the strap."

"That's why Aaron ran away. And you stuck it out for your mom's sake."

Not a question, he answered it anyway. "She needed someone."

Helena's thumb traced her lips. Alex held her scrutiny. She searched for any speck of a lie and he knew it.

"I believe you." She collapsed onto the edge of bed as if her legs had given way. "Still, let's deal with us first, shall we?"

He couldn't stand the space between them another second. Dropping his knees, Alex hugged her thighs as if his life depended on it—which may well be stark truth. "I love you

more than I've ever loved anyone, Helena." Afraid he may blubber, he blurted out his deepest wound. "I know I'm not the love of your life. I know that privilege belongs to Sam. I'm willing to accept that. I only ask that you try to accept my history, as well. If you can't or don't want to, then that's—"

"Alex, stop." Her hands in his hair poured alarmed down his spine. "I don't have enough words to tell you how much that disturbs me."

His history disturbed her, or his love? Alex's heart hit his feet with a thump and he ventured, "What more can I do than accept it?"

"Let me tell you a secret."

Unable to bite it back, he groaned. Another cruel confidence. Lies only begat more lies, and that's all there is to it.

Helena slid onto the floor, pulled his arm around her shoulders. "You," she whispered, "*are* the love of my life, you silly twat."

Stunned, he parroted, "I am?"

"That you are. Jared and Sammy only prepared me for loving you—and Aidan and Aaron," she added with a grin. "What I feel when I look in your eyes is so strong, it has to be the most important thing I will ever feel." Squeezing his knee, she finished, "You cherish me with infinite skill, Mr. Barnes. I can't walk away from that over a test of fate."

An odd calm settled into his skull, a calm that cleansed him of guilt and uncertainty. Their new covenant required a tease. "Am I skillful lover, as well?"



"Did I, or did I not, say I was wrong about never giving such enthusiastic head again? Guess I need to be clearer: For the record, you insecure bastard, sex with you is damn near perfect. You invade my mind in even more pleasurable ways than you invade my body. And I'll go up on the roof right now and shout my love of all your invasions to the world, if that's what it takes to convince you."

Laughter from the living room bled through the closed door. "Just what that lot needs, you screaming my exploits from the rooftops. I dare say they would torment me until I'm too old to hear them."

"Seriously. Jared was self-centered, Sam all by the book. What we do seems natural. An exuberant desire to please is what it's about. Besides," she nudged him, "neither one was ever comfortable talking dirty for me."

Helena's earnestness ushered back his faith with full authority, banishing his last fear into the over-stuffed psyche closet it seemed every human houses—though he reckoned this time the bolt's thud had a resounding quality.

"Cheers, sweeting. Many thanks for saying."

"The pleasure is all mine."

"Impossible. You please me in ways I never dreamed possible."

"You keep dreaming, we'll wear each other out. On that note, are you ready for my last secret?"

"God help me. Not another one."

"A brand new one. Just acquired it today."

"Reckon I have no choice—what?"

"I don't find Aaron particularly attractive."

"Does that mean you love me, but aren't too fond of how I look?"

"Don't get me wrong, he's pretty easy on the eyes. But I couldn't live without seeing your comparatively ugly mug every morning. The rest," she continued in the sing-song reserved for taunting him, "is just perks, and," a suggestive hand ran up his thigh, cupped his ready-to-party wedding tackle, "the icing on my favorite cake."

"Perhaps you have something that requires a bit of icing before we join the mob?"

"There you go, reading my mind." Promptly climbing to her feet, she began to unbutton the blouse that matched her eyes. "Happy Birthday, Alex. May all your dreams come true."

Joy beyond measure offered by the feminine deity well and truly his, Alex suspected his heart may actually pound a hole in his chest. "They already have—except for the one where you're naked."

Laughter her only answer, she slowly peeled back the green silk, revealing a vivid purple bra.

Alex laughed as well. No possible way he couldn't. The tasty piece of fluff wasn't the same functional one he had been desperate to admire when they met, but a skimpier, lacier affair designed more for his cock than her support.

She dropped her eyes to mounds threatening to spill over. Cupping her breasts, she stroked erect nipples jutting through the lace. "Do you like it?"

"It's—" His voice broke, remembering the first time he entered her, how powerful she made him feel—how powerful she always made him feel. "Quite a lot."

"The panties match."

Solidifying penis nodding vigorous agreement, he said hoarsely, "Show me."

Lowering her jeans, bending over for full effect, the scrap-like tanga pants slid into view, along with soft tufts of pubic hair. He wanted to have a right good wank while he watched her. Knowing Helena, probably precisely what she expected. He even got as far as unbuttoning his jeans before a burst of laughter outside their private realm gave him pause.

Helena snickered. "Don't worry about them. Not a one is brave enough to knock for at least an hour."

Under a charge of eroticism supplied by an unknowing audience, Alex stripped off his t-shirt and patted his abdomen, where the hair rose in sympathy with his cock—trapped and feeling quite ignored.

Leaning against the door, she fluffed her hair and posed. "Do you like the ensemble better?"

Licking his lips, he tilted his head as if he couldn't decide. Meanwhile, he dropped his zip. Exposing the scant inches of groin resulted in Helena having a turn at licking her lips.

Low, rumbling, he chuckled as chocolaty as he could. They, as usual, fueled each other. She knew bloody well he whacked off to women in lingerie—the Victoria's Secret catalog bore his name, not hers. As for Helena, she liked nothing better than to watch him do it. Directly over her face if possible.

He threw back his head and laughed with pure, unburdened delight.

"Shh," she hissed, "if they think we've made up, they'll drag us into the fray."

"Not if I can help it, they won't." He laughed again.

"So do you like my new outfit or not?"

"It's perfect."

"Then you better get over here and do me proper, boy-o."

"What about here?" He patted the bed.

"Oh no. An occasion such as this, I want to do it right here." She caressed the door at her back.

He eyed the barrier skeptically. "Are you certain? Reckon we'll make quite a bit of noise."

"They won't hear a thing. Besides, the door opens in."

Another entry for the unending list of reasons he loved her. She divined with uncanny surety how to craft their sexual tension. And to think they would do it for years, for decades!

Helena widened her stance, ran hands gracefully over hips. "Come on, Alex. These panties are so thin I won't even have to take them off."

The conjured image of pulling the scrap aside and spearing her stirred coals in his stomach, the heat spreading into the taut sac between his thighs to shoot sparks of lust through the length of his prick. With a growl of erotic purpose, he crossed the room in two strides, drawing her against the still covered throb. "Now that is tempting." Grinding most pleasurably into her, he nuzzled the creamy expanse of her neck. An intended playful purr rumbled darker from a want-tightened chest. "Best let me think on it a bit, if you don't mind over much."

"Look." Helena's chin pointed to the dressing table.

The ornate mirror provided an excellent view of their embrace. Helena's eyes half-closed over brilliant green desire and, smoldering with need, his didn't look any more serene.

Attention repeatedly diverted to the mirror, Alex nibbled back to her ear, admiring the sensual portrait they created. Angular, furred male entwined with rounded, smooth female, Helena's soft shoulders swelled above his arms, banded with carved, flexed muscle when he clasped her tighter.

Nature's finest artistry, complimentary halves, yin-yang at its zenith. He wished for a camera to capture the sublime moment. Though the picture could be improved if he were naked and not half-dressed—a condition Alex hastily remedied.

Helena kissed his shoulder and he returned to worshipping her neck, kneading her lace imprisoned bum. Eventually pressing rhythmically into the cushion of her abdomen, his lips moved along her collarbone to shoulder, and back again. Only when Helena gasped her pleasure did he seek her mouth, sucking her bottom lip hard, making her moan again. In return, her tongue danced over his lips, traced their outline in delicious detail before plunging into his mouth—where her giggles tickled his lips during a minor skirmish over who would suck whose tongue.

Though it all, he continued to tease with his voice as well as his hands, tossing out everything and anything sexual that came to mind. Equipped with new confidence in his willingness to indulge Helena's aural kink, he wouldn't abandon the ritual.

As delicious as their foreplay tasted, it wasn't long before pure want of being in her—the aching need to indelibly join their bodies and minds—made him hastily push aside the lacy barrier, bend his knees and slip inside without hesitation.

A starving animal welcoming invasion, she cried out, legs clinging to his hips when he lifted her, bore her against the door. The slick, wet heat of her increased his pleasure-pulse, quickened muscles in familiar succession—cock and balls, stomach and arse, thighs and chest, calves and shoulders. The sensations radiating from their point of union turned him into simple raw sinew and tendons, blood and bone, primal male striving for immortality via female, and coagulated into a groaning grunt produced by lungs that had forgotten to draw fresh air.

Neck and shoulders taut and corded with concentration, Helena aloft through hips and cock alone, he remained motionless. Doing his best not to give over, not to plunge in and out with ferocious intent, he tangled his hands in her hair, pressed her harder into the door.

Wriggling, moaning, perched upon his staff like a standard declaring their oneness, Helena quietly begged for more. On the verge of commencing a savagely sweet soldering, a voice on the other side of the door rudely interrupted.

"I'll just check," Joan said quite clearly, her determined rap reverberating through them.

"Shit," Alex strangled, trying not to laugh.

He began to ease away, but Helena choked, "Somebody will stop her."

And so they did. "What do you think you're doing, Little Sister?" Sam's demand came from further away. "Get your ass away from there or you'll be sorry."

The coast appearing clear, Alex grinned into Helena's eyes and bestowed an unexpected thrust. The flat mobbed with company or not, discovery of their play impending or not, he remained solid as obsidian.

"Where's Aaron?" Sam's voice joined his sister's objections at the door. "Aaron! Hey man, can't you lure Miss Nosy into the kitchen?"

"To hell with them," Alex muttered. Accompanied by the party's roar of lewd agreement with Sam, he grasped Helena's waist in hard hands and began to move.

Her curtailed cries filled him with urgency, an urgency exacerbated when Joan ignored her brother, knocking long and loud, each thud echoing his rapid heartbeat.

Aaron arrived next, trying to entice Joan from the door.

Pausing, solidly joined with his—and only his—woman, Alex murmured, "I do believe they're on to us. Reckon we should settle for a quickie before she tries the knob?"

"Give him a minute and she'll be more concerned with a different knob."

"Don't make me laugh. They'll hear us for certain."

"Screw 'em. They'll just have to—" A groan ended her teasing as he bestowed a double-jab. "God, Alex!"

Renewing his mission, he snarled fudge-thick, "Come for me, sweeting."

"Not this way." With no further explanation, she rudely dislodged his claim. "On your back, boy-o."

A blowing bronco, he gasped, "What about the bloody door?"

Seductive as ever, she said, "I locked it as soon as we set foot in here."

"You're a terrible, evil, naughty girl."

"Like you'd have it any other way. Now on your back, Birthday Boy. I intend to ride you like the horse you stole that dick from."

Nothing gave him the same sort of jolt as when she endowed him with larger than life prowess, no matter how far off the track of reality. No argument. No more playing. Alex stalked to the bed and flopped in the center, stiff organ beckoning her to finish him however she pleased.

Time not to be wasted, she straddled his hips and, once again peeling the vivid lace aside, impaled herself to the hilt. Alex groaned, long and loud, caressing her breasts, peeling away their purple prison.

Engulfed in her tight confines, tremors of her control milked his length, his cock the twitching, yearning, needy center of his universe. Just about to roll her off, take his pleasure because his patience wouldn't wait any longer, Helena stretched tall and proud and commenced her ride.

A sight to behold, his Helena. No sculpture, no painting, not even a photograph could hope to capture the powerful essence he saw—a power that arose in answer to his own. All that was woman, all that was sex, all he needed or wanted. His Helen of Troy, she was through-and-through, beginning-to-end, all he would ever love, and like Paris, he would burn



cities to the ground, even grind the rubble to dust, in her name.

Helena's eyes caressed his face as she moved in perfect rhythm, every upslide threatening to unseat him but never failing to recapture every inch of her exquisite prisoner. He held her hips tightly, pushed into his haven, grunted each time she resheathed his rod.

"God I love your cock in me—come with me, Alex, come with me..."

How could he deny her? How could he deny himself? Under a strangled growl he heaved upward, imbedded in the deepest heart of her—and when she came, he did as well, in a rolling rush of ecstasy, the infinite scope seared into his soul by green-gold eyes that would own him far beyond death.

Afterward, lying in their locked-door oasis, lamp-lit skin softer in a cocoon of sex-wrung moisture, Alex's heart slowed to a sleepy beat. A visit with Aaron long overdue or not, he would be content to spend the rest of the night stroking Helena's stomach while her fingers trailed through his damp hair—but an orgasmic bout of laughter from the living room brought a reluctant sigh from his partner.

"As much as I'd rather keep hiding, I guess we need to get out there."

"Why?" he asked half into the pillow. "Sounds as though they're managing without us. I suggest we stay put—at least until Joan gets away from Three and starts pounding on the door again."

Helena laughed but immediately sobered. "By the way, what did you say to Sam? He ignored me—and I saw that smile."

"Nothing, really. I simply told him I'd send him to hospital if he didn't let you go."

She poked him in the ribs.

"Sorry," he said, though his grin held no apology.

"Seriously."

He kissed her shoulder. "I told him I'd catch you if you fall. Always."

"That does it. I insist you make love to me again, right now."

"Now we're getting dangerous. We've been in here well over an hour."

"Do you think they mind?"

"I only mention it because they won't leave until we make them leave. And I've been giving some thought to using the kitchen table, which would be a bit awkward with a crowd hanging about—and now that I think on it, quite impossible anyway, what with Aaron here."

"Right full of yourself, aren't you? You know what? I actually don't give a rat's ass if they do mind. That's my first formal, make-a-damn-choice when I'm undecided decision."

"And a brilliant choice you've made," he said. "Suppose now is when I should re-visit the buying a farm issue?"

"Don't press your luck—first things first. What say we hit the shower? No way they can pound loud enough to reach us through two doors."

\* \* \* \*

When they emerged from the bathroom, water-wrinkled and unrepentant, silence reigned. Helena only noticed the note that had been slipped under the door when it stuck to the bottom of her damp foot.

Written in many hands, it testified that their friends were not annoyed but so entertained, they would probably bring it up at every party in perpetuity. Ronnie made everyone clean up. Nat and Curtie did the dishes. Joan fed the cat. Stan locked the doors and windows. Sam took Aaron to his house, where, Aaron suggested, One could retrieve him after morning light in the studio ceased to be favorable.

Reading over her shoulder, Alex said, "Reckon I get my birthday bang on the table after all."

Wondering if it was possible to make love comatose, she groaned. "I don't know if I can stand another round—literally."

"No worries," he patted her behind, "most likely I can't put my meat where my mouth is."

"That's too bad. I'd still love to see you try. They say auto-fellatio is one of the—"

He tugged her toward the kitchen. "No more contortions tonight. A snack and a snuggle sound a superior end to the best birthday I'll ever have."

Within the hour, they were ensconced in bed amid containers of party leftovers, the television humming a lullaby. Stroking Alex's sleepy brow as they talked about the little things that mean everything to lovers, Helena

Rock Paper Scissors  
*by Deborah Boyer*

recognized that exhausted or not, her tireless brain would keep her awake until dawn.

As her mother liked to say, there's plenty of time to sleep when you're dead. Once a curse, insomnia's spell had turned inside out. Wakefulness would be a blessing now, because when her final seconds came to call, there would be no remorse, no guilt, no if onlys left to greet her last gasp—only thanks for the time she spent holding the man whose legs tangled with hers—a man whose heartbeat echoed the summer surf, and washed her regrets out to sea.

## About Deborah Boyer

Deborah began writing to entertain at 14, when a teacher suggested submission of a humorous essay to the school paper. Entitled "Make-Up Madness", and targeting such travesties as that '70's standard, blue eyeshadow, it earned her a regular column.

Twenty-three years later, encouraged by her husband to follow her heart and not the size of their bank account, in 1999 she left her legal assistant position to devote full attention to the voices in her head. Although rusty creative muscles complained, she pounded out a truly terrible short story and from that moment on, has never looked back.

In 2000, she began work on her first novel and is currently in the throes of her fifth. These days, while she spends longer hours writing than she ever did working for lawyers, she relishes life's every second in Central Pennsylvania.

Visit her website for more about Deb.

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