

J.P. Bowie

A SELF-PORTRAIT

Also by J.P. Bowie

A Portrait of Phillip

A Portrait of Emily

A Portrait of Andrew

A SELF-PORTRAIT



A Novel By J.P. Bowie

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A Self-Portrait

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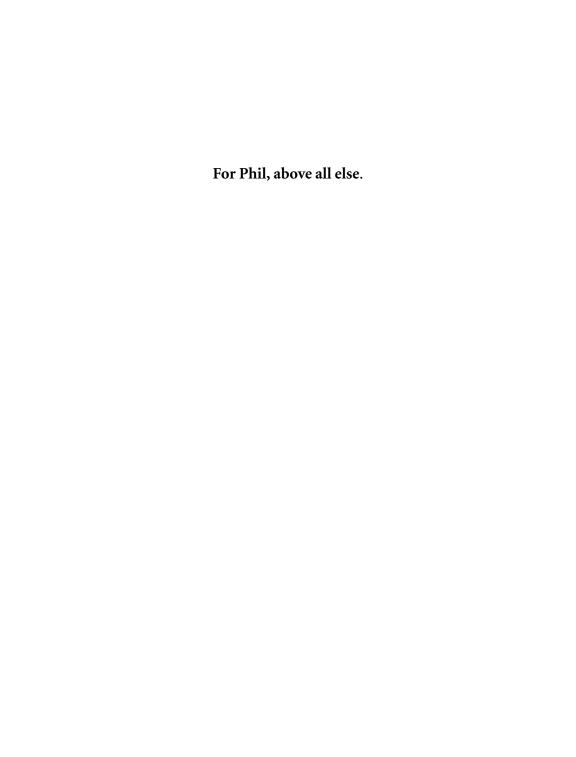
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Prologue



Laguna Beach, Ca.

.... It all started on the day Jeff told me he was meeting with his LAPD buddy, Detective Joe French. Jeff and Joe had been on the force together and had remained friends after Jeff had quit to set up his own private agency—Stevens' Investigations. Joe had actually been extremely helpful on a couple of Jeff's cases. In fact, if it had not been for him, I would have probably been dead meat not long after Jeff and I had met...but that's another story.

Anyway, when Jeff told me he was going up to LA to have lunch with Joe, I wasn't thrilled. Not that I minded Jeff going off on his own. It was his business after all and I trust him implicitly.

Besides, Joe is straight.

No, it was just that when he was about to leave, I had a sudden feeling of apprehension. He must have seen the look on my face because he was very quick to ask me if something was wrong.

"I don't know," I told him. "I just had one of my funny feelings."

Over the years we've been together, Jeff has come to respect those 'funny feelings' of mine. Ever since I awoke from the coma that had kept me in la-la land for three years, I've been subject to these strange turns whenever I feel someone close to me is in danger. Sometimes, it's a nasty nauseous sensation and other times it's like an electrical charge making my skin prickle with an eerie feeling of anticipation.

Actually, I found myself thinking, it could be that I'd been feeling just a little out of sorts ever since we'd come back from visiting Jeff's mother in Arizona. The dry desert air and intense heat had brought out all kinds of allergies I didn't know I had till then. That, and the fact that Jeff's mom was not the easiest person in the world to get along with, had made it a kind of tense visit.

It was the first time I'd met her and it was obvious from the get-go that she was just not about to admit to herself the kind of relationship I had with her son. We played it very low key and although it was a strain for me to keep my hands off Jeff the entire time we were there—a whole week, for gosh sakes!—I behaved myself impeccably. Mrs. Stevens and I (I never got comfortable enough with her to call her by her first name, Rose) got along OK—she was quite sweet really. She just seemed so out of touch with her son's life and it bothered me to see my usually, so "take charge" man, be at a loss around his mother.

Now, he stood in front of me, head cocked a little to one side, a questioning smile on his lips and looking better than any man had a right to. Wearing a snow-white polo shirt that accentuated his tan, that oftenerrant lock of wavy chestnut hair falling over his brow and with his smoky gray eyes gazing into mine, he was, in my opinion, the epitome of masculine beauty. Okay, I'm biased, but there it is.

"You wouldn't be kidding me with this, would you?" he asked.

I wanted to wrestle him to the ground and ravish him on the spot. As if I could—he's got a good twenty pounds of solid muscle on me. I controlled myself enough to reply somewhat shakily, "No of course not...but it might be nothing at all. Just please be careful driving up there. You know there's a bunch of madmen on the freeways everyday."

He chuckled and held me tight against him. "Don't worry kiddo," he murmured in my ear, sending delicious shivers through me. "I'll be back before you know it."

"Don't forget..." I said, "...Andrew and David are coming over tonight for dinner."

"Right. What time?"

"I told them around seven."

"Fine. I'll call you when I'm on my way back." He kissed me tenderly. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

I clung to him for a moment longer before reluctantly letting him go. I watched as he ran down the steps from the front door to the driveway below where his car was parked. Before he pulled out, he smiled at me and waved and I was suddenly on the verge of running to stop him from leaving.

"Jeff!" I called out, but he did not hear me as his car sped to the corner and was gone.

Pull yourself together...I told myself as I went back into the house...Jeff can look after himself. He'd certainly proven that several times over in the past. The phone was ringing and I hurried to answer it.

"Miss me?"

I laughed in spite of myself, feeling relief at the sound of his deep warm voice.

"Yes, come on back."

"No can do. You feeling better?"

"Yes," I lied. "Just be careful, please."

"Will do. See you later." He hung up and I walked into the living room, still carrying the phone. Dammit! I thought, why can't I shake this uneasy feeling?

Of course, there was no way of knowing then that the events that would take place over the next forty-eight hours would probably be the most bizarre of my life.

The phone, shrilling in my hand, made me jump.

"Hello?" My voice must have sounded a bit wobbly.

"Hi Peter, it's Emily. You sound funny. Are you OK?"

"Yeah, just some allergies, I think. How's it going over there?"

Our friends Emily and Jerry Lambert were having an addition built on their house, now that they were expecting their second baby.

"It's a mess. Actually, I was wondering if little Jerry and I could come over for a couple of hours, to get away from the dust and hammering."

"Good idea," I said, glad of the distraction their tiny son would create. At eighteen months, he was at the age of getting into everything and had to be watched all the time. Just what I needed to get my mind occupied with something else. "Come on over and I'll make us some lunch."

"See you in a few then."

I first met Emily when her cousin Gloria introduced us over two years before. I had been commissioned to paint Gloria's portrait as a birthday gift from her husband Johnny Pederson, attorney-at-law. Gloria insisted on throwing a big bash for the 'unveiling', as she called it, and Emily and Jerry were there too. They had just become engaged and Jerry asked me to paint Emily's portrait as an engagement present to her.

During the time we spent together I learned a lot about Emily and the ghastly childhood she'd endured—being sexually molested by her father. She'd been a prime suspect when her father was murdered and the details of his perversion laid bare to the police. It had been a horrendous ordeal for the whole family, including her brother Anthony, whom the police also suspected capable of murdering his father. Happily, it was all eventually cleared up, thanks to Jeff. Emily was finally able to put the past behind her and, with a loving Jerry by her side, find the happiness she had long deserved.

Now, as I waited for her and her lively son to arrive, I marveled at the changes in all our live brought by the passage of time. Life was infinitely better for all of us, and our extended family had grown considerably in the last few months. Andrew and David had returned from New York several months before and Rob and Maggie, Jeff and David's friends since high school, had returned from Seattle with their son, Robbie. They, along with Eve my mother, her boyfriend Fred and our dear English friends Rod and 'A', made quite a celebratory group when we all got together!

A knock at the kitchen door signaled Emily's arrival and any dark thoughts, still lurking in the back of my mind, were totally dissolved as a small bundle of high energy rushed in and wrapped its sturdy arms round my legs. "Jer, you little rascal," I laughed, picking up the gurgling dynamo and hugging him to me. He chortled with delight in my arms as I leaned over to kiss his mother's cheek. With her long, dark brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, Emily looked radiant as usual. Such a far cry from the demure and sad looking young lady I had first met two years before.

"He hates coming here, as you can tell," she chuckled, looking at the pair of us fondly. "Unca Pee and Jay, Unca Pee and Jay, that's all I heard when I told him we were coming over here."

"I'll be glad when he can at least say 'Pete'," I said wryly. "Being referred to as a bodily function isn't the most flattering thing in the world." I laughed as Jerry crooned "Unca Pee," in my ear. "Come on," I told him, "I've got a brand new toy for you to destroy with your usual dexterity." I carried him into the living room and showed him the new teddy bear Jeff and I had picked up a couple of days before.

"Oh, little Jerry will love that," I had yelled, when I spied it in the toy store.

"If he can get it away from you," Jeff had teased me. "You know how you love cuddly things."

"Yeah..." I'd leered at him. "But I like 'em big and cuddly."

"Peter," he'd remonstrated with me. "For heaven's sake, not in the middle of a toy store, please."

I smiled to myself as I remembered his mock-affronted expression, then a sharp pang of uneasiness pinched the back of my mind as I lowered Jerry to the floor so he could pounce on the unsuspecting teddy bear.

"You all right, Peter?" Emily was looking at me with concern. "You seem worried about something."

"I'm OK. Just one of those little apprehensive things I get now and then. I'm way too much of a worrywart at times."

"About what?"

"Oh, I don't know, exactly. Jeff went up to LA to see his friend Joe French, and I haven't been able to shake this stupid feeling all morning."

"Well, call him and put your mind at ease."

"I hate doing that. It makes me look like a demented mother hen."

"Call him. It'll make you feel better."

"You're right..." I reached for the phone. "I'll tell him it was your idea if he sounds pissed." I grinned at her as I punched in the numbers of Jeff's cell phone.

"Jeff Stevens."

"It's me."

"Hi, me."

Did I detect a sigh somewhere in there?

"Everything all right?"

"Uh, well yes. Except Joe has realized who this is calling me, and is rolling his eyes like I'm some poor hen-pecked soul who can't have lunch with his buddy without being stalked on the phone by a...."

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry! This was all Emily's idea."

"Huh...like I believe that. Tell Emily hello, and give that little devil a kiss from me, if he's there too."

"Oh, he's here, beating up on poor Teddy."

"Okay. Take it easy—and stop worrying. That's an order."

"Yes sir!" I could imagine Jeff shaking his head and looking apologetically at Joe, who I hoped in turn would tell him how marvelous it was to have someone care for him that much. Most likely though, Joe would just join in the shaking of the heads, and continue with whatever they had been talking about. I felt like a ninny, but at the same time I was relieved that all seemed well.

"Joe says 'Hi'. He just went to the men's room."

"How is he?" I asked.

"Good. He's been telling me about his latest case—you know, the Satanist cult that was threatening the Governor? I read you the report in the newspaper."

"Oh yeah, vaguely..."

"Anyway, he arrested some of the members—got 'em on drug charges. The judge wouldn't let the devil-worship connection stick first time around."

"Even though they threatened the Governor?"

"And the mayor of Los Angeles. Said they were going to sacrifice his daughter. They almost got her, too. Thanks to some tricky work from Joe's department the plan was foiled and most of the cult members rounded up."

"What jerks. I hope they're gone for a long time."

"They will be. Only thing is, the head honcho managed to disappear so Joe's hoping some of the guys he arrested will spill the beans when they find out the kind of sentences they're facing." I heard some muffled voices then Jeff said, "Here's Joe back, so I'll see you later, babe."

"Bye. Love you." I put the phone down and smiled at Emily. "He's fine."

"See? Now you feel better," she said with satisfaction as she knelt to rescue Teddy who was about to lose his left arm. "By the way, I talked to Anthony yesterday. He and Justin are buying a townhouse in Pasadena."

"My old hometown." I sat on the floor next to her. "Good for them."

"They seem very happy. Justin's been good for Anthony. Helped him get over that entire trauma with our parents." She paused and looked at me speculatively.

"What?"

"Oh, I was just thinking that what you and Jeff need...is a child."

"What?" I started to laugh. "You know that is biologically impossible, don't you? Or did they not mention that in class when you studied the birds and the bees?"

"Don't be facetious, Peter. I meant adopt of course."

"Oh that."

"Well, look how good you are with Jerry, and with Maggie's little one. They adore you and you love having them around."

"Yes, but then they go home and I don't have to deal with the fretting and the cleaning and the changing and the..."

"Stop. You'd manage just fine." She grinned at me while watching Jerry climb on me and put his head on my chest. "See? Case closed."

Gently, I stroked the little head that had snuggled against me and I had to admit it felt good to have someone so small and vulnerable have

so much trust in me. I looked at Emily and smiled sheepishly. "Maybe I'll get Jeff a puppy."

She grinned at me. "He already has one."

"How rude," I laughed, glancing down at my charge. "Your Mommy is picking on me, Jer. Go get her!" Jerry sighed deeply and fell asleep.

"No help there, I'm afraid." Emily stood up with some difficulty. "Where's this lunch you promised?" She patted her tummy. "There's someone in here getting hungry and grumpy."

"You don't look hungry—grumpy maybe," I said, standing up and handing the still sleeping Jerry to her. "Here, look after your offspring while I fix us lunch."

She followed me into the kitchen. "How's your mom?"

"Just fine—as always," I replied. I gave her a wary look. "And yours?" "I wouldn't know."

"Still?"

Emily grimaced. "She'll never change, and Jerry will never forgive her for her coldness toward her grandson. When she tore up the message we sent her regarding his christening and sent it back to us, I thought Jerry was going to come unglued. I'd never seen him so angry..."

"She's a piece of work all right," I muttered.

If I live to be a hundred, I will never understand a woman like Patricia Hastings, Emily's mother. For years she had ignored the sexual abuse her daughters had endured, perpetrated under her roof by her own husband, Charles. Instead, she chose to believe that her daughters were somehow to blame for their father's perversion. She had let them suffer his gross attentions rather than lose face in society. She had kept silent, and to me, that was as despicable as her husband's loathsome actions.

Now, all she had was an empty house. She had cut off all communication with her children. Even with her son Anthony, whom she had professed to love so dearly. Patricia had totally dismissed the idea that her husband's doctor friend—a man Charles Hastings had kept in thrall for his own purposes—had sodomized Anthony with his father's silent consent. She had even managed to ignore the fact that Anthony had almost been the victim again of sexual assault, and perhaps worse, at the hands

of a deranged killer. Patricia preferred to retreat into the nether-world of denial, and if it meant losing the affection of her children, she obviously considered it worth the cost.

"Sometimes I do feel sorry for her," Emily said, giving her son's forehead a gentle kiss. "When I think of what she's missing in her life—what she's always missed, really...But at the same time, it's hard to feel sympathy for someone so cold and unapproachable."

I nodded as I filled our plates with the pasta salad I'd prepared earlier. There wasn't a whole lot you could say in Patricia's defense. As far as I was concerned she was worthless as a mother. So different from mine, which once more gave me the occasion to count my lucky stars that I had been blessed with loving parents.

"Okay, let's eat." I said, leading the way to the kitchen table.

"How was the trip to see Jeff's mom?" she asked as we sat down.

"So-so. I'm glad we went, for Jeff's sake if nothing else. I think she'd rather he'd gone alone, though."

"You didn't get along?"

"We managed, but I think I made her a tad uncomfortable. It was our first meeting. Jeff had told her a lot about me..."

"Oh, oh..." Emily chuckled, teasing me.

"I mean about my painting, smarty!" I gave her the arched eyebrow look. "I think maybe, she was a bit intimidated. She's actually quite sweet, but very reserved."

"Does she know about you and Jeff?"

"Oh yeah, he's told her. But she's put that somewhere in the ozone layer of her mind so she doesn't have to think about it too much—if at all."

"That must have been awkward for you both."

"Uh huh. I felt like I was in no man's land most of the time."

"How did Jeff cope?" she asked.

"It was kinda hard on him. I left them alone a couple of times so they could talk, but she just doesn't really know how to open up. I think it comes from all those years of having a husband who just wasn't interested in anything she had to say. Apparently, he was a bit of an ogre and

left her alone a lot. They were not a close family. Jeff left home pretty early on. He's trying to bridge that gap now with her, but it's not easy."

"You think she's lonely out there in Arizona?"

I shook my head. "She's got friends there. Quite a social life, actually. I think we got in the way of a bridge party once or twice!"

"Well, that's something, I guess..." Emily's attention was becoming distracted by her son who, at that precise moment, was trying to wear his lunch on his head.

"Is that what you think of my culinary expertise, Jer?" I said, laughing at his antics. "Or are you just bored with all our grown-up talk?"

He gave me a big grin as his mother picked the pasta from his hair.

Later, after Emily and her little one left, I busied myself tidying the place up and getting ready for our dinner guests. As I picked up a pile of newspapers I noticed the article Jeff had mentioned on the phone. The one about Joe French busting up the Satanist cult. Feeling a bit guilty that I hadn't paid much attention as Jeff read it to me, I sat down to read it through properly. The part I found intriguing was that although the police had closed in on them very quickly, their leader had managed to 'mysteriously disappear'. According to reports not one of his followers could quite remember if he had actually been with them at the time of their arrest.

"Strange," I muttered, and felt a shiver run down my spine. I put the paper aside, meaning to discuss the report with Jeff when he got home. Something was rankling in my brain. Something I couldn't for the life of me understand. If anyone had told me at that moment that the man mentioned in the report and I were very soon to become adversaries, I would have laughed out loud.

My mom and Fred stopped by in the late afternoon just to say hello. They were going to the theater in town and having dinner beforehand.

"Jeff still at work?" Mom glanced at the new watch he had bought her at Christmas.

"No, he went up to LA to have lunch with Joe. He should be back soon." I had resisted the temptation to call him again. I really didn't want to piss him off altogether.

"Aren't you having Andrew and David over tonight?"

"Yeah. He'll get back in time to help—he always does."

"That traffic on the 5 is miserable this time of day," Fred remarked. "Don't expect him any time soon."

I sighed, knowing he was right, and once again that insidious feeling of apprehension gnawed at me. As soon as Mom and Fred left I picked up the phone and hastily pressed speed dial. No answer on his cell phone. Not even a ringing tone—nothing. I hung up and pressed speed dial again. Still nothing.

"Damn!" I said aloud, "his phone must be dead." I didn't have Joe's number handy, so I went into the den to rummage through Jeff's Rolodex.

"Here it is," I mumbled to myself, punching in the numbers. To my dismay I got the same reaction—silence. What were the chances of both their cell phones going dead at the same time?

I didn't like this one bit. Trying not to panic, I punched in Jeff's office number.

"Steven's Investigations," Monica's chirpy voice had a reassuring sound.

"Monica...Hi—it's Peter. Have you heard from Jeff?"

"Not since lunchtime, Peter. But he did say he'd be tied up most of the day with Joe so I haven't been concerned."

"I can't reach him on his cell..."

"Let me try on the other line," she said. A moment later she was back. "No luck," she sighed. "Have you tried Joe's number?"

"Yes. Nothing there either."

"That's strange..."

I looked at the second number by Joe's name—the police station. "I'm going to call Joe's office, Monica. I'll call you later." Quickly I dialed the number and asked to be connected to Detective French's extension.

A female voice said, "Sorry, he's not here right now."

"Well, where is he?" I demanded, none too politely. "He's not answering his cell phone. Doesn't he check in with you guys?"

"Yes sir, he does..."

I broke in, my impatience showing in my voice. "When was the last time you heard from him? He's with a friend of mine, and I can't get a hold of either one of them."

"I'm sure there's no need for alarm, sir."

"What about his car phone? Can you reach him on that?" I was beginning to sound slightly hysterical, so I took a deep breath to calm myself. "Sorry, I'm just a bit worried..."

"We'll put a call in for him. Do you want to hold?"

"Yes, I'll hold." And I did, for what seemed an eternity. I tried to rationalize my anxiety as I waited. Okay, both their phones are out—strange, but not entirely impossible. If Jeff was on his way back, and he'd have to be to make it home in time, he'd probably be cursing modern technology right now, or blaming himself for not charging the phone sufficiently. I tried to imagine him sitting patiently in his car while the traffic crept along at a snail's pace. But somehow, I couldn't quite get that vision. He had to be in his car, I reasoned with myself. Where else could he be? And where the hell was Joe?

"Sir?" The clerk's voice, breaking into my thoughts, made me jump.

"Yes, I'm here."

"We don't seem to be able to raise him on his car phone."

"What does that mean?"

"Uh, I'm not sure..." Her voice faltered.

"Can I speak to his supervisor?" I had started to tremble and my stomach was decidedly queasy. I sat down while I waited for Joe's boss to come on the line.

"Sergeant Lawson here."

"Hi, my name's Peter Brandon. I'm a friend of Jeff Stevens. He was having lunch today with Joe French and I can't seem to reach either one of them. Can you tell me what's going on?"

"Mr. Brandon, we're experiencing difficulty reaching Detective French, but it's way too early to be concerned..."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "They're not responding to any calls. Are you telling me all three phones could be down at the same time? That's just not possible!"

"Calm down sir, please." His voice had taken on a condescending edge, which I really resented. "We are checking it out. There's a patrol car out looking for them. If you leave your number, we'll call you when we have news. But, I assure you they are in no danger."

"How the hell can you possibly know that?" I rasped, throwing all vestiges of politeness to the winds. "I know Jeff, and I know he'd never leave me hanging like this. He knows I was worried about him going up there today. I had this feeling that something was wrong..."

"Sir...please calm down." The man obviously thought he was dealing with a crazy person. "We are doing everything we can. We'll call you when we have something."

I sat gaping at the phone in my hand. He'd hung up on me—the jerk! I looked around the darkening room and shuddered with a sick fear. I knew now without a doubt that something was very wrong.

"Jeff," I groaned, running my hand through my hair in frustration. "Where are you?"

I called Andrew at home. His usual cheery greeting changed with quick concern when he heard the quaver in my voice. I explained what had happened.

He tried to reassure me. "But he's just late, Peter."

"No, it's more than that. I've had this sick feeling—you know how I get when something's wrong. It just won't go away and it won't till I hear him pull into this damned driveway!"

"I'm coming over right now," he said. "I'll call David at the office and tell him to come straight to your place when he's done."

"Thanks, it's this waiting that's driving me crazy...and I haven't even started dinner..." I stopped foolishly.

"Don't worry about that. We'll order pizza or something. Sit tight. I'll be right there."

I tried calling Jeff's number again after Andrew hung up, but still there was only the sound of silence. I walked to the window and looked out hoping against hope that I'd see his car pull into the driveway, but there was no sign of it. I leaned my forehead against the windowpane and moaned under my breath, "Please don't let this be something really bad."

* *

By the time Andrew arrived I was a total quivering wreck. After giving me a big comforting hug, he took me by the arm and led me into the kitchen.

"You need a drink." He poured me a large Scotch and water.

Why hadn't I thought of that?

I took a long gulp and enjoyed the sensation as the amber liquid warmed my insides. I looked at him and shook my head. "It's the not knowing that's killing me," I told him. Andrew's face was solemn as he watched me put away my drink in about one minute flat." If there was just some word..."

"No news is the best news, so they say...Sorry, that was dumb," he murmured. "But, Jeff can take care of himself, you know that."

"But what if he and Joe have been in an accident and can't get word to anyone? What if they're trapped somewhere no one can see them? What if..."

"Peter, for goodness sake," Andrew cajoled. "You'll drive yourself nuts imagining all the worst scenarios." He put his arms around me. "Try to calm down. I'm sure we'll hear something soon."

But we didn't. David arrived about an hour later and still we'd heard nothing. Having my best friends there with me was a big help but even they could not stop me from becoming more and more frantic as the time went by.

"You know," David said suddenly, "I'll bet Joe's wife will have gotten more out of the cops than they'd tell you. She probably knows most of them there in the precinct. Why not call her?"

"Good idea." Andrew looked at me. "D'you have her number?"

"I'll look," I mumbled, grabbing Jeff's Rolodex with a shaking hand. "Yeah, here it is I think...her name's Sally..." I dialed the unfamiliar number and waited with bated breath.

The line was busy.

"Damn!" I jumped to my feet in a fury. My frustration was taking me over and the sick feeling that the Scotch had momentarily assuaged had returned full force.

"Peter," Andrew said. "You look really bad. Maybe you should lie down."

"I can't do that!"

But even as I spoke, I felt my body go limp and I collapsed back into my chair. Both David and Andrew sprang to my side, but my vision was fading and I was falling, falling into blackness...



I expect it's extremely hard for one to grasp the concept of being in a coma for three years. You'd actually have to have been there, in order to understand it completely.

I was there.

Three whole years of my life were lost in darkness from which I may never have been released, if it had not been for one man. That man was murdered on the same night I was brutally clubbed into unconsciousness. He was my last thought as I surrendered to the void that would envelope me for those years. His name was Phillip. He was my lover for twelve incredible years, and now as the darkness once more enfolded me, I cried out to him for help.

My mind became a confused jumble of images and sounds that seemed to come from faraway. It was as if I was lost in the middle of a brightly colored kaleidoscope, so brilliant were the lights around me. I could hear voices, some loud, some a mere whisper, some familiar and dear, some insidious and hostile. The clamor increased in volume. I held my hands over my ears to try and block it out. I cried out for help again...

"Phillip!"

For I knew instinctively that no one else could help me here. Wherever I was, it was not within any earthly power to bring me back. Whether I was in some parallel universe, in heaven or in hell, I could not tell. Nor did I care much. I just wanted out. As I struggled to escape, a voice came clearly to me through all the morass of noise that surrounded me.

Phillip's voice. It came so close to my ear, that I could almost feel the touch of his lips.

"Phillip?"

"I'm here, Peter."

"Oh, Phillip. I need your help."

"I know...but first, you must remember..."

The voice faded, the lights around me grew dim and I felt myself floating in the darkness, carried gently away into the void, where the line between dreams and reality becomes blurred and uncertain.

I dreamed and I remembered...everything.

PART 1

CHAPTER 1



Pasadena, Ca.

Phillip came into my life when I was fifteen years old. The qualities I instantly admired in him, I believe molded me, and made me the person I am today. My mother would be the first to tell you I was never your everyday, ordinary kind of kid. I like to think she's being complimentary, but there's a sardonic inflection in her voice that might give you the idea I could have been a difficult child. There are even those around me today who mistake my puckish qualities for devilment—perish the thought.

I would agree however, that try hard as he did, Phillip never completely erased my, shall we say, less positive qualities. I can still be quick to judge, a tad too critical and just a little on the possessive side. Somewhere, I think I can hear the sound of hollow laughter, but that's as revealing of myself as I care to be, for the moment.

I had a golden childhood. The product of a beautiful mother and handsome dad, from whom I inherited some of their best qualities, though I think I may have picked up a feisty gene or two from my grandmother—my dad's mother. I remember her occasional sharp

tongue quite well. It's a trait I have been known to exhibit from time to time.

In grade school I was popular enough, but a bit of a mystery I suspect to a lot of the kids. A bit of a loner at times, I preferred to roam through museums and art galleries rather than join in the after-school activities with the other kids. That's not to say I didn't enjoy some of the school's sports programs. I had inherited a natural athleticism from my father and enjoyed being on the swim and soccer teams. Baseball and football didn't turn me on so I was never considered a 'jock'. That was fine with me, although I have to admit I didn't mind looking at some of them!

Early in life, I was already lost in the world of art. I had started showing an affinity for oils and canvas when I was ten years old. My parents had taken me on a trip to Europe where I immediately felt at home. This is not that surprising as my great-grandparents were both from England. A little town called Storrington, in the south of England, was their birthplace. They had grown up together, emigrated to America soon after they married and settled in Flushing, Long Island. Their son, my grandfather, left Flushing when he was a young man, traveled to California, met my Gran who at that time was trying to break into movies in Hollywood. He made her see the futility of that soon after they met and when they married, she became his secretary in his real estate office.

I have only a vague recollection of my Granddad, but from the photos of him that I've seen he looked nice, and my own father has always had good things to say about him. He died a young man, and my Gran, despite her occasional jibe about "men", never could find it in her heart to replace him.

I seem to have strayed from the subject a bit—oh yes, we were overseas, London to be exact, where I became mesmerized by the wealth of art in the galleries and museums. If ten seems a little young for my overwhelming interest to take hold, well, I told you I wasn't quite like the other kids. I remember standing transfixed in front of a landscape by Constable, and marveling at the detail and the veracity of his art. The bark on an elm tree for instance—so detailed, so alive! Almost immediately, I was seized by the desire to create that kind of work and when I

gazed up at portraits by John Singer Sargent, at the sometimes aloof, sometimes smiling faces of the men and women he had captured so brilliantly, I knew there and then that my destiny had been forged. Well, maybe at ten I wasn't thinking in those exact terms—but you get the picture.

My excitement was obvious to my parents. They encouraged me in every way, enrolling me in art appreciation classes and buying me the tools of the trade. By the time I was through junior high I had already won a couple of awards for 'promising young painter', and my art teacher had easily convinced my parents that this should be my chosen career. I had never wanted to do anything else. It just came naturally to me, much to the puzzlement of both my parents, who could not remember anyone in either family with the same talent.

My Gran told me, with a wink, that she'd had a very artistic boyfriend once upon a time. "But that wouldn't account for, would it?" she mused. "Unless some of it spilled over?"

I didn't know what the heck she was talking about, being only twelve at the time, but I suspected she was 'behaving badly' as she frequently liked to do. Gran loved to live up to her shock value as the 'little old lady with the potty mouth'. My dad would often clamp his hands over my ears when she got going, but it was all in fun really. He loved his mother and truly admired her zest for living and her interest in all things new. She was a big Madonna fan, probably because she considered herself just as risque in her own way.

Around the time when a lot of kids starting 'serious dating' I realized I had absolutely no interest at all in that subject. I liked girls. My best friend, Candace Reilly, was a girl. But I had no desire to change the status of our friendship, no matter how hard she tried to persuade me we should be boy and girlfriend.

"Why don't you want to kiss me?" she demanded one day after I'd walked her home from school. We were fifteen and had walked home together hundreds of times. This had never come up before, so to say I was surprised is an understatement.

"Kiss you? Sure I'll kiss you." And I did—on the cheek.

"No, not like that," she whined. "On the lips!"

"On the lips? Okay." I leaned in and gave her a tiny peck on her mouth.

"That's it?" She screwed up her face in disgust. "That's all I get? The girls say they get French-kisses from the other boys."

"What's that?" I asked, showing my total ignorance in these matters.

"You know..." she said, her face reddening. "With open mouths."

"Yuck! Open mouths?" I looked at her in amazement. "That's disgusting."

"But all the girls say their boyfriends do it that way with them."

"Candace, I'm not your *boy*friend. We're friends—and friends don't go around kissing each other with their mouths open. At least, no one else has asked me to do that."

She gave me a forlorn look. "Why don't you want to be my boyfriend? Is there someone else?"

"Of course not."

Now, I wasn't being completely honest. Someone *had* caught my eye, but I knew there was absolutely no point in ever showing an obvious interest in that person. Instinctively I felt that if I approached Ron Holmes, captain of our swim team, and told him I thought he was hot, I'd probably end up on my ass nursing a black eye—or maybe not. But I still wasn't going to risk it!

"Well then..." Candace was saying, "We should go steady. All my friends say so."

"Tell your friends to mind their own business. I want to stay your friend, not mess it up with all that sloppy stuff."

"Peter Brandon, you are *horrible*." She emphasized this statement by slamming the door in my face.

"Girls," I muttered under my breath as I walked away. "Who needs 'em?"

Needless to say that was not the end of our friendship. Next day it was as if our little confrontation had never happened. She was all smiles in class, but my attention was taken up by a stranger who had suddenly appeared at the teacher's desk.

She introduced him as Phillip Jennings.

His parents had just moved to Pasadena from Seattle. He sat at the desk she indicated was his, looked across the aisle at me, smiled and winked—and the strangest thing happened. It seemed for a moment that I stopped breathing, my heart stopped beating and the smile that was threatening to split my face in two, just wouldn't stop beaming.

Coming to my senses I felt my face redden with embarrassment as I heard a couple of the girls giggle, then realized Phillip had turned away and was listening to the teacher continue with her lesson. I kept my eyes firmly glued on my textbook for the next few minutes, but I couldn't resist a sideways glance to my left where he sat. My heart skipped a beat when our eyes met, and he gave me a little smile.

At the end of class he had to stay behind for orientation. I dawdled for a long time in the schoolyard. Then, despairing that he was ever going to appear, was just about to leave when I heard a voice call, "Hey wait!"

He was running down the steps toward me, smiling. His dark, almost black hair was a riot of curls. As he came closer I could see he was a just a shade taller than me and in the sunlight his eyes were a sparking emerald green. He was wearing a pale blue polo shirt and khaki chinos. His bare arms were tanned and strong. I can see all of this as if it were only yesterday, so vividly did he impale himself upon my senses.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi yourself. What's your name?"

"Peter Brandon—and you're Phillip..."

"Right, Phillip Jennings. Where you headed?"

"Home, I guess."

"Wanna go for a walk first?" Just then, a group of girls ran past us, giggling. Phillip shook his head slightly then looked at me. "Well?"

"I guess so." His unswerving gaze was making me nervous. When he touched my arm lightly I almost jumped at the tingle it caused. Believe me, it wasn't static electricity.

He grinned at me. "Come on then. You'd better lead the way. I'm a stranger myself here."

"Right. Let's go to my house. We can use the pool."

I was talking up a storm in my usual manner as we walked together toward my home, so it took me some time before I became aware of three or four guys from another school watching us from the other side of the street, casting scowls and threatening looks our way. One of them yelled, "Faggots!"

Phillip stopped dead in his tracks and looked over in their direction.

"Don't pay any attention," I said, pulling at his arm. "They're just stupid. My dad told me..." I stopped yammering as he shook himself free and strode over to the yelling group.

Oh my God, I thought, they'll beat the shit out of him.

I ran after him, determined that if there was a confrontation he wouldn't think that I was chicken and too scared to stand up with him. But when I got there, the other kids were looking at each other with consternation and rapidly disbanding—all of them going in separate directions.

"What happened?" I asked.

He gave me a small smile. "Nothing much. I just told them I was captain of the wrestling team in Seattle Junior High, and if they wanted to fight me, I'd be happy to take them on—singly or together."

"Oh." I looked at him with wide eyes.

A sudden vision of him, clad only in his wrestling singlet, his toned arms and chest glistening with the sweat of his endeavors swam before my eyes and I felt a momentary dizziness overcome me.

"Have they bothered you before?"

"Huh?"

"Those guys," he said patiently. "Have they bothered you before?"

"Uh...oh..." I tried hard to focus on what he'd just asked me. "Just some name calling, things like that. I usually ignore it. I think maybe if I looked like more of a pushover it would be harder. I've heard of some kids who've had a really bad time."

"What did you do about it?"

"About what?"

"About the other kids who were getting the bad time."

"Er...well, nothing really..."

He stopped walking and turned to face me. "One thing you'll find out about me Peter, is that I cannot stand by and see someone victimized. I don't care who is doing it, I will make it stop."

I stood transfixed, enraptured by his intensity.

"Peter?"

"Yes," I blurted. He must have been starting to think I was a total goofball. "I understand what you're saying. I guess I've been too worried about what might happen if I jumped in..."

"No one wants to get hurt, Peter. But sometimes you just have to stand up for what's right. If more of us took a stand, the bullying would stop. I really believe that."

I wanted to believe whatever he believed so I nodded and he smiled at me, touched my arm and we walked on again, this time both of us lost in our separate thoughts. I wanted him to like me. I wanted him to be my friend and what had just happened I hoped had not diminished me in his eyes. Despondently, I felt I had just failed a crucial test. I glanced at him as we walked along together. What was he thinking? Was he wondering how he could ditch me as quickly as possible? Was he thinking he'd made a big mistake in befriending me? I was racked with some pretty irrational thoughts as I plodded along by his side.

"What does your dad do?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"Uh...he's an investment counselor...real estate and stuff. Has his own company."

"Cool. My dad's an architect. That's what I'm going to be. What about you?"

"I want to be a famous artist. Landscapes and portraits and the like..."

"Double cool. Can I see some of your paintings?"

"Sure," I replied, happy that he seemed to have forgotten the events of earlier. "Were you really the captain of the wrestling team?"

"Uh huh. For two years. I'll be joining the wrestling team here."

"I'll come and cheer you on."

"I'd like that."

When we got to my house, my mother was just about to go out to the store. I introduced Phillip to her. He shook her hand politely and murmured he was pleased to meet her. She picked up her car keys and smiled at him. "There's some lemonade in the fridge if you're thirsty. Are you staying for dinner, Phillip?"

He looked at me, then back at my mother before shaking his head. "No thanks, Mrs. Brandon. My parents are expecting me home."

"Well, be sure and call them to let them know where you are, won't you?" With that she left us alone and I led him out to the pool.

"Your mother is very beautiful."

"Yes she is," I answered with a deal of pride, handing him a pair of swim shorts.

He changed right there in front of me, pulling off his shirt to expose his smooth, tanned torso. I had to force myself to look away as he dropped his pants and pulled on the shorts I'd given him. I undressed quickly as he dove into the pool, then I quickly followed. He grabbed me and pulled me under, laughing as we surfaced, then swimming smoothly away to the other end. We swam several lengths in silence before he pulled himself out of the water and sat at the pool's edge looking down at me.

He gazed at me for what seemed an eternity, a little smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. The smile that I would grow to know and love so much. The smile that made words unnecessary, that over the years to come would warm my heart and fill me with longing. I, for my part, could have looked at him forever.

"I'd better call my folks," he said, standing up.

I got out of the pool and went to get the phone. Just as he got through telling his mother he was on his way home, Mom arrived and offered to drive him over to his house. I sat in the back of the car and listened as he and my mother talked away as if they were old friends. I would come to realize that Phillip loved the company of older people and had found an affinity for the more mature conversation they invoked.

I sat behind them, feeling left out—and put out, to no end. As if he had felt my eyes boring into the back of his head, Phillip turned to look at me and asked if I was still awake.

"Yes I am," I replied tartly. "Not that you two would notice."

My mother chuckled and looked at me through the rear view mirror. "Sorry darling, I'm monopolizing the conversation aren't I? Phillip is just so interesting."

She was right—he was interesting, and for the first time ever in my life I wished my mother were somewhere else completely. I wanted Phillip all to myself. I didn't want to share him with my parents or my friends or anyone. I wanted to be alone with him in some far off place—just the two of us lying on some deserted shore, strolling together through some secluded shady forest, swimming in a blue lagoon—oh, there was no end to my fantasies! I shook myself to clear my head and come down sharply to earth. After all, I had just met him a few hours before and right now he seemed much more interested in my mother than in me! I suddenly became aware that the car had stopped and Phillip was getting out.

"Thanks for the lift, Mrs. Brandon." He looked at me and gave me that smile again. "Peter, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, see you," I mumbled, still slightly pissed off. I watched him walk up the driveway to his house, my eyes glued to the round swell his behind created in his chinos.

"Peter?" I jumped guiltily and gave my mother my attention as she turned and asked, "Don't you want to sit up front now?"

"Uh, yes." I got out and climbed into the front seat, trying to get one last glimpse of him before he disappeared into the house.

My mother looked at me as we drove home in silence. "You're very quiet, Peter. Is everything all right?"

"Huh? Oh yes, everything's OK."

"Phillip seems like a very nice boy. Very mature for his age." She glanced at me as I didn't reply right way. "Don't you like him, dear?"

"Yeah, I like him all right, I guess."

How could I tell her that I was in the throes of the start of an obsession with Phillip Jennings? An obsession that would take over my life and never really let me go. I looked out the side window at the houses whizzing by. My mother always had a bit of heavy foot when she drove. Still does as a matter of fact, no matter how loudly I complain about it.

My father was home when we got back and, as he and my mother enjoyed a cocktail outside on the patio, I went to my room and thought about Phillip. I couldn't forget what he had said about standing up against the bullying that went on at school. It was true that I had not been subjected to it too much. I was tall for my age and that no doubt intimidated some of the would-be bullies. I didn't look like a pushover and so I had been spared a lot of the humiliation heaped on some of the other smaller and less fortunate boys. Now I felt ashamed that I had not stood up for them against the tormenting that they had endured. It was time for me to give up my tendency to be somewhat self-absorbed.

Yes, me!

It was very important that Phillip saw in me someone who shared his philosophy about protecting the victim, and I determined that the next time I saw this happen, I would step in.

I have been blessed with a photographic memory, so it was easy for me to bring his face into sharp focus in my mind as I thought of him. I pulled out one of my sketch-books and drew the amazing mane of curls that crowned his head. Next, I sketched in the dark feathery eyebrows, then the straight line of his nose and the slightly flared nostrils.

His eyes stared at me from under my hand as I penciled them in, ringing them with the thick lashes I remembered so well. It was his mouth that I couldn't quite get right. I could see it clearly in my mind's eye—generously wide, finely drawn on top, sensuous below. But it was that provocative subtle smile of his that eluded me for the moment. So engrossed was I, that I didn't hear my mother call me to dinner.

A knock at my door made me start, but it never occurred to me to hide my drawing. My parents had always respected my privacy. I heard my father announce his presence.

"Peter, aren't you hungry?"

"Coming, Dad...I was just finishing up."

He stood framed in the doorway; a larger version of me. He had often been mistaken for my older brother—we looked so alike. I had inherited my blond hair from both my parents, but his genes had given me his athletic build and dark, almost cobalt blue eyes. In his early forties he looked young and virile, exuding the aura of an outdoorsman rather than the successful businessman he was. He entered my room slowly; his eyes fixed on the sketch on my lap.

"Anyone I know?"

"You haven't met him yet. He just started in school today." I showed him my work. "His name's Phillip. Mom seems to like him."

"You must too if you care enough to sketch him already." He looked at me searchingly for a moment, then he ruffled my hair and said, "Let's go eat."

I followed him from the room. I knew he had a dozen questions he wanted to ask me, but I also knew he would not want to put me on the defensive right away. The big one of course was why was I drawing a boy I'd only met a few hours before? I honestly don't know how I would have answered him had he asked. Truthfully, I didn't really know the answer myself. All I knew was, I couldn't wait for the next day when I would see Phillip again.

We had always been a close-knit group, Mom, Dad and me. Perhaps because I was the only child; but whatever the reason it was a constant source of comfort to feel the warmth and love they both gave me. I wasn't exactly spoiled, but I was certainly indulged a tad more than if there had been other siblings with whom to share everything. When I was very young I had longed for a brother or sister until it was explained to me that my mother could not have another baby due to a nasty fall she'd had, six months after I was born.

As we walked down the stairs together I remember my father put his arm around my shoulder and hugged me to him. Just before we went into the dining room he looked at me and smiled. "Why don't you ask your friend over on Saturday? I was planning on barbecuing—we can eat poolside."

"Sounds great, Dad. I'll ask him tomorrow if he can come."

"We'll check with your mom, but maybe his folks would like to come too. They can't know too many people around here yet."



The following day as I sprinted through the school's main entrance, a bit late for first class, I saw him sitting at the top of the steps. He looked like he was waiting for someone.

"Hi!" I said, a bit out of breath. "Shouldn't you be in class?"

"I thought we'd be late together." He grinned and fell in step with me.

"Don't want to get you in trouble on your second day."

"You won't. I just saw the teacher...what's her name...?"

"Miss Jenkins."

"Right. She was heading for the principal's office, so we're safe."

I looked at him smiling at me and in my mind I said, 'Let's just forget about class today, or any other day for that matter. Let's just go for a long walk in the park and find a secluded spot so I can sit and look at you forever...' But of course I didn't—not then anyway. I did remember to pass on my dad's invitation. He seemed really pleased and told me he'd tell his parents.

That Saturday afternoon the Brandon and Jennings' families came together for the first time and started what would become a monthly tradition over the next year. A tradition that would probably have gone on unchecked had it not been for the unforeseen tragedy that lay ahead of us.

I remember John and Elizabeth Jennings as a warm and friendly couple with ready smiles and easy conversation. I could see where Phillip got his incredible mane of hair. His mother had the same mass of curls, only longer and darker, giving her an exotic look. His father, on the other hand, was fair complexioned and light haired. It was later that I learned Phillip had been adopted by John. Phillip's biological father had deserted Elizabeth a month before Phillip was born.

While our parents got to know one another I took Phillip up to my room and showed him some of my artwork. Shyly I showed him the sketch I had done of him.

"Wow," he murmured. "You're really good. Can I have this?"

"I can do better, I think. But...yeah, you can have this one."

He looked at me keenly then smiled. "Let's hit the pool. I brought my own swim shorts this time." He peeled off his khaki shorts and blue polo shirt and stood before me in all his Greek-god-like glory. In my eyes anyway, he was perfect.

I gulped and said quickly, "I have to change. I'll be down in a minute."

"That's OK." He sat down on my bed. "I'll wait for you."

I grabbed my shorts and made for the bathroom. I heard him chuckle softly as I closed the door. When I came out, wearing my swim shorts, he had gone. What a jerk he must have thought I was, but I was way too shy to undress in front of him. When I went out to the pool he was already in the water, racing his dad.

I remember the rest of that day being strangely unsettling for me. Whether it was the sight of Phillip's sleek athletic body seemingly always somewhere in my line of vision, or the fact that he seemed to be suddenly distanced from me, I'm not sure. Later, I asked him if he remembered that day.

"Of course I do," he said. "You were acting like you'd rather I wasn't there."

He'd laughed at my affronted expression. Nothing could have been farther from the truth of course. I wanted him there. I just didn't want anyone else around. That was my problem. My obsession with Phillip appeared to have taken me over completely so that my day-to-day thinking became centered around him only.

As the weeks went by and it became clear to us, and to everyone else apparently, that ours was a friendship forged to last forever, several of my friends began to stay away. I don't know if Phillip and I were giving off some kind of aura that told them, 'This is Private', but it was almost

like they knew they had to wait to be invited in. This must sound terribly conceited, but that's the way it was.

I was cornered one day by Candace demanding to know why the hell I couldn't spare just a little of my precious time for her anymore. "Don't stand there pretending you don't know what I'm talking about, Peter Brandon!" She was fairly railing at me. "Ever since you and Phillip have become friends, it's like I can just go fly a kite!"

"Candace, I'm sorry..."

"Oh, save it," she snapped. "I can't say I blame you. He's such a dishy guy. I just miss our time together, that's all."

I looked at her feeling lost for words which, believe me, doesn't happen very often.

"I guess I'm just jealous," she continued. "The other kids are too you know."

"What do you mean?" I was quite sure there was a joke coming.

"The way you're so into one another without being...icky. It's like you communicate tele...tele...you know, without speaking all the time."

"Like telepathy?"

"That's it...like aliens or something. You're always just smiling at each other. You're always together, there's a kind of peace about you, you know...a calmness. Not like some of the other kids, always pushing and shoving and yelling."

"Wow." I couldn't think of what else to say.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Are you guys gay?"

Taken totally by surprise and not even sure of the answer, my mouth opened and closed like a deranged guppy's.

"Candace," I finally gasped. "What made you ask that?"

"Well, like I said, you're always together."

"So are lots of guys. Guys hang out with the same guys all the time."

"I know...but this is different, isn't it? Besides, you look so cute together."

Okay, so here it was. Someone asking the big question. Just what was the relationship I had with Phillip? In the weeks we had known each other we had seen each other every day—in school and out. We had studied together at my house or his. We had spent weekends together, going for long walks or to the movies.

I would drop by the gym and watch him in wrestling practice. Believe me, the earlier vision I'd had of him in his wrestling gear, paled in comparison with the real thing!

Our parents were used to seeing us show up at each other's homes together ready to raid the fridge, use the pool, or watch TV. Ostensibly we were kids just hanging out...but with a difference. I already knew I loved Phillip, and I was pretty sure he loved me. There had been no physical contact between us other than the occasional rough house, an arm thrown over the shoulders, a pat on the arm, that kind of stuff. No kiss, no exploratory feel.

I looked at Candace's expectant face and honestly didn't know what to tell her. Was I gay because I loved Phillip so much? I just hadn't thought too much about it. It seemed perfectly natural to love him the way I did.

"Well?" she demanded, not letting me off the hook.

"I g-guess so," I stammered. "I haven't really thought about it."

"You mean you haven't got naked with him or anything yet?"

"God no, Candace!"

"What are you waiting for—an engraved invitation?"

"I haven't got naked with anyone, ever," I said.

"Well it's time you did. *I* have," she boasted.

"Who with?" I gasped, my eyes widening at her brazenness.

"I'm not telling. When you tell me the truth about you and Phillip, then I'll tell you!" With that she flounced off, leaving me wondering what the hell had just happened.

"What's wrong with Candace?" Phillip's voice behind me made me jump.

"Oh hi, I didn't know you were here."

"Of course I'm here. I'm waiting for you." He gave my arm a squeeze. "Come on...let's go over to my place today. Your folks must be sick of seeing me."

"I don't think so. She really likes you." I picked up my backpack and followed him out into the sunlit schoolyard.

"So what was up with Candace?" he asked again as we walked to his house.

"She was complaining about the time I spend with you."

"Oh. Is she mad?"

"No, not exactly. Jealous, I think." I glanced at him. "Can I ask you something that may sound a bit strange?"

"It wouldn't be the first time," he teased me. "You can be a bit off the wall at times."

"I can? Well, this came from Candace. Are we gay?"

He stopped dead in his tracks and looked at me with surprise. "What do you think?" he asked, with a little smile. His eyes searched mine, the merriment in his being replaced by something more serious.

"If wanting to spend all my time with you means I'm gay, then I guess I am."

If all of this sounds a bit naive, I have to tell you, I was pretty green in those days. Like I said earlier, I hadn't given much thought to sex and dating and the like. I'd listened to some of the boys boasting of their exploits, but hadn't really given it too much credence. Yeah, I had noticed my attraction for some of the older boys and I'd indulged in a fantasy or two about Ron Holmes, the swim team captain. My dad and I had talked of course. He was too intelligent to let me feel something was wrong as I went through puberty and noticed the changes in my body. He'd told me about 'wet-dreams' and how it was perfectly natural. Thank God—I thought I'd peed the bed the first time! We had talked about masturbation. Also natural he told me, but I hadn't really got into that too much. It was when he got to girls that I found my mind wandering. I think my parents knew that I was 'different' before I did. If they worried about it they did not show it and I'm sure they knew what my relationship with Phillip was developing into.

Phillip put his hand on my shoulder as we continued to walk. "I think being gay," he said, "is much more than that, Peter. It means loving someone of the same sex in a sexual as well as spiritual way."

"Well, I wouldn't know about the sex," I told him. "I've never had any sex. How do you know all this?"

"I read about it."

"Good. You can tell me everything. There's a lot I need clearing up."

"Well, I'm no expert you know. I've only ever fooled around. Never been 'all the way' with anyone."

"Really? I thought you might have been married several times already," I sniggered.

He punched me lightly, then threw his arm around my neck and dragged me up his driveway, the two of us laughing all the way.



I liked being at Phillip's house. His parents were latent hippies and had made their home comfortable and laid-back. There were lots of comfy chairs and large pillows sitting on oriental rugs. You could flop down anywhere and find a comfortable spot. His room was larger than mine and housed a drawing board on which he practiced his building designs. He was even then, under his father's guidance, the budding architect. The walls of his room were covered with photographs and artist's renderings of famous buildings. He was as enthralled by concrete and glass as I was by oceans and forests.

But that day, I was not looking at the contents of his room or what covered the walls. I could see only him. Not that this was unusual. For the past weeks the thought and image of him had consumed me. Now, as I watched him move toward me, my heart raced with anticipation and the sudden sure knowledge that our friendship was about to change.

We stood looking at each other, neither of us knowing quite what to do next. For the first time since we met we seemed to be at a loss for words. Although the distance between us could not have been more than a couple of feet, to me at that moment it felt like a chasm too wide and deep to be crossed. I felt foolish and stifled, annoyed with myself for being so tongue-tied. Terrified that if I said the wrong thing at this moment it would ruin everything.

I remember thinking that perhaps I could ask him to show me a couple of wrestling moves that would bring us into close contact. Should I crack a joke to break the tension that he too surely must be feeling? Should I just pretend that I expected nothing more of this moment than our usual friendly exchange?

And then...he reached out across that chasm and gently stroked my cheek with the tips of his fingers. I quivered from his touch and closed my eyes as he brought his face close to mine. I felt his lips, warm and moist, brush against my mouth. I gasped and my lips parted as he pressed his even more firmly on mine.

It was a clumsy kiss as kisses go, but I had never kissed anyone like this before and quite honestly I don't think Phillip was all that experienced either. We had to get an A-plus for trying though. My eyes opened in surprise as I felt his tongue enter my mouth. It felt really nice in there, so I slipped mine into his.

Now we were getting somewhere. We were kissing with *open mouths*. Candace had been right—it was definitely the way to go! If I had been excited before, I was beside myself now. I held onto him as though my life depended on it, inhaling the warm clean smell of his skin, the effect of which caused my head to swim with excitement. I was literally shaking like a leaf and I could feel something else happening—*down there*.

I began to whimper as I realized I had no control over this sensation. I shuddered and cried out as it overtook me...and then I ejaculated into my underpants. I could have died from embarrassment at that moment. I pulled myself out of his arms and sank down on the side of his bed, covering my face with my hands. I felt totally humiliated and was sure I had become a laughing stock in Phillip's eyes.

"Peter," I heard him say. "Look at me."

I opened my fingers slightly and peeked at him. He was kneeling in front of me and I could see he was not laughing or sneering at me. Of course, I should have known he would not. This was Phillip after all. I should have known he would understand. Gently he took my hands away from my face.

"Don't be upset." He was kissing my cheek. "That's happened to me too."

"It has?" I looked at him to see if he was just trying to make me feel better.

He nodded and smiled, then kissed me again. "C'mon, let's get you showered off." He took my hand and led me into his bathroom. He unbuttoned my shirt and unbuckled my pants belt. Awkwardly, I pulled at his shirt, then he raised his arms so I could pull it up over his head. He slipped out of his pants and stood naked before me. I was totally enraptured by the sight of him. His slim, hard and tanned body already showing signs of sculpted musculature and the hint of dark hair on his chest.

He pulled me to him, and as we pressed our naked bodies together, to my amazement I felt the sensation of returning arousal. We stepped into the shower together letting the water envelope us in its steamy warmth, lathering each other's bodies, letting our hands linger on parts before unseen by either of us. He sent delicious thrills through me by circling my nipples with his tongue and gently nibbling on them. He knelt in front of me and took me in his mouth, sliding his lips up and down the length of my erection. His teeth nipped at me and I jumped involuntarily.

"Sorry," he muttered, looking up at me. I told him that it was OK. I was only too eager to endure whatever pain he inflicted on me. So many times later we would laugh together at this first attempt at carnal sex. How green and clumsy we were...but at that moment I would not have changed a thing. Again I felt myself going out of control. I gasped and pulled back from this overpowering sensation. I would not make a fool of myself again.

Phillip smiled at me, enclosing me in his arms. His soapy body slithered against mine sending jolts of pleasure through me. I remember thinking at that moment that I hoped this felt as good for him as it did for me. As if in answer his breathing quickened and his body spasmed against me. His hand grasped my penis and once more I was at the threshold, but this time I knew instinctively that I should not pull back.

Hot semen sprayed against our stomachs and chests as we came together with choking cries. Our bodies shuddered and trembled as we clung to one another, his mouth crushing mine, our tongues swirling together in our first really passionate kiss. He leaned back against the shower wall and I put my head on his shoulder, content to stay there forever while the water cascaded down upon us. We stayed locked in that embrace, unwilling to break apart, our only movement a tender caress or kiss.

Later as we dried each other with his large fluffy towel, I felt strangely tongue-tied. What had just passed between us had changed us forever. What I had previously felt for Phillip I had imagined being love in its purest form. Now it was compounded by a new feeling—lust. Something that had been foreign to me now seemed an integral part of our relationship.

As his hands strayed over my skin I closed my eyes and imagined us as we had been only moments before, locked in an all consuming embrace—and damn, if I didn't feel the beginning of yet another arousal. Of course I was only fifteen and at that age you can go forever. But my God, when I think of it now I blush with embarrassment.

Well, almost.

I was gratified to see that Phillip too was experiencing that same sensation. If we hadn't heard his mother call him from downstairs we'd probably have gone at it again. Instead, at that point we had to hastily get dressed and scamper downstairs to say hello before I took off for home.

Phillip walked me part of the way. "How do you feel?" he asked quietly, as we ambled to the corner of his street.

"Great! You?"

"Really great."

I gave him a sly look. "I got the feeling you know a lot more about that...uh...stuff, than you let on."

"Not really. I read about some of it in a book, but you're the only one I've ever done all that with."

"I'm glad. It makes it all the more special for me."

"For me too, Peter."

We stood looking at each other for a long moment. "Well," he said finally. "I'll see you tomorrow at school. Bye."

I gave him a shy smile. "Bye."

If it hadn't appeared too girly, I would have skipped all the way home!



So there it was. At age fifteen I had met the boy who would become the man with whom I was sure I would spend the rest of my life. You might ask how I could be so certain. Let's face it, fifteen is mighty young for someone to be thinking of long term relationships. Really, I don't think I was thinking along those lines. It just seemed so simple—I would love him forever.

I think I did skip those last few steps up the driveway to my home.

Funny how happiness can turn to despair in a flash. My mother was on the phone when I bounced in. She looked so worried, I immediately went to her and stood quietly while she finished listening to whomever was on the other end. Then she looked at me and gathered me in her arms.

"Mom, what's wrong?" I asked, flinging my backpack to one side. I knew it was something terrible.

"It's your father," she whispered against my hair. "He's in the hospital. I have to go right away."

"I'll come too. What happened? Is he going to be all right?"

"He's had a heart attack, darling. At the office..." She was looking around her distractedly. "What did I do with my car keys...?"

"I'll get them...Is he going to be all right?" I asked again, trying not to sound scared. Of course, I was. I couldn't believe anything could happen to my father. A heart attack? He was always so healthy, so full of life. This couldn't be happening.

"The doctors say they have to operate. I have to sign papers. Have you found my keys?"

"Here they are."

"This may be difficult, Peter. Are you sure you want to come?"

"Of course I want to!" I was just a tad sharp. "Mom, you don't have to always protect me. I'm nearly sixteen years old."

"Let's go then."

I followed her out to the car. I knew this was something she could not imagine either. She and my father had met their first year in college and had been married as soon as they could get permission from their parents. Young love surely must run in our family. They sometimes still acted like newly-weds even around me. If I'd ever felt embarrassed by their overt show of affection for each other, I could certainly understand it now.

I looked at her as we drove swiftly through town. I had always considered her a lovely woman—Eve Brandon, my mother. In my eyes the best mother a boy could ever have. Always ready to love me unconditionally whether I succeeded in life or not. Encouraging me from the beginning when I first showed an inclination toward the artist's life, praising my first few questionable attempts at landscape painting, sitting patiently as my model for my portrait painting. Nothing was ever too much trouble for her. And she was this way with her friends too, so it was not hard to imagine the depth of feeling she had for Paul, her husband—my father.

Who could really understand what she was going through now? Hard as I might try at that moment, my limited emotional experience prevented me from truly understanding just what she was feeling as we drove to that hospital. It was beyond my powers of reasoning that my father was in any real danger. He just couldn't die and leave us alone! I began to feel a twinge of guilt as I imagined my father writhing in agony on his office floor while Phillip and I were...well, you know.

Looking back on that day now, I realize it was my first glimpse into the reality that not everything in life goes the way we want it to. Sometimes things go wrong; terribly wrong—and we are powerless to prevent it.

Seeing my father lying there in that hospital bed brought me an overpowering feeling of helplessness. My strong and handsome father. The man I looked up to most in the world was now lying pale and still, unaware of our presence. The doctors said they had stabilized him for the moment but he was going to need open heart surgery right away. My mother nodded her agreement numbly, taking my father's hand and pressing it gently to her face. I thought my heart was going to break. While my mother went to sign the papers of consent I sat by his bedside. I took his hand in mine and silently begged him not to leave us. A kaleidoscope of memories tumbled through my mind as I sat there gazing at him.

Dad and I romping together on the sands at Malibu when I was still a toddler. He would pick me up and throw me high into the air. I would shriek with delight as he caught me in his strong arms and held me safe and secure. Dad patiently teaching me how to swim and trying hard not to laugh at my first frantic attempts to stay afloat as my pudgy arms and legs flailed around, serving only to help me sink all the faster.

"Paul..." my mother would murmur worriedly and he would scoop me up and place me on his shoulders. How proud he looked the first time I swam all by myself across the width of the pool without once going under. Because of his ability to fill my early life with fun and adventure, I never truly retreated into the sometimes insular life of the artist. Although he willingly indulged my creativity in that area, he saw to it that I experienced all the 'normal' things of boyhood, showing me how to ride a bike, play tennis and softball. We would go hiking and camping together whenever he could spare the time from work. We were buddies, my Dad and I...and I knew I would be inconsolable if anything happened to him.

Suddenly the room was full of commotion as orderlies and nurses swooped in to prepare him for transport to surgery. My mother and I stood in the corridor and watched as he was wheeled away.

The attending doctor gave us a sympathetic look. "This will take several hours, Mrs. Brandon. Why don't you go home? We'll call you when we have news."

"I'd rather stay if you don't mind." My mother was resolute. "Peter and I will be fine right here." Then she added in her usual practical way; "We can get something to eat while we wait."

Of course, neither one of us had any appetite at all, but she insisted I have at least a sandwich while she drank coffee and toyed with a salad.

"I should call your grandmother I suppose," she said almost to herself. "I just hate having to upset her before we know what's going to happen."

My grandmother lived in Sacramento. She had moved into a retirement home some years earlier after she'd had a stroke that left her paralyzed in one arm.

"Dad's going to be all right, Mom." I watched her trying to hold back her tears. "He's strong. He can fight this."

Her sad gaze focused on me. "His father died of a heart attack you know. He was only forty...younger than your dad is now."

"But they know so much more about this stuff nowadays," I protested, not really knowing what I was talking about.

She smiled and took my hand. "You're right. I have to believe that he'll come through this. But Peter, if he doesn't...remember he was always so proud of you."

We both began to cry at that moment, holding onto each other across the cafeteria table. I guess the staff and customers of hospital cafeterias are used to such emotional displays as no one gave us a second glance. After a while my mother excused herself and made for the rest room, to 'make some repairs' as she put it. I loitered in the corridor waiting for her and then, on an impulse, made for the pay phone and called Phillip.

"Hi!" He sounded pleased to hear my voice.

"I'm at St Vincent's hospital," I said in a subdued tone. "My dad had a heart attack."

"I'll be right there." He hung up before I could protest.

"Who were you talking to?" My mother had seen me replace the receiver on the pay phone as she came out of the rest room.

"Phillip. He's coming to the hospital."

"That's nice of him...although I'm not sure what he can do..."

"I think he just wanted to give us some support. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, of course not darling." She glanced nervously at a pair of doctors who approached us with determined looks on their faces, but they marched right by us and went into the cafeteria.

"Let's go sit in the waiting room," I suggested, taking her arm. She allowed me to lead her into the small waiting area where she sat down, resigned to the long wait. I hunted around for a couple of decent magazines with which to occupy ourselves. We sat in silence together, not really reading, but rather each lost in thought.

"Peter..." Phillip's voice was like a salve to my jumpy nerves. I smiled with relief when I saw him and his mother walking toward us. "Mom drove me over." That explained how he had made it so quickly.

"Eve, are you all right? How's Paul?" Elizabeth asked.

"Oh, thank you for coming over," Mom said, hugging her. They sat down together and were soon lost in their conversation as Elizabeth listened to the events that had brought us here.

"How're you doing?" Phillip's voice deepened with his concern.

"I'm OK. Better now you're here." I wanted to slip into his arms and wrap myself around him for comfort, but it was enough that he was sitting beside me. He squeezed my hand and we sat in a comfortable silence, our arms touching and our eyes glued to the TV in the corner of the room.

Eventually the doctor came to make his report. He told us that my dad had come through the operation quite well, but that he would have to stay in intensive care for a couple of days. "We'll have a better idea then of his prognosis. He has suffered severe trauma to his heart and respiratory system. He's not going to be himself for quite a while, I'm afraid. He'll have to take it easy for several months."

Mom stood. "Can I see him now?"

"For a moment only. He's very heavily sedated. I would advise only you go in right now, Mrs. Brandon."

She looked at me with apology, and although I felt miserable that I could not see my dad, I smiled at her and nodded my understanding. Phillip and Elizabeth stood in the corridor outside the ICU with me.

"That's good then," Phillip said. "He's going to be fine."

I nodded with relief. "Only thing is, he's not going to take this 'taking things easy' stuff very well, I'm afraid. He's so active all the time."

Elizabeth looked at me with concern. "You'll have to make sure he doesn't overdo things, Peter. It's going to be a huge adjustment and you'll have to encourage him to go slow once he's up and about."

"Easier said than done, Mrs. Jennings. You don't know my dad..."

"But he'll have to listen to the doctors," she interrupted. "It would be really unfair of him to jeopardize his health again after all of this."

"Take it easy, Mom." Phillip put his hand on her arm. "Mr. Brandon isn't going to want to run a marathon for quite a while."

"I should hope not!" She seemed angry, as if it were my father's fault that he was lying in there having come close to death. Then she threw her arms around me and held me tightly. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I'm just so scared for you and your mother...to almost lose him like that..."

I patted her on the back, for the moment unsure of just who was consoling who. Phillip looked at me and smiled, then Elizabeth released me as my mother came out of the ICU. She looked pale and shaken as I took her arm and steered her to a seat. I sat beside her. She'd been crying, but she smiled at me and touched my face gently with her fingertips.

"He looks so weak. So many tubes and needles." She shook her head. "I just can't believe this has happened to him. The doctors said it was touch and go for a while. He really has to slow down..." She broke off suddenly and stood up. "But he'll be all right, I know he will."

"You bet he will, Mom." I put my arms around her. "Let's go home now. You need to rest, too."

"Peter's right Eve," Elizabeth said. "When Paul wakes up tomorrow, he will want to see you."

Reluctantly, my mother let us lead her out of the hospital. She looked exhausted and leaned heavily on my arm as we walked to the cars. I wished that I had my driver's license, so she could have relaxed on the way home. Phillip and Elizabeth followed us in their car, and for once my mother did not break any speed limits.

For most of that evening I fielded phone calls as more and more of my father's friends and associates found out what had happened and called to see how he was. Mom was exhausted and went to bed early, the strain of the day etched plainly on her face.

Phillip called just before I went to bed. "I've been trying to call you all night. The line was always busy."

"Yeah, everyone in the world's been calling to see how Dad's doing."

"Are you OK?"

"Uh huh...just thinking of going to bed."

"Good idea. Call me when you've seen your dad and let us know how he is, won't you."

"I'll call from the hospital. What're you doing tomorrow?"

"Just hanging out at home, till I hear from you." There was a pause and then he said, "Peter...you know earlier today when we...you know..."

"Yes," I said in a rush. "I know. Are you regretting what happened? I'll understand if you are, honestly. I don't want anything to break up our friendship..."

"No!" he interrupted. "What I wanted to say was...uh...I really like you, Peter...a lot. I like being with you. It really hurt to see you so upset today."

I felt hot tears spring into my eyes as I listened. "That's so great of you to say those things. It felt good having you there...and about earlier...I can't think of the words to tell you what that meant to me." I paused, then took a deep breath. "I love you, Phillip."

There was silence on the other end of the line. I listened to my heart thunder in my chest as I clutched the receiver in my damp hand.

His voice, in my ear, came almost as a whisper. "I love you, too."

That night, despite everything that had happened that day, I slept like a log with nary a dream to disturb me.



My father was not allowed home for two whole weeks after his operation, but to our relief his recovery was, as the doctors put it—'remarkable'—and once home, he improved a little every day. I knew the confinement was driving him mad, but he and my mother must have had some kind of long talk, because he did his best to follow doctors' orders and take it easy.

During that time, he and Phillip bonded. Phillip was over almost every day, and he and my dad spent a lot of time talking. I was constantly amazed at how Phillip could get into these adult conversations about investments, the stock market, politics, the environment—all things close to my father's heart. I never really felt left out. I had my own interests. Landscape painting had become a big thing in my life and I spent a lot of time lost in these imagined forests and thickets I transposed to canvas.

I had become a big admirer of George Inness, a man once regarded by many as the finest landscape artist in America—and for some, in the world. I found his work truly inspiring. I loved his bold use of color and his fearless texturing. His own work was influenced by the Hudson River School, a tonalist more that an impressionist—and I felt myself drawn to his bolder style.

I had entered a competition for "most promising young oil painters", and had already won a place in the finals to be held in two months. For my entry I had chosen something from my imagination. An Elysian field

of dappled serenity, an image of peace and tranquility, the sun's rays overshadowed in the distance by ominous dark clouds that heralded an oncoming storm. I called it "Uncertainty". To me, it signified what had happened in our lives in the past few weeks, something Phillip caught the moment he saw the work. He whistled gently through his teeth as he and my parents inspected the almost finished entry.

"This will win, no doubt about it. The judges would have to be blind not to see genius in this."

I grinned happily at him. His opinion meant so much to me.

My father put his hand on my shoulder and looked at me with a puzzled smile. "It's amazing, Peter. Where does all this talent come from? I don't remember anyone in our family having this kind of creative ability. Do you Eve?"

Mom laughed. "Not on my side of the family, that's for sure. We are so proud of you son. Like Phillip said, this is the winner."

A group hug followed. I can still remember the sensation I felt when Phillip's face pressed against mine. I also remember feeling an overpowering happiness in the knowledge that everything I wanted in life—my mother, my father recovered from his heart attack, and Phillip...was right there with me in my studio at that precise moment.



The weeks passed quickly. My father, now greatly improved, went back to his office under strict instructions from the doctor and my mother not to overdo things. Phillip and I spent as much time together as we possibly could. He had decided that being an architect was what he wanted as a career and his parents set about finding the best college for him. I dreaded the thought that one day he might have to go to college in some other city, but I stayed quiet on the subject. There was no way I would let my selfish yearning get in the way of Phillip's plans for his future.

My entry in the painting competition netted second place. I was disappointed, but as I stood grudgingly admiring the winning entry, I felt a

tap on my shoulder and turned to see a large man towering over me, a smile beaming from his moon-shaped face.

"Master Peter Brandon? I am Frederick Hanson." He reached for my hand and shook it vigorously. "Of Hanson and Sharpe, the art dealers...You must have heard of us?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid I haven't." Instinctively though, I recognized that this man was of some importance in the art world and I should not alienate him. I smiled innocently and added, "But then, I'm only fifteen!"

He laughed hugely, his jowls shaking like jelly. "Of course, of course...Why would you care about art dealers? You just do this for fun, right?"

"Well...I do love what I do, Mr. Hanson."

"Of course you do, of course you do—and it shows my boy, it *shows*. Your work is remarkable, *remarkable* for one so young! Tell me, are your parents here?"

"Yes. Over there." I pointed to where Phillip's and my parents stood chatting. My father looked over at that point and Mr. Hanson strode over to where they stood. I watched as he fell into a deep conversation with my parents and from the looks of things, had their complete interest.

"What the heck does he want, d'you suppose?" I muttered.

"You're going to find out in a minute," Phillip replied. "Here they come." Before I could stop him, Phillip walked over to where his parents stood as Frederick Hanson, accompanied by my mom and dad, walked toward me.

Hanson was beaming even more largely. "I have been enquiring of your parents," he began in his quaint speech pattern, "If it would be at all possible for the company of Hanson and Sharpe to represent you as your sole agent. Your parents say, and quite rightly so, that it would be up to you! So young man, what do you say? Can the world famous house of Hanson and Sharpe add you to its extremely select array of talented artists?"

To say I was startled is a big understatement. I was speechless. If Hanson and Sharpe were as big as this man said, why on earth were they interested in me? "I don't know what to say, sir..." I stammered.

Hanson laughed. "A bit overwhelming is it? Of course what I perceive is a fledgling talent. One that has to be nurtured and coaxed to greatness. But it's there! Oh yes, my boy, it's all *there*!"

As he went on, I began to realize that Frederick Hanson almost always spoke in exclamation points.

"To show you that I am serious," he continued. "I am prepared to offer you a generous sum for your painting, 'Uncertainty'. I would like to put it on exhibition in our gallery in Beverly Hills! How does two thousand dollars sound to you?"

I almost fell over backwards. Two thousand dollars for my painting? He had to be joking. He laughed again at the astounded expression on my face. I looked at my dad who also looked surprised, but who gave me an encouraging smile.

"Wow," I finally managed to say. "Are you serious?"

"Totally serious! But I must insist that you go to the best art school to fine tune this wonderful talent of yours. And you must travel! Rome, Paris, London! See the masters accomplishments for yourself, and study with the *best*!"

Every emphasized word was accompanied by grand sweeps of his arms. Mr. Hanson was totally over the top and as I caught sight of Phillip behind him trying to contain his laughter, I almost lost it. I finally managed to gasp, "Dad, I think we really need to talk about all this, don't you?"

"Yes, son." I could tell he too was having a hard time keeping his composure. "Mr. Hanson...uh, my wife and I need to talk to Peter about all this. We'll let you know about the painting as soon as possible."

"Yes, of *course*." Hanson bowed deeply then pulling a gold card from his inside pocket with a flourish, he handed it to my father with deference. "Please call me and apprise me of your decision. Thank you!"

With that he strode away leaving us all looking after him in amazement. My father and I looked at each other, then started to laugh.

"Paul...Peter," my mother scolded us, none too seriously. "He'll hear you."

"W.C. Handy..." Dad said. "That's who he reminds me of...W.C. Handy."

"Who?"

"Remember the big man in the old movie of David Copperfield? He wore a funny top hat and a jacket two sizes too small for him?" He looked at me expectantly. "Oh well...I'll have to rent it one day for you, then you'll see."

Phillip's father shook his head in amusement. "That was quite a performance."

"He seemed very impressed with Peter's work," Elizabeth said

Dad nodded. "Impressed enough to want to make Peter a world famous artist."

"Is that all?" Phillip winked at me. "There will be no talking to you after this day—and you're only fifteen!" He and I laughed together at our silly joke. We ran over to the exhibition tent and collected my painting. As we took it down from its easel, he looked at me with a sudden seriousness. "Paris...Rome... London? I don't know if I want you that far away from me."

"Then you'll have to come too, that's all."

"You know I can't. After high school I need to get my degree in architecture."

I wasn't quite sure what to say next. Of course I didn't want to spend any time at all away from Phillip, but it was inevitable that someday we would have to face this possibility. His career was going to be different from mine, and we would end up going to different colleges—perhaps even in different cities. We were both suddenly depressed. The earlier laughter and silliness was forgotten as we trudged back to where our parents waited for us.

"What's with the long faces all of a sudden?" My father looked at us keenly as he took my painting and pushed it into the back of his station wagon.

"Oh nothing really," I lied. "I'm just feeling a bit tired."

He turned to John. "Okay, we'll see you over at our house, then we'll decide where we're going to eat."

"Sounds good." They waved as they got into their car and drove off.

I felt suddenly deflated and was conspicuously quiet on the way home. Disturbed by my unusual silence, Mom turned to look at me.

"What's wrong Peter?"

"Oh, I don't know Mom. I just feel depressed all of a sudden. I don't know why."

"Probably all the excitement of the day just winding down a bit," my father suggested. "It's been a bit hectic. What did you think of Mr. Hanson?"

"Totally weird!" I grimaced. "Do you think he meant all that?"

"Yes, I do Peter. And I guess it's time you thought of which art school you want to go to. You do want to pursue this, don't you?"

"I guess so..." What had once seemed so clear, now appeared uncertain.

I don't know if I want you that far away from me. Phillip's words ran through my head time and time again. I didn't want us to be parted for a day, never mind the possibility of months on end in foreign countries. In the time that we had known each other he had become as important to me as my parents. My constant companion, the one I could trust above all others.

"You used to be so certain about it," my mother was saying, interrupting my thoughts. "What's happened to make you unsure?"

I looked up at her quickly. "No, no...I'm still sure that I want to paint. It's just that I hadn't reckoned on having to go to Paris and Rome, like Mr. Hanson said..."

"Well, if you want to be the best..." Dad murmured, leaving the rest unsaid.

"I know. I'm just being ungrateful. I want everything to happen all at once."

"Oh, the impatience of youth," Dad chuckled. "My mother used to yell at me all the time, telling me that I wanted everything right now. I guess things never change."

When Phillip and his parents came over, the grown ups gathered in the family room for a drink. I grabbed Phillip and pulled him upstairs to my room. "What did you mean earlier about not wanting me far away from you?"

"Just what I said." He put his arms around me. "I know we have to make decisions about what we're going to do after high school, and I know that you'll probably have to go overseas to study...I'm just not happy about it...that's all." He looked at me, smiling sadly. "Just my luck to be stuck on someone with such a talent!"

"What about you?" I demanded. "You'll have to go to God-knows-where to get your degree. I guess we'll keep the airlines in business for a while." I kissed him gently on the lips and we held each other for a long time, not moving or speaking, knowing that just being there together was all we needed.

When I look back on those times, there is a myriad of memories encapsulated in that time frame. Some make me smile with happiness, others cast their shadow of sorrow. Not so different really from thousands of other lives, but unique to me and therefore seemingly so important.



Both of us turned sixteen that year. We both learned to drive, passed our tests and we both got cars for our birthdays. I told you I was indulged! Phillip got an '81 Corvette. A beauty—red with a beige interior, and I got a black Mustang convertible. We thought we were such hot stuff!

One weekend we set off, just the two of us in my car. We headed south and ended up in Laguna Beach. Although I had been there a couple of times before with my parents, this time the town seemed different to me. Perhaps because I was there alone with Phillip. Perhaps because it was a particularly beautiful day, the sky and the ocean being an equally incredible blue.

I wanted to stay there forever. I had a sudden vision of myself standing on the edge of this same cliff, gazing out at the view and capturing

its unique beauty on canvas. As we stood admiring the view Phillip put his hand on my shoulder and we smiled at one another. I could tell he was falling in love with Laguna too.

We strolled through the town, taking in the many art galleries. At one, Phillip suddenly grabbed my arm. "Look!" he said with excitement, pointing at a plaque under one of the paintings.

'Exhibition Presented by Hanson & Sharpe'.

"Let's go in—maybe he's here."

I let him pull me into the gallery and we stood for a while gazing at some of the exhibits.

"Your work is so much better than this, Peter."

"Thanks," I muttered hoping no one heard him. I had to agree though, nothing was very exciting. There didn't seem to be any vibrancy or originality in the collection.

A voice boomed from behind us. "Why, it's young Mr. Brandon!" We turned to see Frederick Hanson descending upon us in all his vastness, which in this small gallery was instantly overwhelming. "How marvelous to see you...and your friend...uh...?

"Phillip," I said.

"Of course, of course, I remember! And why haven't I heard from you Peter?" he admonished me. "I expected some word by this time, you know."

"Sorry, Mr. Hanson. We've been kind of busy studying for school tests. You know the kind of thing we teenagers have to go through, or get a C minus!"

"Ha, ha! Of course you do...but have you made a decision regarding the offer I made some time ago?"

"Not really sir."

"Well, at least give me the opportunity to exhibit your painting at one our shows. I promise no harm will come to it, and the exposure can only be to your benefit! I would only ask that Hanson and Sharpe be your sole representative agency. What do you say?"

I could feel Phillip staring at me intently. I caught his eye and he nodded imperceptibly. Somehow, we both knew that this was a deciding moment in our lives, and one that should not be thrown away lightly.

"I'd have to get the OK from my mom and dad first."

"Of course you must!" Hanson rubbed his hands together with satisfaction. "I will call them tomorrow and get their permission, then I can arrange for it to be exhibited in our next presentation. It will take pride of place, my boy, *pride of place*!"

The sun was beginning to set as we stepped out of the gallery. We strolled in silence to the beach and stood watching as it dipped below the horizon, sending blazing ribbons of orange and red across the darkening sky.

"I want to live here one day," Phillip murmured, putting his arm around my shoulders

"Me to." I leaned against him, the two of us lost in the serenity and beauty of the evening, oblivious to the world around us.



The next few months were exciting ones for both of us. Phillip had fulfilled his ambition to become school wrestling captain and was undefeated in his weight class. I attended all of his meets to cheer him on and, of course, was filled with pride every time he put his opponent to shame. Sometimes, as I sat watching him from the gymnasium stands, his toned muscular body glistening with the sweat of his endeavors, my young and extremely active imagination could envision him as a proud warrior of ancient times, standing on the field of glory, his enemies lying vanquished at his feet. It didn't take much more mental prodding for my imagination to take off and see myself at his side, the two of us fighting any usurper who dared cross our path!

I had always loved reading about legendary heroes, my favorites being Alexander the Great and his companion, Hephaistion. I particularly liked the fact that they had been friends and lovers since boyhood and remained true to each other all their lives. My love for Phillip I knew to be every bit as strong as theirs and, like them, would never let anyone or anything come between us. In retrospect, I guess all of this sounds a bit immature, but the fervent dreams of adolescence are hard to stifle—and let's face it, without dreams, all we'd have is reality. Something that can be too hard to bear at times.

In the meantime, Frederick Hanson had proven as good as his word. "Uncertainty" was exhibited in their Laguna Beach gallery and as predicted by him, was a big success. There had already been interest in it

and Frederick wanted to introduce me to several of his clients. Dad drove Mom and me down and Phillip and his parents joined us at the Hotel Laguna for lunch prior to the gallery visit. Fred Olson, an old family friend and a one-time boyfriend of my mother's, had also been invited. He brought along Don and Martha Henley. Martha was an old girlfriend of my mom's—they had gone to school together. My father couldn't stand her, and had been very thankful when she and Don moved to Laguna Beach. I could understand his impatience. Martha Henley was as dizzy as they come, and never stopped talking. Don, her husband, had obviously learned to tune her out a long time ago and would simply talk across her, as if she wasn't there. He owned a highly successful architectural consultancy business, and although we could never have known it on that particular day, he would eventually become Phillip's boss. He would also play a pivotal role in the events that would change all our lives, forever.

Martha, a diminutive and overdressed chatterbox, regaled us with endless stories about many a boring social function she had tirelessly arranged for this charity and that benefit. Phillip and I would look at each other trying to suppress our giggles, while my father glared warnings at us. My mother did a sterling job of coping with the never-ending stream of gossip that spilled from Martha's mouth. She would interject the occasional "Oh my," or "You don't say?", whenever needed. Fred, who I had grown to like very much despite his being my father's rival for my mother's affection, would simply roll his eyes and try to concentrate on whatever Don was saying. My dad had told me that Fred had actually introduced him to my mother when they were all at college together.

"The biggest mistake he ever made," Dad had chuckled. "I literally pulled the rug from under his feet. I took one look at your mother and knew she was the one for me. Fred was furious, didn't talk to me for a long time, but he came around when he saw that we were really serious about each other."

My mother did finally get Martha to slow down her chattering when we entered the gallery. Who could compete with the size of Frederick Hanson's personality anyway? He welcomed us, his voice booming out across the gallery and introducing his partner Oscar Sharpe, an equally large and enthusiastic gentleman who pumped my hand till I thought my arm would fall off.

"Careful Oscar," Hanson shouted in jocular fashion. "Don't damage the talent! Ha Ha!"

"Quite right!" Oscar's laughter was every bit as loud as his partner's.

It was all too much, really. All these loud people clamoring and jostling around me. I gave Phillip a 'please help me' look and he quickly steered me out of the middle of the throng to where his parents stood, looking a bit bemused by this whole spectacle.

"How does it feel to be the celebrity?" John asked me, with a sympathetic smile.

"Just what it looks like...totally painful," I complained. I don't know if I can take much more of it..." But, of course, I had to grin and bear it as Frederick and Oscar whisked me around the gallery, introducing me, the artist, to various interested clients. During a lull in the proceedings I told my dad that I was ready to go and we decided on a quick getaway.

"I'll tell Hanson to call us in the morning," Dad said. "He wants to take your painting to LA to an art critic there and have him look at it. How do you feel about that?"

"Fine, I guess. Let's just get out of here."

We said our goodbyes amid disappointed wails from Martha who wanted to bend my mother's ear some more. "Call me tomorrow, Eve, won't you?" she gabbled. "There's so much more news to tell you. I just don't see you often enough anymore!"

Phillip and I walked ahead of the group as we left. "Thank goodness that's over," I muttered. "I don't think I could've take one more minute of Martha and Frederick in the same room."

"But just think what a great married couple they'd have made..." Phillip whispered. "They'd have talked each other to death in the first week."

"During the honeymoon!" I whispered back. We looked at each other. "Can you imagine it?" We both fell about, convulsed with laugh-

ter till tears ran down our faces. We were behaving badly—and loving every minute of it.

My mother gave us both a sharp look. "What are you two laughing so hard about?"

"We were just imagining Frederick and Martha on honeymoon!" I bellowed.

"Peter, really..." She started to frown her disapproval but was stopped by my father's roar of laughter.

"Oh God, don't wish that on the poor guy."

"Paul!" Now my mother shifted her indignation onto my father who was still chuckling.

"Oh come on, Eve. Don't you agree it would have been a marriage made in heaven?"

"It would have been no such thing." Then my mom started to laugh too. She looked at John and Elizabeth. "Please don't think we're always this badly behaved."

"Not at all," John said. "We were having a hard time keeping straight faces ourselves, back there."

I remember that afternoon so vividly for many reasons, the main one being that it was the last time all of us would be together. The event that changed all our lives, and once more brought bitter reality to bear, took place on a day unremarkable in every other way. Phillip's parents had gone up to Santa Barbara to visit his dad's only relative—an old aunt who was now in a retirement home. Phillip and I had gone to see an Indiana Jones movie. When we got back home my dad was standing on the driveway waiting for us. He looked very serious and for a moment I thought I was in some kind of trouble, but he looked at Phillip, put his arm around his shoulders and said gently, "Come inside, Phillip. I'm afraid we have some bad news for you, son."

We walked into the hall where my mother was standing. She took a bewildered Phillip in her arms. "I'm so sorry Phillip," she murmured as she held him, "I'm afraid there's been an accident. Your mom and dad's car was hit by another vehicle on the way to Santa Barbara..."

"Are they all right?" Phillip's voice suddenly sounded young and uncertain.

My father took over. "No Phillip...I'm afraid they're not. I'm sorry to have to tell you they were both..." He stumbled over the words; "...They were both killed, Phillip."

A sound I had never heard before escaped from somewhere deep inside Phillip. A low moan, mingled with what was almost a snarl of disbelief. He shook himself free of my mother's arms and stood staring at us, his eyes blind with grief, his face contorted with the effort of trying to control the tears that began to spill from his eyes.

"No, no, no!" he whimpered, falling to his knees and covering his face with his hands. For a moment I was transfixed with horror, and then seeing him in such anguish, I rushed to him and put my arms around him. He clung to me and held me so tightly I thought he would break every bone in my body, but I could not let him go. I looked up at my parents who now held each other as they gazed down at us helplessly. I held him for what seemed an eternity, until his grip on me began to relax a little and his sobbing subsided. My father and I helped him to his feet and he stood, swaying slightly, apologizing as he composed himself. I hugged him to me again.

"Come upstairs," I coaxed. "You can lie down for a while."

Still holding on to my father and me, he nodded and allowed himself to be led upstairs. We took him to my room and laid him on the bed and I sat with him.

My father stroked his hair gently. "Stay with him," he said. "We'll make all the arrangements." Quietly, he left us alone.

Phillip looked at me with anguished eyes, and I lay down beside him in the darkening room. I put my arms around him and he sighed against my chest.

"What am I going to do without them?" I heard him murmur, almost to himself.

"Ssh..." I held him close. "Don't worry...I'll take care of you. You know I'll never leave you. You'll always have me."

His arms tightened around me and I knew he believed me. As I held and comforted him, I felt his grief as surely as if it had been mine. My father had been close to death, but he had come back to us. Phillip's parents were gone forever. He would never again feel their love, hear their praise, their encouragement; never again know that they would be there when he needed them. They were lost to him forever. His pain was palpable and I felt it seep into the core of my being.

Mercifully, he slept after a little while, his grief having exhausted him. I lay unmoving, letting him rest. When he awoke, the realization of what the day had brought would weigh crushingly upon him, and I would have given anything to have spared him all of it.



The next few days were ones that I would prefer to forget, but are indelibly etched in my memory. My father and I went with Phillip to his house where he packed a bag and moved into our guestroom. Seeing him so bereft, so lost, was heartbreaking. We, my parents and I, did our best to console him, but the loss was too enormous for him to even make a pretence of feeling all right. I would see him try so hard to appear his usual jaunty self, but the facade was paper-thin and would soon fall apart. He would disappear for hours on end. I knew he was doing this to spare us the sight of him grieving, but I felt as though I should be there with him. My mother, wise and wonderful as ever, would tell me that it was only natural that he should want some time alone.

"Don't take it to heart, darling," she said, watching me staring disconsolately out of the window. "He needs this time to adjust and to think. He's only a boy, like you. He has to be so confused and...a little scared as to what the future holds for him now."

"But I don't want him to feel alone. I want to let him know he has me...and you, and Dad."

"He already knows that, and that we love him. But Peter, his parents were all he had before us...he has no other family. Only a great-aunt, who is too old to deal with this."

I felt a twinge of panic. "Then what will happen to him?"

"Your father is going to take care of things. If Phillip agrees, he will apply for guardianship, so Phillip can live with us until he's eighteen and can decide for himself what he wants to do."

I looked at my mother in amazement. "You and Dad have already thought this out? Have you talked to Phillip about it? What did he say?" I was beside myself with excitement. Phillip and I would live together!

She gave me a gentle smile. "Not yet, Peter. We thought we'd wait till after the funeral."

"Oh," I muttered. "Of course." But naturally, I could not wait and blurted out what I knew as soon as I saw him. He looked at me impassively for a long moment as he digested this news.

"You don't seem too thrilled with the idea." I couldn't stand the silence in my room any longer.

"It's hard for me to feel thrilled by anything right now," he replied, sitting down on the bed. "Maybe in a few days when I can think more clearly..."

"Right." I mentally kicked myself for being so stupid. Why hadn't I listened to my mother and let them tell him after the funeral? I sat down beside him. "Please don't say anything to my Mom and Dad about...you know...what I just told you. They'll be mad at me for bringing it up before they've had a chance to."

"Your mom and dad are the best," he said quietly. He put his arms around me and held me tight against him. "I can't think of anything else I would rather have Peter, than to be a part of your family, now that mine..." His voice died, as he could not bring himself to say the words that would finish what he was thinking. He bowed his head on my shoulder and wept silently. We cried together, holding each other while the sky darkened and a light rain began to fall.

It seemed that day, even the heavens wept for him.



Forever imprinted on my mind is the day of John and Elizabeth's funeral. They were buried side by side, and there could have been no more grievous sight than Phillip's expression as they were lowered into the ground. How he managed to stand upright at that moment I'll never know. I would have been a small crumpled ball on the ground, but Phillip stood stoically staring ahead as the minister intoned words of ritual over the open grave.

The rain that had begun the day before fell steadily upon us as we stood silently beside him. In their will, his parents had named St. Augustine's Cemetery as their resting-place. A surprise to all as it was not in Pasadena, but just north of Laguna Beach. I looked out at the ocean, made the color of iron under an angry sky—and I could not but help compare it to that day when Phillip and I had stood, side by side, gazing at an azure sea and sky, run through with vermilion by the setting sun.

How different things were now—and always would be. I glanced at him and put my arm around his shoulders. He turned to me and I embraced him, feeling him tremble against me as he fought to control his grief. We walked slowly from the cemetery, my parents and the other mourners following behind.

I knew my parents were planning on having Phillip stay with us and asking him if he wished to be placed under their guardianship until he was eighteen. I also knew he was going to agree to all of this, much to my

delight. I only wished that it signified a more joyous occasion and had not been necessitated by these events.

We were a sorry group as we drove back to the house in the limo the funeral home had supplied for us. At Phillip's request there would be no gathering of friends, something for which I think we were all grateful. He could not have endured anymore expressions of condolence from well meaning friends. He'd had enough and now wanted to be left alone.

"Apart from you of course," he'd told me earlier, "And your mom and dad. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

"You'll never have to do without me, Phillip," I'd answered with all the assurance of youth, and he had smiled sadly and hugged me to him. If it was possible, I think we became even closer during that time. There was not a thing I would not have done for him. For more than a year I had loved him, dreamed of him, considered him above all else. Now, in this dark time I knew he needed me, and wild horses would not have torn me from his side. If all this sounds a bit melodramatic, well I'm sorry, that's the way I felt. The impetuosity of youth perhaps, but real and heartfelt, nevertheless. We were just boys, but the brutality life sometimes brings, was forcing us to grow up fast. Thank God that the love we had for each other was as solid as a rock—a safe harbor in this sea of uncertainty that had begun to roll around us.

That night, after we had toyed with the food my mother prepared for us, we sat in the family room and my dad broached the subject of Phillip's future. He listened politely to what my father said, nodding his understanding every now and then. As I gazed at him listening, his face in turn shadowed and illuminated by the flickering fireplace I was reminded of a portrait I'd seen of Lord Byron, the poet.

Byronesque—the word ran through my head a dozen times while I sat there. That word described him perfectly. The mane of curly hair, the sharply defined features, the sad and lost look on his expressive face. My father stopped speaking and Phillip looked at the three of us, his eyes misting.

"Thank you, sir. I don't think I can ever really tell you how much this means to me. You have always made me feel a part of this family. There's nowhere else I'd rather be than here with all of you right now."

My mother sat beside him, giving him a hug. "We will love having you here Phillip," she said, stroking his hair gently. "You and Peter..." she paused for a moment then continued, "...we know how much your friendship means to both of you."

"Well, that's settled then." My father got up and offered his hand to Phillip who held it for a moment...then he rose from the couch and moved into my father's arms.



The following day we went back to Phillip's house and picked up some more of his clothes and personal items. Our guestroom would become his. It was big enough to accommodate his drawing board and his many books on architectural design. I would have preferred it if we had shared my room, but I thought it prudent at the time not to push that issue. Having him so near was wonderful in itself.

My father called his attorney to explain what had happened and to start the legal proceedings that would make him Phillip's guardian. Phillip's parents had left a very detailed will, but with one omission—it did not give a provision as to what would happen to Phillip should they both predecease him. Everything had been left to him, of course, but legally it would have to be bound up in a trust until he reached the age of eighteen. Phillip took an active interest in all of this and according to my father, asked the financial advisors some pretty searching questions about what would be in his best interests. They were impressed enough to draw up a very thorough portfolio for him and took time explaining it in detail.

During this time Frederick Hanson called, wanting to know if I had enough paintings for him to put on an exhibition of my work.

"There is such a need for young talent," he told my father. "I really feel that Peter's work and creativity would benefit from the right exposure."

"He seems genuinely interested in you Peter," Dad said after he had finished talking with Mr. Hanson. "How do you feel about having your own exhibition?"

"Sounds great." I behaved with all the nonchalance an almost seventeen-year-old can muster.

"Maybe he should come down and take a look at the canvases in your studio."

"Okay. I'm working on Mom's portrait right now. Maybe he'd like to put that on show."

"I didn't know Eve was sitting for you...Can I see it?"

"She's not sitting for me," I told him. "I'm doing it from some sketches I did earlier. Come on, I'll show you."

We climbed the stairs to my studio in the attic together and when we reached the top, I noticed he was out of breath and his face looked pinched.

"You all right Dad?"

"Yeah, just a bit out of condition I think." He quickly tried to brush off my concern. "I haven't been getting the same amount of exercise since the operation. Doctors say I still have to take it easy." He grinned at me. "What do they know, anyhow?"

"Well...if they think you should slow down..."

"I'm fine..." He cut me off with an impatient gesture. "Let's see that portrait..." He strode ahead of me into my studio. "Wow!" I heard him exclaim. "That's terrific."

I followed him in and we stood together gazing at my mother's likeness.

"She'll love this, Peter. Definitely, this should go into your exhibition. No doubt about it."

He turned to me his eyes shining with enthusiasm, his face once again seemingly glowing with health. I mentally breathed a sigh of relief and pushed my earlier concern to the back of my mind.

"But don't sell this one," he continued. "This one I'll be selfish with—whatever you're offered, I'll double it."

"Dad," I protested, "You know I could never sell it to you. It's yours, when I've finished it."

He looked at me for a moment, then took my arm. "Let's sit down for a moment. There's something I want to talk to you about."

We sat down on the floor in the corner of the studio and I looked at him expectantly. He smiled as he gazed around him then he gave a gentle sigh. "You know Peter, there have been times when I wished that you had wanted to follow a more conventional path in life...doctor, lawyer, teacher—that kind of thing. I used to feel apprehensive that you were so determined to be an artist. I've had visions of you starving in an attic somewhere in Paris or drawing portraits of passers-by at a street fair. Ridiculous I know, because your mother and I would always be there for you. But, you know what I mean; there are so many failed artistic people. So many with talent who never make it. Lately though, I have begun to feel you have that special quality that makes the difference. Don't ask me what I mean, because I don't think I can put it into words. It's just that each time I see a new work by you, it's like you have grown as an artist—and as a person."

"Thanks Dad," I murmured, touched by his sincerity. "Your opinion means a lot to me."

"What I'm trying to say here Peter, is that I wouldn't want any other kind of life for you now. This..." he said, indicating my studio, "this is your world." He put his arm around my shoulder and hugged me to him. "There's something else I want you to know. Your relationship with Phillip...You don't have to tell me that it's very special to you—and to him. Your mother and I just want you both to be very sure that this is what you both want."

I looked at him wide-eyed. Was he saying what I thought he was saying?

As if he had read my thoughts, he nodded. "Life is difficult for gay men and women, Peter. There are a lot of factions out there that could hurt you, some of them expounding religious beliefs to justify their prejudice. You must have noticed some of this at school." "Well yes," I agreed. "Some of the kids have been stupid...but Phillip and I can handle that. We can take care of ourselves. Phillip's on the wrestling team!"

He chuckled at that. "And you can challenge them to 'paint brushes at dawn." Then he turned serious again. "But please be careful out there won't you? Your mother and I would be destroyed if anything happened to you."

I put my head on his shoulder. "We'll be careful, don't worry." I looked up at him. "How long have you known?"

"A long time."

"Are you unhappy about it?"

His smile held just a trace of sadness. "Peter, if I could have wished anything else for you, I would have, but only because of the difficulties you may have down the road. I'm not ashamed of you, if that's what you're asking. I am very proud of the fact you're my son. I have no deeprooted fear of homosexuality—only the fear that you may suffer somehow, because of it. Maybe the path you're choosing for a career will protect you from much of the hate-mongering. But I promise you this—as long as your mother and I are alive, no one will speak badly of you in front of us!"

You can see why I loved my dad so much. As I grew older and was confronted first hand with the ugliness he had spoken of, I loved him even more, and considered myself the luckiest of men to have had him as a parent. Listening to some of my friends paint a very bleak picture of their home life once they came out to their parents, made me realize I was indeed blessed having a mother and father who loved and supported me at all times. The eighties was a tense and difficult time for gay men and women. The AIDS epidemic was at its most virulent; many had died and many more were stricken with the disease. Public opinion had turned against us, and the powers-that-be, on Capitol Hill and in the churches, did nothing to assuage the unfounded belief that gays were solely responsible for the epidemic. We had a President who could not even bring himself to say "AIDS" in public!

Phillip, always an avid reader of the news, and a budding radical, would become bitter and angry when he read some of the more vitriolic articles by right-wing extremists. He had a ready listener in my father, and they would both challenge any sympathizers of these malicious purveyors of hatred.

As it neared time for our graduation prom, Phillip wanted us to go together as each other's 'date', but there my father drew the line. I think he might not have objected if my mom hadn't tackled him first and expressed her concern for us.

"Please Paul..." She had gone to him as soon as she heard of our plan. "They could be beaten up—or worse. I've read about this just recently. Two poor boys were nearly killed for dancing together at their prom. Please talk to Phillip about this. I'd never get through the evening if I thought they were in any danger!"

And so my dad confronted us with their objections. "Personally, I think you're both very brave for wanting to do this, but Eve is beside herself, and I have to agree with her. It would be much too risky."

We were a little crestfallen, but we would not go against their wishes. Phillip respected and loved them as if they were his own parents, and in the end we could see the sense of what they said. It would have been naive of us to expect that even in our fairly liberal school, all the kids would have greeted us with open arms, had we decided to stroll into the dance hall, hand in hand, as each other's dates. Although we had not been overtly harassed since the news of our relationship had spread throughout the school, there had been one or two instances when I had been made only too aware that some guys were not at all happy about the situation.

One incident in the cafeteria had left me shaken and very mad. It happened on a day Phillip was engaged in some extra wrestling practice and couldn't join me for lunch. Candace waved me over to her table, but when I sat down two of the guys there got up and left, muttering under their breath about 'not sitting with any fags'. Candace rolled her eyes and then started talking about something or other, but I was not about to let it go. I walked over to where they had reseated themselves.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

One of them, Josh something-or-other looked at me and sneered. "You're the problem, Brandon. You and your fag friend, *Phillip*."

"Excuse me?" I could feel the muscles in my face tighten with rage.

"You heard me, fag."

"Shut up, Josh." His friend rose from the table. "Everyone can hear you, for Pete's sake."

"Good," Josh yelled, his eyes darting around to see what kind of support he could expect. "It's time it was said out loud!"

His friend moved away and Josh and I stood toe to toe, while a deathly hush fell over the entire cafeteria. I stared at him, daring him to make the first move. Almost as if they had wills of their own, my hands curled into fists at my sides as I prepared to defend myself.

"Hey Peter..." I felt an arm thrown over my shoulders and I turned, startled, to see my first fantasy-man, Ron Holmes, standing by me. "What you doin' later? I'm going to need you for swim practice."

He deftly turned me around and led me back to the table where Candace sat staring at us with eyes as big as two movie screens. "Don't let that idiot intimidate you," he whispered. He sat down with me and proceeded to talk about the upcoming swim competition, while all around us, everything returned to normal and the cafeteria was once again abuzz with conversation and laughter. I looked round to see what Josh was doing, but he had gone.

"Thanks Ron," I said. "I think I might have beaten the shit out of him."

"Don't let fools like that get to you, Peter." Ron stood up to go. "I'll see you at the pool." He grinned. "I really do need you there!"

"That Ron is so dreamy," Candace sighed after he'd gone.

"Candace," I exclaimed. "I think you could show a little more concern for what almost happened to me."

"Oh, I know...Can you believe that moron?"

"Candace..." I was hesitant, a little afraid of what her answer might be. "Do many of the kids think that way?" She shrugged her shoulders just a little too flippantly. I know she was trying to spare my feelings. "There are some...but its jealousy, really. You guys always look so together...I'm sure it's because most kids are just not...uh, that *together*."

"Well, that explains a lot!" I tried to sound amused.

"That Josh..." she said. "Nobody likes him. That's probably why he hates you so much. He sees in you something he can never be. We should feel sorry for him, really."

"Right. I'll feel sorry for him after I punch him out, if he ever tries that routine again." I didn't tell Phillip about the incident, but of course, he heard about it anyway. Stuff like that spread from class to class like wildfire. Then I found out, not from him, that he'd had a problem with a couple of his teammates not wanting to wrestle him. Apparently they were sure he'd get a 'woody', when pressed against their oh-so-hunky bodies. Honestly, some people's arrogance is just too much!

At first, Phillip had tried to laugh off their asinine behavior, but when they persisted in their foolishness and went to the coach with their phobias, you-know-what hit the fan. Of course, his coach wasn't about to let this affect Phillip's performance as the school's most valuable competitor, so he told the guys they'd either practice with Phillip or forfeit their place on the team.

When all this came out and I heard about it second-hand from one of Phillip's teammates, I was upset he had not confided in me sooner.

"I didn't want to worry you with this crap," he said, trying to make little of it. "Besides, I had to find out from Ron what happened in the cafeteria the other day."

"That's different..."

"How different?" He tapped me lightly on the chin. "It's all about the same thing—homophobia. Something we'll probably have to deal with all our lives." He put his arms around me. "Just let's promise each other that in future, we talk to one another about it. Okay?"

I nodded as I nestled into his embrace. I was glad his coach had stuck up for him, but a little part of my cynical mind wondered that if Phillip had not been the school champion, would the result have been the same? Would he have been as quick to defend Phillip had he been just a so-so wrestler? Despite my promise to tell Phillip all, I kept those little doubts to myself.

Anyway, once again I digress, so it's back to the prom. I asked Candace if she'd be my date and as she was between boyfriends at the time, she said yes. Phillip asked a girl called Holly, so to all intents and purposes, we attended the prom just like all the other kids—well, almost all the other kids. We knew there were at least six or seven other guys who would rather have gone together, but those days were not as liberal as they are now. Or is it that today's kids are just not so easily subjected to peer pressure?

That night at the prom, as I danced with Candace, and Phillip with Holly, his eyes met mine and we shared a secret smile across the floor. Years later, the memory of that was brought back to me by a sweetly poignant British movie, where two boys in love with each other share just such a moment, at the school dance.

Later that night, after we had returned home, Phillip tapped at my door. Still in his tux and looking incredibly handsome, he bowed slightly to me. "May I have this dance?" he murmured, his lips curling in that sweet, yet mysterious smile of his.

"There's no music."

"We don't need any." He slipped his arms around me and we swayed together as he hummed "Save the Last Dance for Me" close to my ear. I reveled in the feel and warmth of his body pressed to mine. I clung to him, and made a silent vow that nothing in this world would ever part us.



The year that followed was a hectic one for both of us. On August 8th, Phillip turned eighteen and was enrolled at UNC, the university that housed one of the country's most famous architectural colleges.

"I know it sounds like it's at the other end of the earth," he said to me when he told me of his decision to apply at the University of Chicago: "But my dad wanted me to go there. That's where he got his degree. He said it was the best."

How could I argue with him on that score? My mother planned a special going away party for him—something I could not for the life of me get excited about. Why would I? After the party he'd be gone. Where was the festivity in that?

One day as he sat in my studio watching me paint he said, "We should go away somewhere together for a couple of days." He instantly had my full attention. "I was thinking Laguna Beach...you know that cute hotel up by the museum, with the great views. We had lunch there with your folks."

"I remember. When can we do this?"

"Soon...'cause I only have two more weeks."

"Don't remind me!"

"Let's go the day after tomorrow. It shouldn't be too busy during the week. I'll call and make reservations."

He stopped to give me a hug before he went to his room to make the call. I had been dreading his leaving for months, ever since he told me

UNC had accepted his application for enrollment. Not that I was going to be standing around doing nothing. I had applied for and been accepted at Cal Arts, but I wasn't leaving home—it was just a few miles away. True, there would be summer school trips to Europe, something I hoped Phillip would be able to join me on, at least for part of the time. It was all so up in the air at that time and that was what depressed me. Nothing was sure, and the thought of him being away from me for months on end was enough to make me break out in a cold sweat. Really.

"Okay, all done." He beamed at me as he came back. "Cheer up, we still have two weeks before I go, and now we're going to have some time to ourselves. I got us a nice room with ocean view and balcony. Who could ask for anything more?"

His mood was infectious and I found myself laughing as he swung me around the studio in a bad imitation of a tango.

"We'd better let Eve and Paul know right away," he said, stopping abruptly in his tracks. He'd started calling them by their first names some time before, at their insistence.

"Mr. and Mrs. Brandon is way too formal," my father had told him one day. Phillip's natural politeness had prevented him from calling them anything else, except he'd sometimes address my dad as 'sir.' "Makes me feel like an old fogy!" Dad had laughed. "Call me Paul...indulge me a little."

"Yes sir...I mean...Paul," Phillip had chuckled. "It'll take a little getting used to."

"They won't mind," I said now. "Probably be glad to get me out from under their feet for a couple of days. My mother said I was being mopey."

"Hangdog." He looked at me teasingly. "Definitely hangdog."

"Well, it's all your fault," I pouted. "If you weren't going to the back of God-knows-where for the next eon...!"

"Stop whining like a little girl." He grabbed me and swung me off my feet, spinning me around until I cried for mercy. We giggled like fools as we stood there swaying dizzily in each other's arms.

"Oh, Phillip..." I was trying not to sound like I was still whining. "I will miss you."

"I'll miss you too," he said, his lips against my ear. "More than you'll know, every day, every minute." He held me clasped against his hard athletic body and I couldn't help the tears that spilled down my cheeks.

"I'm such a sissy," I muttered, pulling away from him. "I'm not making this any easier for either of us." I looked at him and tried to smile. "You're being so strong. You always are. I wish I were more like you."

"Then you wouldn't be you—you'd be me, and I'd be in a pretty pickle...being in love with myself!" He laughed lightly and ran his fingers gently across my lips. "Don't change, Peter. Always be yourself, never afraid to show your feelings. It's the only honest way to be." He kissed the tip of my nose. "Now, I've totally distracted you from your work. I promised Eve I'd go with her to the Mall today. She's insisting on buying me a new winter jacket before I go to the frozen wastes."

"Okay." I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. "I do really need to get this one done."

He gave me a quick hug, then he was gone.

I returned to my work and was soon lost in it. Frederick Hanson had been as good as his word over the past year and had been exhibiting my work regularly in LA. Several paintings had sold, and as a result I had quite a little nest egg already carefully invested by my father. I had received favorable reviews in the art magazines—some playing on the fact that I was still very young, and obviously the best had yet to come. One reviewer said my work was "totally American". I wasn't quite sure what he meant by that nor did he enlarge on the statement. I had looked to the masters for my early inspiration as one instinctively would—but recently I had become more adventurous in my style, using more vibrant colors, building the paint for added texture. Frederick encouraged this, and told me, quietly and seriously one day, that he was most impressed with the maturity he could now see coming through in my painting.

"You have a unique style, my boy, and one that should not be tampered with too much. A little refining is all that is necessary. I cannot

stress enough however, that what would really be best for you—is a year in Europe. There, you could surround yourself with the world of art, be immersed in it, feel it seep into your mind and body!" He was on a roll now, waving his arms expansively. "Yours is a rare talent Peter, one that I have not seen in many a year. Use it wisely and well...show the world what you can do!"

His florid style always brought me to the edge of laughter, but I had grown to like the strange man and his flair for the theatrical. He reminded me of a circus ringmaster. I could see him in striped vest and top hat, cracking a large whip and announcing the acts in his full stentorian voice. I had a mind to paint him in that get-up, but wondered if he would be impressed, or perhaps insulted. Better to not show it to him, if I ever got around to actually getting it done.

Our trip to Laguna Beach was one of those memories to treasure always. It was a bittersweet time, of course. Phillips imminent departure to Chicago was always there in the back of my mind even as we enjoyed the balmy weather and the town's ambience. The view from our room was spectacular; Catalina Island clearly visible and seemingly so close that we felt we could almost swim across to it. We spent all day on the beaches, playing volleyball with the local guys, soaking up the sun and challenging the waves as they crashed onshore. It was a perfect time, and one that gave us an even greater resolve to one day move permanently to this small bustling seaside town.

At night we holed up in our room, ordering room service so we didn't have to get dressed up for dinner. We lay on the bed, feeding our faces, watching television and making love—not necessarily in that order, of course. We had progressed greatly in that department, due to our constant willingness to 'practice'. One of Phillip's wrestling buddies had lent him a copy of the Khama Sutra, but some of the positions depicted therein were just too hilarious by far. Every time we'd try one, we'd end up giggling and ruining the desired effect. Let's just say our own experimenting proved far more valuable. I had found, by detailed and loving exploration, a place on Phillip's body, that when kissed and gently nib-

bled would send him into paroxysms of desire. He would groan sensuously as I ensnared him with my lips, and I took delight in watching the erotic effect it had on him. Finding out for ourselves what pleasures we could give one another, was a whole lot more fun than reading a manual!

On our last night there as we lay snuggled in each other's arms, listening to the sound of the rolling waves through the open window, I was overcome with a devastating depression. Before I could help myself, tears began to pour from my eyes, and I snuffled uncontrollably against Phillip's chest.

"Sorry," I blubbered, trying to wipe his chest and my eyes at the same time. "I've tried so hard not to do this again."

"It's OK," he whispered, his fingertips caressing my back. "I'm sad too."

"But you're not flooding the room like me. You're so strong Phillip..."

He put a finger to my lips. "Ssh, don't worry about anything. We won't be apart for long. Christmas break will be here before you know it, and I'll be home again."

I hugged him to me in a fierce embrace. He was right of course. It was only a matter of three months that he'd be gone, but it might as well have been eons. I couldn't bear the thought of not having him around. We'd been constantly in each other's company for close to three years. I had come to think of us as inseparable, and now...

Phillip looked at me with the smile that had made me fall in love with him, that first day at the pool. "I'll call you every day." He kissed my soggy cheek. "You can tell me every little thing that's been going on each day. You're going to meet a whole bunch of new people at Cal Arts, and you'll be so busy you won't even notice I'm gone."

"Now you're being silly," I told him, chuckling in spite of myself. He held me tightly and before long we were lost once more in the throes of our desire for each other. Later, as we watched the midnight movie, Phillip fell asleep in my arms. I loved when that happened as it gave me an opportunity to just gaze at him without him getting uncomfortable

under that 'steady scrutiny' he would laughingly accuse me of. I never tired of looking at him and sometimes, if he was working at his drawing board or reading a book, he would reach over and turn my face away from him with a teasing, "Give me a break!"

I know I was obsessed by him, besotted even; but that was me—never one to be content with half measures.



A week later he was in Chicago and I was as morose as I knew I would be. Mom and Dad were sympathetic at first, then grew out of patience with me, as I tended to not pull myself together as they had hoped I would. As the weeks dragged by and all I had to look forward to were his phone calls, I became what my new friend, Brian at Cal Arts, had no hesitation in calling me—"A giant pain in the ass!"

Brian was a happy-go-lucky kind of guy. Not conventionally good-looking, but with such a sweet disposition and sense of humor that he was a magnet to boys and girls alike. Tall, wide shouldered, with a shock of red hair that defied all his attempts to tame it and the brightest blue eyes I'd ever seen, he strode around the campus bursting with confidence, looking more like a football quarterback than an artist, certain of his place in the order of things. We had taken to each other right away, though I was a bit amazed he didn't dump me just as quickly, due to my less than sunny disposition in those early days of our friendship.

"You look like a kid who's lost his candy," he remarked at the break. "What's up?"

Not wanting to sound too whiny, I shrugged off the question and asked where he came from.

"Laguna Beach."

"Really? I love that place! What's your medium?"

"Graphic design. You?

"Oils mainly. Landscaping and portraits."

"Wow, that's a hard nut to crack, isn't it?"

"Well, I've had a couple of exhibitions already," I said defensively.

"Great!" He smiled, showing big white teeth. "So what's the problem?"

"Problem?"

"You look pissed off all the time."

"Oh that. I'm missing a friend, that's all."

"What's his name?"

"Phillip..." I looked at him with surprise. "How did you know it was a guy?"

"Because my gaydar is never wrong!" he replied, with a little chuckle.

"Well..." I replied warily.

"It's OK—you can tell me," he said with a grin

"I don't know you well enough to go into personal stuff."

"'Course you do. You look like you need to talk. I'm here—so talk" He put his hand on my shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. That was Brian, I quickly learned. A genuine guy who could be trusted with your secrets and who, once he liked you, was a friend for life. Over the weeks and months, I learned to trust and admire his strength of character, and he taught me not to take myself so seriously. He was the same age as me—eighteen—but he seemed a lot more mature and I knew instinctively, that he and Phillip would get along very well.

So, as he gazed at me with that look of understanding, I told him everything that was bothering me. The poor guy must have wished he'd never asked, as the floodgates opened and I poured out my heart to him. Looking back a little later, I had a good laugh at myself, as everything I told him, of course, was of so little consequence to anyone but me.

I mean, what was the big deal? So Phillip and I were parted for the first time since our friendship began, but we spoke on the phone everyday. He sent me amusing letters filled with gossip and anecdotes about the people he had met—and best of all, he'd be back in less than two months for the Holidays.

As I told Brian all this, he looked at me with an amused smile on his lips.

"Oh, poor you, poor you!" He shook his head in mock sympathy. "So, let me get this straight. You are in love with the most wonderful guy

in the world, who it would seem returns this love just as strongly. You have the best parents in the world—that's what you said, right? A beautiful home, two exhibitions of your paintings already under your belt, but wait...something's wrong...Oh dear, Phillip is in Chicago and you have to wait till December, a whole seven weeks away, before you see him again. How can you stand it? No wonder you're so distraught. Poor you!" He was laughing now and I didn't know whether to punch him one, or join in. Fortunately, common sense prevailed and I laughed with him.

"Oh, you must think I'm a colossal jerk!" I wheezed.

"Something like that." He gave me a big hug in those thick arms of his. "Better now?"

"Much. Thanks for helping me put this in a better perspective."

"That's what we artists do best, isn't it?" He winked at me as I winced at his joke.

As luck would have it—or in this case, wouldn't have it—it was much more than seven weeks before I saw Phillip again. Two days before his flight home, Chicago was hit by a fearsome snowstorm that closed O'Hare airport down. He called me to let me know all flights were canceled and there was no possibility of him coming home in time for Christmas. He couldn't even get to the airport, the roads between the college and O'Hare being impassable.

To say I was totally freaked is an understatement. My mother was appalled hearing me use language even I didn't know I possessed, as I stormed around the house bewailing the cruel fates that were keeping us apart. Oh, the drama! Meryl Streep had nothing on me.

Unfortunately for me, but very fortunately for Brian, he wasn't around for me to vent my spleen on him. He and his parents were spending Christmas with his cousin and her family in New Mexico.

I was insufferable until my father pulled me aside and told me, that while they were truly sorry Phillip wouldn't be home for Christmas, my acting like a spoiled brat wasn't helping any part of the situation.

I calmed down a bit after that and tried to look as if I was still a part of the human race. I helped my mother prepare Christmas dinner and

even managed to sound like I wasn't coming apart when Phillip called to wish us all Merry Christmas. He sounded quite chipper I remember, which really didn't please me one bit. I wanted him to feel as bad as I did. Of course he did, he was just better at hiding it than I was and didn't want to upset me even more. Too bad I didn't have his sterling character.

When Brian got back from his trip and heard what had happened he was duly sympathetic but had to add, "Well, there's only a slight chance of snow at the Easter break, so he'll just have to think of another excuse."

I looked at him in amazement, till he started laughing and punched me playfully on the shoulder. "You are way too easy to fool, Peter Brandon. You should see your face!"

"You really are a creep," I yelled, laughing in spite of myself. "Anyway, as soon as the weather clears, I'm going up there to see him."

"Oh, thank God. Then maybe we'll all get some relief from your long face."

When I told Phillip of my plan to visit him he sounded as excited as I was. "Great!" he exclaimed, much to my delight. "I'll book us a room at the Greenwich. I stayed there once with my folks. It was really nice."

"I can't wait," I gurgled with happiness. "I'm already counting the days."



When my plane touched down in Chicago and I looked out at the gray wet landscape that surrounded the airport, the bleakness of it all in such sharp contrast to California's sunshine, was a shock to my system. How could Phillip stand it? I wondered, as I peered through the plane window. I was feeling just a little nervous as I followed the other passengers down to baggage claim. What if Phillip's feelings had changed over the months we'd been apart? What if he'd decided our relationship would be a hindrance to him in his plans for his future. What if he'd found someone else to be his best friend...? What if...what if...?

And suddenly there he was, standing in front of me; his arms open, his smile making me fall in love with him all over again. As we hugged,

his lips touched my ear and he whispered, "I'd kiss you on the mouth, but it might cause a sensation."

"It would cause a sensation in me," I said, holding him tightly, really not caring what anyone else might think.

"Let's go." He shouldered my bag. "I can't wait to get you all to myself."

I grinned happily at him, all my fears so quickly dispelled by his obvious delight in seeing me again. I kept taking sideways glances at him as we strode quickly through the airport corridors towards the taxi rank.

He looked incredible. He'd had his hair cut shorter and it made him look more mature, somehow. Was he taller? It seemed so as I hurried to keep up with him.

"You're taller," I said.

"So are you. I noticed it as soon as I saw you back there in the crowd." "Really?"

"Uh huh." He smiled at me as he opened the cab door. "Greenwich Hotel," he told the cabbie as we settled into the seat together. He winked at me. "There's more I noticed, but it'll keep till we're alone." He put his hand over mine and held it all the way to the hotel. I leaned against him, feeling the strength and hardness of his body.

Life was looking rosy, all over again.

Our room was spacious and commanded a great view of the city. Not that I wanted to look out in those first few hours we spent there. As soon as he closed the door, Phillip took me in his arms and kissed me hard and long. That was even before we got our coats off. It was as if a fever had infected us. The coats came off, then the sweaters, then...well you know the routine. We fell on the king size bed and didn't get up from it for a long time—in fact, when we did take notice of things other than each other's kisses and caresses, it was already dark and we were both famished.

"Let's order room service," Phillip suggested. "Then we can shower while we wait. Would you like some champagne?" He laughed at my surprised expression. "I guess I look like I'm twenty-one. They didn't ask me for ID in the store."

"Well okay," I replied slowly. "You're not drinking all the time are you?"

"Of course not; a few beers only at parties."

I'd tasted beer of course, and didn't like it much. "Champagne's a better idea," I said with a leer. "I hear it's an aphrodisiac."

"We don't need none o' that, baby." He gave me a lascivious grin and licked his lips lewdly. We both fell about laughing, then we were kissing again and in the ensuing action, the room service and champagne were totally forgotten.



Gray dawn was sneaking in through the window when I next awoke. Phillip was still asleep and I lay a while watching him, as I loved to do. My romantic ruminations were brought to an abrupt halt, however, by a deep rumbling that came somewhere from the pit of my stomach. My God, but I was famished! Not surprising as I hadn't eaten since breakfast on the plane, the previous day. I slipped out of bed and called room service. Fifteen minutes later I opened the door for the waiter.

"I'll take it from here," I told him taking charge of the trolley. I pressed some money into his hand and closed the door quickly. Phillip was still asleep and I wanted to be able to wake him with the smell of fresh coffee under his nose.

"Mmm..." he murmured so cutely as I brushed his lips with mine.

"Breakfast is served sir," I whispered against his ear and giggled as his arms pinned me to him and he tried to drag me back into bed. "No, no...unhand me villain. We must eat, or I shall perish."

"So, tired of me already?" he complained. "Love's loser to a plate of pancakes!"

I kissed him heartily. "Come on," I said. "Eat...you need to regain your strength for the next round."

"If you insist," he growled, then gave me a sly smile. "You are wonderful, y'know."

"You ain't so bad yourself, mister—now eat."

We munched happily and slurped the hot coffee, all the while looking at each other.

"I've missed you so much," he said, swallowing the last of his pancake.

"Me too," I mumbled, my mouth full.

"We can't be apart next Christmas. It was awful. That reminds me..."

He jumped out of bed and ran to the closet. I had time to admire the sleek muscularity of his body as he rummaged about, before pulling out a large box wrapped in Christmas paper.

"I'm sorry; it's kind of heavy, so if you want to mail it home, that's OK."

He was right—it was heavy. Eagerly, I tore at the wrapping like a little kid, and gasped with delight, as I laid bare an artist's case made of polished oak.

"It's beautiful," I told him, my eyes misting. "Just beautiful. Thank you so much."

"You're beautiful, Peter. Each time I look at you, I'm just that much more in love with you."

"You know just how to make me the happiest guy on earth, don't you?"

"As happy as you make me?"

"Sometimes I think that's all I want to do." I leaned forward and kissed him gently. His lips parted, his tongue slipping between my teeth and exploring the inside of my mouth. My skin became hot as every nerve ending in my body tingled with desire. "Wait..." I gasped, rapidly becoming distracted by the sensations he caused in me. "I want to give you something..."

"And I want to give *you* something," he murmured sexily in my ear. I was helplessly in his thrall and allowed myself to be pulled into his arms. He untied my robe and I slipped out of it, pressing my nakedness to his, feeling the hardness of his erection pushing against my belly. I felt myself melting into his arms, wanting no more than this; to make time stand still, and be forever with only him.



And so, for the next few years, our lives became pretty nomadic. It seemed either Phillip or I were constantly in a plane, train or car as we made many a trip to be together. I don't think he minded—and I certainly didn't. Being with him always brought me the greatest happiness.

There was some more sorrow. My grandmother passed away just after my twentieth birthday. She had been ailing for some years and so it was a relief for her, therefore for us. My father being her only child was left a large inheritance, but the surprise was, she had left me a sizeable chunk of money, to be held in trust till I was twenty-one.

Also, during that time I was granted a scholarship in Paris. Frederick Hanson was delighted when I told him the news. I spent six months there, soaking up the incredible sights of the Left Bank, Montmartre, the Moulin Rouge, the Louvre and all the other places the impressionists made famous. I sketched and painted my way around the city and even learned to speak enough French to make myself, if not accepted by the Parisians, at least not sneered at. The French are tough to get to know, but they like artists well enough.

I suppose it's round about here I should come clean about something. After all, I vowed to remember everything. During my stay in Paris, something happened that I had never thought possible. I was sitting in the Cafe de Flores on the Left Bank one afternoon, alone of course, busy with my sketching, sipping some coffee, when I suddenly became aware that I was being watched. I glanced around and my eyes

met those of a young man, who sat two tables away, smiling at me. He was about my age, dark complexioned, black curly hair—altogether a very attractive young man, and before I could stop myself, being the friendly soul that I am, I smiled back at him.

He rose and approached my table. "May I join you?" he asked, in English. His voice was warm and husky, the accent I couldn't quite place. I was intrigued.

"Please." I put down my sketchpad and pushed the chair toward him. He sat opposite me and held out his hand.

"Bernard," he said, holding my hand for just a trifle longer than necessary. "And you are...?"

"Peter...Peter Brandon. I'm from the US."

His smile grew wider. "I know. You look American."

I laughed. "Is that good or bad?"

"For me, very good. I like Americans. I have been to America several times...it is, for me anyway, a home from home."

"Really?"

"My father was American..."

"And your mother?"

"Portuguese. I live here now in Paris, but I was born in Lisbon. We traveled a lot. My father was a diplomat."

"Do you live with your parents now?" I asked.

"My mother only. My father died five years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Are you still in school?"

"Art school...like you, I think." He gave me another sunny smile. "I saw you drawing everyone who passes by. You're an artist, yes?"

"Yes...at least I try to be."

He picked up my sketchbook and riffled quickly through the pages. "You are very good, I think. Oils or watercolors?"

"Oils mostly. I like the depth and textures. And you?"

"Acrylics. You wouldn't like my style..."

"Why on earth do you say that?" I liked to think I kept an open mind about all trends in the art world.

"It's a little...shall we say...wild?"

I grinned at him. "I like wild."

"My teachers don't, it seems," he said with a grimace. "Too commercial, they tell me."

"Ah, well we are in Paris, are we not?" I smiled and stretched my arms expansively. "The city of the aesthetics."

He laughed aloud, then touched my arm gently. "Walk with me a little?"

I gathered up my belongings, tipped the waiter and, as we left, Bernard slipped his arm through mine. I thought nothing of it—it was, after all, a Continental custom that I felt comfortable with. I had decided that when Phillip came to visit me here in Paris, we would walk everywhere arm in arm, with no fear of curious or hostile looks. We walked down to the river and sat in the shadow of Notre Dame Cathedral, watching the boats slip silently by. We talked for a long time and before I knew it, it was late afternoon and I was going to be late for class.

"I must go, I'm sorry," I told him.

"Meet me tomorrow," he said. "At the Cafe deux Magots. You know it? I will buy you lunch."

I nodded. "Okay. I'll look forward to it. One o'clock all right?"

"I'll be there." He looked at me for along moment, then leaned forward and kissed me on the lips. I started back in surprise, but he gripped my shoulder, not roughly. "Don't be so American, Peter." He smiled and walked away.

I stood watching him go, my fingers straying to my lips that still felt his kiss. That was something I had not anticipated. Not the kiss, as much as the effect it had on me. I felt like young Bernard had just dropped a bombshell on me, in the middle of that afternoon.

All through class I thought of him. The live model we were drawing looked nothing like him, yet when I'd finished, it was Bernard's sweet face that looked at me from my sketchpad. I'd better get over this real fast, I thought, as I walked the two blocks to the tiny apartment I had rented. Phillip was going to be here in just two weeks time and he certainly didn't need...My thoughts were abruptly interrupted as an arm

was suddenly draped across my shoulders, and Bernard's laughing face thrust close to mine.

I stopped in shock. "Where did you spring from?" I gasped.

"I waited for you to finish your class. Are you not pleased to see me?"

"Oh, of co...course, very pleased," I stammered. "But you said lunch tomorrow..."

"I couldn't wait. I wanted to see you again. We have much to say to each other."

I looked at him and with a sickening certainty, I knew where this was going—if I let it. I had to nip this in the bud, right away.

"Bernard," I said slowly. "You're right, we have much to say. I have something to say right now...just so you don't get the wrong idea. I have someone in my life—someone to whom I am totally committed. I hope you understand that we can never be more than just good friends. If you still want that then I'm your man, but more than that, I cannot give you."

He looked away from me for a moment, then he shrugged and smiled. "Of course, that is all I want." He took my arm and we started to walk again. "I will not lie to you, more than friendship would be good too, but I will respect your commitment." He glanced at me, his eyebrows arched in question. "Are you not very young for such an arrangement?"

"Phillip and I have been together since we were fifteen," I replied, with just a hint of smugness.

"And where is he, this *Phillipe*?"

"In Chicago, studying architecture. He'll be here in a couple of weeks."

"Oh, so I will have to work fast!"

"Bernard..."

He laughed gaily. "Don't worry, mon ami. I promise I will not misbehave. Invite me up for coffee."

We were standing outside the wrought iron gates of my apartment building. I hesitated for just a moment, then I pushed the gate open for him. He took my hand as we climbed the stairs, and although my first impulse was to pull away, I did not.

Don't be so American, I was thinking as we climbed the stairs together. They're just that much more familiar over here.

Uh huh.

I wish I could say that Bernard was as good as his word, but the moment we entered the apartment, he was all over me. Instinctively, I backed off trying to hold him at arms length, but he would have none of it. Before I knew it, we were on the bed (did I mention the apartment was tiny?), Bernard on top of me, his lips clamped on mine, his tongue swirling inside my mouth. For an instant I felt charged with sexual need and my arms closed tightly around him. Then, realization set in and with an almighty effort I heaved him off me.

"Dammit, Bernard!" I bellowed. "What are you playing at?"

He looked at me with a scowl. "You're the one who is playing—playing hard to get!"

I scowled back at him. "I don't want to be got—by you or anyone else. I've told you I have Phillip in my life and that's all I need." I tried to calm down. "Bernard, I was upfront with you. I was not leading you on."

"You invited me up here!"

"No, you invited yourself," I reminded him. "Now, I'm inviting you to leave."

His scowl deepened, but he stood and prepared to go. I tried not to notice the bulge in his pants that was level with my eyes as he stood in front of me.

"I just don't get it, Bernard. You seemed to understand what I was saying out there on the street—then you try to jump me. Did you think I was that shallow?"

He laughed, adjusting the front of his pants for my benefit. "You Americans don't know how to enjoy life. You tie yourself to one person and think yourself happy. You should be sampling all that life has to offer while you're still young."

"What's with this 'you Americans' all of a sudden?" I asked. "Back in the cafe you were telling me how much you like Americans, and that your father was American."

"Ah well, it's a good line. It gets the ball rolling, as they say."

"You mean you were lying?"

He rolled his eyes and shrugged. "I call it, being everything to everyone."

Right.

"Okay Bernard," I said with a sigh. "I wish I could say, nice knowing you—but then, I would be lying too."

With another shrug of those, oh so expressive shoulders, he headed for the door, where he paused and looked back.

"Au revoir, Peter."

I smiled sweetly. "No, I think this calls for Adieu, Bernard."

The door slammed behind him and I blew a big sigh of relief...and not just from the fact that he had gone. As I sat on the bed thinking about what had just happened, I had to admit to myself that I had been attracted to Bernard—no doubt about it. Another time, another place, and who knew where it might have led, but...and it's a great big BUT, I would never have been able to look Phillip in the eye again without thinking, *I cheated on you*. As it was, the mere fact that it had come so close, gave me pause to feel guilt. I recognized that what I needed was sexual fulfillment, something that had not been lacking until Phillip and I were forced to spend so much time apart.

Just pull yourself together Peter, I told myself. He'll be here in just a couple of weeks.



And indeed he was. To say I was delirious is just simply putting it mildly. The poor guy must have thought I was going to devour him whole, the way I attacked him that first night together in Paris. I'll bet that little bed in that tiny apartment never got such a workout. The only time we left the apartment was when we got ravenous—for food. I had no fridge, so we had to go out daily for fresh produce and bread. But it

was sheer heaven to have Phillip in Paris with me. Bernard was forgotten. A small blip on the radar screen of life.

Huh?

That is, or *was*, until Phillip and I were strolling (arm in arm) over one of the countless bridges that cross the Seine, when there he was...Bernard.

"What's wrong?" Phillip looked at me, feeling the sudden tensing of my arm in his.

"Nothing."

"Peter...Hello!"

Damn him...I thought for sure he'd ignore me, but nooo! *Quelle sur-prise*. I gave him a rather sickly smile. "Bernard, how are you?"

"Well. How kind of you to ask." He smiled, showing his lovely teeth and dimples. "This must be *Phillipe*." He held out his hand, which of course Phillip shook immediately. Always the gentleman.

"Phillip," I mumbled, "This is Bernard...uh, he's an art student too." "Oh, right..." Phillip said, all smiles. "...nice to meet you."

"I am so happy to meet *you*, Phillipe." He held on to Phillip's hand as he leaned closer and murmured, "Peter has told me so much about you..."

"Uh, well..." I was starting to pull Phillip on our way. "Nice seeing you, Bernard. Take care."

For a moment, I thought he was going to object to our hurried departure, but then with a shrug and a smile he turned and strolled away. I could hear him chuckle as he walked on.

Phillip gave me a raised eyebrow look. "What was that all about?" "What?"

"You know what. It's not like you to cut someone off like that. Don't you like him? He seems like a nice guy."

"Um, yeah...he's all right I guess. A bit egotistical...not my style really... you know..."

Phillip was looking at me, a small smile tugging at his upper lip. He leaned against a parapet and crossed his arms.

"Okay, come on. Tell me what happened."

I must have looked as guilty as hell, so there was no point in waffling any longer. "Well, if you must know, he came on to me...in the apartment... started kissing me and all that."

"And all what?"

"That was it. I wouldn't let it go any further. I told him all about you and how much I loved you...and he'd better stop, or else."

Phillip laughed quietly and I frowned at him. "It's not funny," I pouted. "What if something had happened?

"There's only one way something could have happened, Peter...and you know what that is. He's an attractive guy...if you felt tempted, that's understandable."

"I wasn't tempted! Well, only for a moment. Oh God, why am I feeling so guilty? Nothing *happened*..."

Phillip wrapped his arms around me, right there on the bridge. He put his lips close to my ear and whispered, "Stop already. You don't have to do this. It's all right, really. These things happen."

"They do?" I pulled back slightly and looked at him. "It's happened to you?"

He nodded. "Almost the same scenario. Handsome guy saying all the right things. I'm feeling lonesome...we kissed..."

I stiffened in his arms, but he tightened them about me, holding me prisoner.

"Then I thought of you," he said. "And that was that. Goodbye, hand-some guy."

I leaned against him and buried my face in his shoulder. "What a fool I've been," I said, "Thinking that you wouldn't see this for what it was."

"We've been apart too much," he whispered. "We have a lot of to make up for. Things seem to grow out of proportion when you're not there to talk it through with me."

We clung together as darkness fell around us and the lamps on the bridge flickered to life. Somewhere below us we could hear the strains of music played on an accordion. We stood together, our arms still around each other, watching a pleasure boat pass beneath us. It's decks were filled with couples dancing slowly to the sensuous and romantic mood of the music, and for a moment we were caught up in the heady atmosphere, allowing our bodies to sway together to the rhythm. We held each other until the music faded away and the lights of the boat dwindled to distant specks on the water.

Ah, Paree...city of romance, for sure.



The rest of the summer we spent in Rome and London. If Phillip ever tired of me dragging him around the countless art galleries in those two cities, he never voiced a complaint. He even seemed to share my excitement when I would marvel at the techniques used by the old masters. Although his taste lay more in the straight lines of modern architecture, his discriminating eye could tell when he was looking at something expertly done.

At one point, however, I remember as we trailed through a gallery in Rome filled with a multitude of religious paintings, he paused and chuckled.

"What?" I asked him.

"I think I'm suffering from a surfeit of poor old St. Sebastian looking like he's got a bad case of indigestion. I know if my chest was filled with as many arrows as he's got there, I wouldn't be looking just as if I'm slightly pissed off!"

We had a good laugh at that and I had to admit you can sometimes have too much of a good thing. He was much more impressed when we went to an exhibition at the London Portrait Gallery of a little known Scottish artist—Alan Ramsay. Like me, he found the portraiture by this fine artist to be beyond merely excellent. As we stood, side by side, in front of Ramsay's self-portrait, he whispered, "I feel as though I'm looking at a real flesh and blood person, not just some image painted on canvas."

Silently, I agreed, and determined this was a technique I would have to study in more detail. What intrigued me most about this artist was that he, like me, found his talent at an early age. When he was only fifteen, his portrait of his father, of which his parent was justly proud, caused a stir in artistic circles and it was not long before Ramsay was sought after as a portrait artist by the aristocracy, eventually becoming a favorite of English Royalty. That exhibition of Ramsay's work made a huge impression on me—an impression that never dimmed in the years to come. There is no doubt in my mind, that the success I have enjoyed as a portrait artist can be attributed to Ramsay's influence, particularly in his development of the 'natural' portrait.

My parents came to London and we toured the English countryside, stopping at many a village pub and enjoying the hospitality of the British bed and breakfast inns. My photographic memory came in handy on my return to California, as I was able to paint an English landscape completely from memory. This became a particular favorite of Phillip's. He said it would always remind him of that happy time—our first European visit together.

I guess I was showing a level of maturity by this time as Phillip's absences from my life, due to his attending UNC, didn't cut me up as emotionally as before. Naturally, I would have preferred had he been by my side constantly, but I knew that was not feasible, and so I accepted it.

I think that somehow, my experience with Bernard had been good for me in some strange way. That Phillip and I could both be lured by the attentions of someone new did not seem like a weakness—au contraire, (that's all the French you'll get from me, I promise). Those experiences served to strengthen our love for each other, borne out by the simple fact, we didn't give in to the impulse. I'm not saying we were both saints, far from it, but I think we just knew that our relationship was too valuable to lose over a quick metaphorical roll in the hay.

Life was never as good as when we were together and I longed for the day when I could see him on a daily basis. He loved what he was doing so much, that sometimes his enthusiasm seemed to outweigh his sadness at us being parted so much—and don't think I wasn't slightly miffed by that. As the years progressed and I got to know him that much better, of course I realized it was just Phillip's way of dealing with stuff he couldn't control. He was not one for dwelling on the negatives.

Although he could be very much the realist at times, he was blessed with a liberal dose of optimism. He could see ahead to the good times he believed awaited us, once we were set up in the positions we were striving for. He told me his goals were simple enough.

"Just you and me in our own home with an ocean view. You creating masterpieces in your studio, me running a very successful architectural business. Both of us enjoying life, and each other, to the max."

I couldn't find anything wrong with that. I was just impatient as ever to see it come true. Despite my tendency to try and hurry things along, life proceeded at a normal if eventful pace. That year, we both turned twenty-one. Phillip first, he was three months older than me, his birth-day being in August and mine in October.

I had a landscape painting on exhibition in a Laguna Beach gallery, and one day received a phone call from a man who was to become a very dear friend. He had a marked British accent and told me his name was Rodney Whitbread.

"Rod for short. My partner, 'A'—that's short for Arthur—and I, saw the landscape painting you have on exhibition here in town. We live in South Laguna you see. We have a house here we use when we're not gallivanting around the world, and from our deck we have a divine view we've always wanted to have painted. Do you think we could commission you to undertake such a thing? I mean I don't know if you do this kind of thing or not, but we would both be just delighted if you could. We think your talent is quite remarkable..." He suddenly chuckled. "My word, I am rambling along. 'A' says I do it all the time. I haven't given you an opportunity to speak at all! So, what d'you say?"

"Well," I laughed with him. "It sounds like something I'd like to do. I love Laguna. In fact, Phillip and I will be down there this weekend."

"Phillip?"

"My partner."

"Wonderful! Perhaps you could come to our house for lunch, and then you could see for yourself what we're so mad about?"

"We'd be delighted," I told him.

He gave me the address and we arranged to meet with them at one o'clock on the Saturday. Phillip was going to be home for a few days and we had arranged to visit Laguna, which was almost becoming a tradition with us—our home away from home, as it were. Now that the trust my grandmother had left me was mine to use, I had even started to think of buying a house down there. Somewhere for Phillip and I to live, not too far from Pasadena, but enough to give us our independence. Of course, that would have to wait until he had graduated from university, but that wasn't too far in the future, even to my impatient mind.

So, in late October, we met the two men who were to become such good friends of ours. When Rod threw open his door in answer to our knock, his welcoming smile told us immediately we were going to get along just fine. He introduced us to 'A', whose elfin quality was totally endearing. We stayed for lunch and long after, enthralled by their quick and ready wit, the marvelous stories of their lives in the British theatre, and 'A's uncanny ability to mimic almost every movie actress that had ever lived. His take on Bette Davis was a riot and had us convulsed with laughter till our ribs hurt.

Before we knew it, the sun had begun to set and we stood on the deck and gazed in admiration of its splendor, as it cast a shimmering red glow over the sky and ocean. Catalina Island stood out in bold relief against this vivid backdrop, and I knew this particular commission would be a labor of love.

"I hope we're like Rod and 'A' when we're as old as they are," Phillip said, as we undressed for bed back in our hotel. "They are so attuned to each other."

"Yes they are," I agreed. "All these years together have made them almost as one."

"I'm sure they have their disagreements, like everyone else, but they certainly seem to care a great deal for each other." He threw himself down on the bed and held his arms open to me. Gladly I climbed into their shelter and laid my head on his warm chest.

"Mmm," I whispered. "Feels good." I looked up at him and grinned. "D'you think they still do it?"

"Peter...don't be crass!" He laughed, and I held him tightly as his body shook with the effort to control his mirth. "You are really a brat. Thinking of those nice old guys like that!"

"Well, what I meant was, I hope they still do." I winked at him. "Which means I hope we still do when we're their age."

Phillip hugged me to him. "Oh, I'll still love you honey, even when you have to wear Depends..." This image was too much and we were now rolling around laughing like fools, till he grabbed me and clamped his mouth on mine.

"That's enough of that," he growled. "We have some serious stuff here to attend to."

I wasn't about to argue with him.



We saw a lot of Rod and 'A' over the next few weeks and introduced them to my parents and also to Brian. Brian, being a local, took us in his car to an area of the town just off the highway. It was like entering another world. Quiet, tree lined streets with hacienda style homes, nestled behind carefully maintained greenery. The whole area had a serenity that belied its proximity to the bustling highway that was within walking distance.

"My folks wanted to buy here originally," Brian said. "But there was nothing available at the time—that's why we ended up where we are."

There was nothing wrong with where they were as far as I could see. Brian's home was a custom designed two story house with a great view of the ocean, but his parents still hankered for the area he was now showing us.

"If you guys ever do decide to live here, this is where you should be. Get a realtor who knows his stuff and can keep an eye on what's going on here."

And that's more or less what happened. At one of Rod and 'A's many parties we met Henry Clark, who Rod swore was the only realtor 'worth

his salt' as he put it. We were impressed enough to ask him to start looking for us, and we told him about the area of town we particularly liked.

"Very good taste," Henry said with a grin. "I'll see what I can do."

Meanwhile, I had finished Rod and 'A's seascape and they were thrilled and delighted with it. Of course it was another excuse for them to throw yet another party at which several people asked me if I could do the same for them—with their favorite views. All this made me even more eager to move to Laguna and finally we told my parents of our intentions. They had seen this coming of course, what with our so frequent trips there, but my mother looked a little forlorn when we announced the news.

"I'm just so used to you being here," she said sadly. "But, I can't be selfish. It's time for you to spread your wings."

"It's not like it's so far away Eve," my father chuckled. "An hour away, that's all."

"And it's such a great artist's colony!" I added my two cents worth. "Phillip and I both love it there, and once we find a house you're both welcome any time you want a weekend away."

"Careful of that, Peter," Dad laughed. "We might just take advantage of your hospitality. By the way," he added. "You might want to look up Ed Hamilton sometime. He's an old school buddy of mine, a doctor at St Margaret's Hospital. He and his wife Kay would love to meet you both, I'm sure."

"And Fred too," my mother said. "He can introduce you and Phillip to some of his friends."

"I don't think we'll be lonely down there Mom," I said. "Rod and 'A' have already introduced us to more than we can handle. And Brian lives down there too, don't forget."

Shortly after this conversation, Henry called me to let me know he had a possible listing on a house in the area we liked. "It needs some work," he said. "It's a bit run down, but the location is terrific, and the view is stunning. Can you and Phillip come and see it this weekend?"

"Well, Phillip is in Chicago," I replied, after a moment's hesitation. "But I guess I can come down if you think it's what we're looking for."

"It's definitely worth a look, Peter."

"Okay. I'll be down on Saturday. I'll let Phillip know." I put the phone down and was immediately gripped with a feeling of great excitement. Somehow, I knew that the property Henry was going to show me was going to be pretty special.

I told my parents about it and asked them to come with me. "Of course I won't make any decision without Phillip's OK," I told them. "But I really want to see it as soon as possible." They said they'd love to come, so I called Phillip to let him know what was going on.

"Wow." He was impressed. "Henry certainly didn't waste any time. Gee, I wish I could be with you."

"Me too, but don't worry, you'll get a thorough report and of course I won't do anything without your approval."

"Honey, I trust your judgment totally."

"Thanks, but I'll still want to talk it over with you."

"Okay. Can't wait to hear all about it."

After some smoochie talk we hung up, and I called Henry back to confirm our appointment. The only blight on the horizon was my mom's insistence that she let Martha Harley know we were going to be in Laguna.

"Mom," I whined, "Why? She'll want to come along, and she'll yak the entire time."

My dad averted his eyes and said nothing, but my mother held firm. "Martha would be hurt if I was down there and didn't tell her." She looked at me and gave me a conspiratorial smile. "Of course, she just might have previous plans, but at least my conscience would be clear."

No such luck, I thought, groaning to myself, then groaned out loud when I heard her talking to Martha on the phone and from the sound of it, Martha just couldn't wait to see us on Saturday. Damn! My dad gave me a sympathetic look but we were unable to do anything about it.

Despite that, on the Saturday as we drove into a rather windswept Laguna Beach, I was beside myself with anticipation. Henry was waiting outside his office for us, and his air of quiet professionalism didn't quiver an inch as Martha barreled into the parking lot in her Cadillac, honking her horn and waving madly as if we couldn't see she was headed straight for us.

"Christ," my father muttered in an unusual moment of sacrilege. He eyed Martha's voluminous outfit of primrose yellow as she struggled out of the car. "Who the hell got her ready?"

"Paul!" My mother gave him a warning look. I winked at Henry and he smiled urbanely as if nothing was amiss. Martha bore down on us, one hand firmly planted on her hairdo the other clutching her dress to stop it rising up in the wind, which had picked up considerably in the last few minutes.

"Oh, my goodness," she shrieked. "I should have worn pants!"

My father and I looked at each other and it was obvious the same thought had just passed through both our minds.

"I hope to God she does have pants on," he muttered to me, and I had to work very hard to keep a straight face as I dutifully kissed Martha's proffered cheek.

"Let's get out of this wind, shall we?" Henry suggested, gesturing toward his car. I took pity on my father and let him sit in front with Henry. I sat in back, wedged between Martha and my mother who threw me a look of apology—which I pretended not to see. As anticipated, Martha kept up a steady barrage of conversation, jumping from one subject to the next, dropping names of people I'd never heard of, and from the look on my mother's face, neither had she. I gave her a 'serve's you right' look and she pinched my arm, causing me to yelp. Of course Martha didn't notice, but I heard my dad chuckle to himself as he gazed intently out the passenger window.

"Nice neighborhood!" He had to bellow to be heard over Martha's gabbling.

"Oh, Paul..." She gave him her attention for a moment. "This used to be the most desirable area in Laguna—before my Don built Sandy Shores. That's where we live..." She directed this momentous statement at Henry who murmured something that could have been construed as though she had his total interest. "But there are still some very pretty

houses here," she added, in what could only be termed a decidedly patronizing tone.

Henry turned into a small cul-de-sac and stopped the car. "There it is," he said pointing at the house on the corner. Impatiently, I shooed my mother from the car and jumped out to get a good look.

Oh yes, yes, my mind exulted happily—This is it.

Martha's 'Sandy Shores' might have been the in-place to live, but as far as I was concerned, I had found Phillip's and my home. I almost ran across the street to the front of the house, which rose impressively before me. It was built with a Spanish motif—white adobe walls, red tiled steps to the front door and what looked like a really large verandah atop a three-car garage.

"I bet the view is terrific from up there!" I exclaimed to Henry who smiled his agreement. He walked ahead of me and rang the doorbell. I was almost jumping up and down with impatience as we waited for someone to answer. Eventually, the dark Spanish oak door opened and a little white haired lady smiled uncertainly at us.

"Mrs. Gibson, it's Henry Clark. I've come to show the house!" he yelled.

"Show me what?"

"The house, Mrs. Gibson. I've come to show it."

"Oh yes?"

"May we come in?" he yelled again.

By this time we had got the fact that Mrs. Gibson was hard of hearing, but Martha had to ask loudly, "What's wrong...is she deaf?"

We all trooped into the house and floundered around for a moment as we were plunged into darkness.

"Can I open the drapes?" Henry shouted.

"Thank you, I made it myself." Mrs. Gibson ran her hands over the gray dress she was wearing.

"Very nice, Mrs. Gibson." Henry didn't miss a beat, but walked over to the living room window. "Can I open the drapes?"

"Oh, why don't you open the drapes, Henry?" Mrs. Gibson said, sweetly.

I was trying hard not to giggle, but as Henry pulled back the drapes and the interior of the living room was finally exposed, I gasped with delight. From where we were standing in the entryway, I could see the magnificent fireplace, the vaulted beamed ceiling and, now that the drapes had been opened, the glimmer of blue ocean beyond the glass sliding doors. As if drawn by a magnet I headed for the verandah and drew in a deep breath of pleasure at the superb view laid before me. My mind raced ahead, as I imagined Phillip and I taking in this incredible vista every day, and watching the sunset each night from this wonderful vantage point.

"Oh yes, Henry," I whispered. "This is it...Phillip will love it too, I'm sure."

"Let's see the rest shall we?" he murmured. We followed him through the rest of the house as he pointed out various features—but I was already mentally making changes. It was going to need a deal of work. There was a lot of neglect, but mostly superficial as far as I could see.

Henry said, "I would recommend a building inspection to see if there are any major problems with the roof or foundation."

My father nodded. He could tell by my expression that I had already made up my mind that this was the house for Phillip and me—our home!

"What's the lot size?" he asked.

"Huge...Come on outside. You'll see what I mean." Henry led us out to the back and we were amazed at how much land surrounded the house. "This was a premium lot, originally set aside for two houses, but Mr. Gibson bought them both so he could have enough room on either side. He didn't much like the idea of neighbors being too close."

Mrs. Gibson was watching us with a bemused air, as if she were wondering what the heck we were all doing in her backyard.

"Is she OK?" I asked Henry, keeping my voice down.

"Oh yes, she's just a little absent-minded. She wants to move to a smaller home. Can't keep up with all this since Mr. Gibson passed away, last year."

"I love your house, Mrs. Gibson." I smiled at her, and she smiled back.

"Silly boy, this isn't a blouse—it's a dress," she replied. "I made it myself, you know." She took my arm. "Would you all like some tea? William and I have tea everyday at this time."

"William?" I looked at Henry.

"That was Mr. Gibson," he whispered. "She forgets he's gone, every now and then."

"That would be very nice Mrs. Gibson," my mother said. "But I don't think we should take any more of your time."

"Oh, William and I love the company. Come on in."

We trooped in behind her.

"Go look around some more," Henry said. "I'll give her a hand with the tea."

Dad and I went back upstairs to the master bedroom.

"I was thinking one of the other bedrooms could be converted into a studio," I said. "And Phillip will need an office eventually."

"You *are* thinking ahead!" Dad exclaimed. "Well, there's plenty of room to expand if you need to." He looked at me seriously. "Are you sure you want to take all this on, Peter?"

"Totally sure, Dad." I grinned at him. "What does my financial advisor have to say?"

"Well, it is a sound investment," he replied swinging into his professional mode. "This part of California has always been a popular real estate stronghold, even in rough times. So from that aspect, there's no problem. It's just that you are still both so young and to have the responsibility of such a big house..."

"Dad," I interrupted him. "Don't worry about that. This is what we both want. A home together—and our independence. I hope you don't mind that."

"No, of course not. I have to admit that your mom and I wanted the same thing at your age."

My mother's voice called us from downstairs. "Tea's ready, boys."

We went down to the living room to see Martha transfixing Mrs. Gibson with a steady barrage of gossip, none of which, I'm sure, she understood. Undeterred, Martha chattered on, pausing only to sip at her tea, while Mrs. Gibson's expression took on a slightly glazed look. Henry looked like he'd been hit over the head with a mallet and he jumped up gratefully as we entered the room.

"Oh good," he said. "You're back. Peter, let's go into the kitchen. We can sit there and discuss terms, if you like. Would you excuse me, ladies?"

He almost ran out of the room in his haste to get away from Martha's endless gabbling. I followed, chuckling, while my mother and father tried to rescue Mrs. Gibson.

Henry looked at me with wide eyes. "God, that woman is very trying."

"That's putting it politely, Henry." We laughed together as we sat at the kitchen table.

"So what d'you think?" he asked.

"I love it, and I know Phillip will too. Let's make an offer, but Phillip has to see it to make it final."

"Of course. Can he come down soon?"

"I'll tell him it's urgent."

"I'll make the offer contingent on his approval...Say within seven days?"

"Sounds about right. Go for it!"

Later that day, as I told Phillip all about the house I could feel him becoming as excited as I was. "I can't wait to see it," he exclaimed eagerly.

"It does need some work, Phillip. Mostly cosmetic, but Henry suggested we get a builder's inspection once we're in escrow."

"I'll come down Thursday night. I have a break scheduled anyway, so I can stay for about a week."

"Terrific. I'll pick you up at the airport and we can drive straight there. We can stay over at our hotel and see the house in the morning. Oh Phillip, I know you're going to love it. I know you'll see the same possibilities I have. I want to get started right away, getting my studio in order, building you an office..."

He laughed softly in my ear. "Slow down there, honey. We have all the time in the world to get it the way we want it."

"I know, but I can't wait for us to be there. Just you and me, in our own special home."

"I want that too," he said huskily and I suddenly had a great need to feel his arms around me, and the sweet taste of his lips on mine.

"God, I miss you," I whispered.

"I miss you too. Where are you?"

"In my room."

"On your bed?"

"Uh huh."

"Lay down, close your eyes and pretend I'm there with you. Can you feel me kissing your neck?"

"Yes, yes I can," I murmured. I pulled off my clothes and lay back on my bed, letting my fantasy take control.

"Are you naked now?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied dreamily. "I can feel you touching me."

And in truth I *could* feel the hot scorching of his mouth, as it traced a downward trail to my navel. I gasped, imagining my fingers tangling in his curly hair as his head rested on my stomach and his lips teased the tip of my penis. I groaned in ecstasy as I listened to Phillip talk to me in his sexy way. I was totally turned on, especially when his breathing changed to a ragged and sensual moaning.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered. "I love you, Peter. I love you."

"I love you too..." I choked on the words as my orgasm overtook me. There was silence on the other end of the line, and then I heard him gave out a long shuddering sigh.

"Oh my God, I can't believe we just did that," I said weakly.

A deep sexy chuckle sounded in my ear. "How was I?"

"Let me just say this—you have a lot to live up to on Thursday night!"



That summer Phillip graduated with honors, and Fred Olsen, my mother's ex-boyfriend suggested he interview with Don Harley, Martha's husband. He had a vacancy in his design office in Laguna, and although he originally wanted an experienced person to fill the position, Fred persuaded him to give Phillip a crack at it.

Phillip came home from that interview with mixed feelings. He had been impressed with the size and scope of Harley's company, he had also liked the professionalism of the employees, but he did not take to Don Harley himself, at all.

"There's something about him Peter," he told me after meeting with his future employer. "Something I can't quite put my finger on. I mean, the man knows his stuff all right. He's extremely ambitious for his company. There's just something a little off-center about him. I wish I could be clearer about what I mean. He just makes me feel uncomfortable, somehow."

"Will you have much contact with him?" I asked. "If you're not going to be working directly under him, and you like the other guys there, maybe it'll work out OK."

"Yeah, you're right. It's a good opportunity for me to have a job while I study for my Masters, and like you said, I probably won't have much to do with him. I'm too far down the totem pole for him to bother with me."

Despite Phillips misgivings about Don Harley, everything now seemed perfect to me—but two weeks before we were due to close escrow on our dream home, Mrs. Gibson decided to drop a bombshell on us. She'd had a change of heart, and told Henry she didn't want to sell the house after all. He had spent a whole evening with her trying to change her mind, and when he finally left the house, totally exhausted from having to shout every word, she had not budged. He called me that night and hoarsely explained what had happened.

"But, this is awful," I cried. "What are we going to do?"

"Well, legally you have every right to force the sale," he croaked at me.

"But she's an old lady. We can't put her out on the street."

To be quite honest I could have, but I knew Phillip would never go for it. He would have been appalled at the thought of poor Mrs. Gibson sitting abjectly on the sidewalk, her furniture piled around her. I shook my head to clear that vision. What the heck were we going to do?

"I'm going to call her son in the morning," Henry said. "See if he can talk some sense into her. I found her a sweet little cottage in San Clemente that I thought she just loved. Said it was just what she wanted. Now she can't even remember buying it."

Lord, I thought—the poor thing! But, I want my house.

I called Phillip after I'd hung up and gave him the disturbing news. "What can we do?" I whined in the poor guy's ear.

"Well if she's adamant about not moving, we can't do anything," he replied, just as I knew he would. He would be quicker to let the old lady off the hook than I would. I began to whimper and he had the nerve to chuckle at the sound of my heartbreak.

"Don't fall apart yet Peter," he said. "Let Henry handle it. I'm sure he can bring her around somehow. He's got a lot of experience dealing with remorseful sellers and buyers."

As it turned out Phillip was right. The next day Henry called to say that Mrs. Gibson's son had persuaded her that it was in her best interests to move into the smaller house, closer to where he and his family lived.

I breathed a huge sigh of relief and got on with my packing.

Mom and Dad wanted to buy us a house-warming gift, so in my unabashed way, I asked for furniture. Well, we didn't have any! They decided on a living room set. An overstuffed couch and two armchairs Phillip and I had already seen and liked. We had already splashed out on a mahogany sleigh bed and armoire. I was a having a ball running round the stores, dragging Brian with me on days my Mom couldn't make it. I wanted the place to look 'homey' by the time Phillip got back from Chicago.

One afternoon, as we scouted round a paint supply store, Brian told me he'd met 'a really cute guy' since he'd moved back to Laguna Beach. "His name is Bruce," he told me, his usual sunny smile even sunnier. "He's waiting tables right now, but he takes drama class. He wants to be a professional actor. He's done some plays already. Mostly non-equity stuff."

"Have you been to see him act?" I asked.

"Not yet, but he's in a play next week down in San Juan Capistrano. I thought maybe you'd like to go with me?"

"Sure. Let me know which night."

"I think you'll like him." He sounded hesitant.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Well, it's just that Bruce is a bit...uh...over-the-top at times. He can be pretty outrageous when he's on a roll, but he's so funny. He just cracks me up..."

"Uh huh." I looked at Brian's smiling face and decided to keep my mouth shut, for once. "Okay Bry," I said cheerfully. "So now, what d'you think of this color for the living room walls?"

To say that both Bruce's play and his performance in it were total disasters is putting it mildly. The company had chosen some obscure British comedic farce to present to the unsuspecting audience who sat in stunned silence through most of it as the actors on stage fell through an assortment of doors, windows and sundry trap doors, all to execrable timing and an excessive use of very slow double takes. I glanced at Brian

a couple of times and had to suppress a giggle as he looked like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights.

"Jesus," he whispered at one point. "Bruce is way too good to be in this dreck!"

My eyebrows almost disappeared into my hair at that remark. He must be in love, I thought. "Okay Peter," I muttered under my breath, "Keep it all to yourself."

Afterward, we went backstage to meet the cast, the moment I had been dreading since shortly after the curtain went up. I hung back behind Brian as a tall, lanky figure suddenly rushed towards us and threw himself into Brian's arms.

"Oh, they hated me! They hated me!" he wailed, his face pressed against Brian's shoulder.

"No, they didn't," Brian tried to placate him. "You were terrific—it's the play that's not very good."

Bruce looked at me over Brian's shoulder. "What did you think?"

"Oh, Bruce..." Brian turned to me. "This is Peter, my friend from Cal-Arts. I've told you all about him."

Bruce stretched out a limp hand for me to shake. It was like taking hold of wet noodles. I smiled and murmured, "Hi, nice to meet you."

"Did you like the play?" he demanded, rather than asked.

"Uh, well...I...hmmm," I waffled. The suddenly inspired I exclaimed, "*Brian* thought you were very good."

His eyes narrowed a little as he looked at me, but then I became invisible as two cast members shouted, "Coming Bruce?" and Bruce screamed, "Later!" at the top of his voice, causing both Brian and I to jump out of our skins.

"We're all meeting in the bar for drinkies to celebrate," he yelled at us as if we were in another room.

Celebrate what?

What the hell was Brian doing with this idiot? I wondered. I looked for some evidence of his cuteness and could see none. His face was foxy, in the animal sense of the word. His eyes, though a rich brown were too close together, giving him a crafty look. For Brian's sake I tried to dis-

miss these petty observations, but in the back of my mind I felt an alarm go off. I looked from him to Brian and it was obvious my buddy was totally smitten. He had a goofy look on his face that, though it looked endearing, I knew signaled trouble for him.

"Hope you don't mind if I don't invite you," Bruce was yelling again. "It's just for us kids from the show."

I couldn't have been more relieved, but poor Brian looked miserable. Bruce gave him a quick peck on the cheek and dashed off without so much as a glance my way.

"Okay kid," I said, taking Brian's arm. "It's just you and me. Come on, I'll buy you a drink before I drop you off."

As we drove north on the Coast road I let Brian vent his frustration at not being with Bruce. While he extolled Bruce's virtues, which had been mysteriously hidden from sight as far as I was concerned, I tried to think of sensible things to say to make him look at the their relationship with a clearer eye. None came to mind, unfortunately. I mean, how can you criticize someone else's object of affection without sounding patronizing and petty? Brian might have been describing a Bottocelli beauty rather than the skinny fox-faced individual I'd just met.

Boy, the eyes of love are truly blind.

Later, as I related this story to Phillip by phone, I began to feel that perhaps I'd been hasty in my judgment of Bruce. After all, there must be something to him if Brian liked him. Phillip agreed with me and said he'd defer any opinion till he met him. Funny how we were both so protective of Brian. Phillip had become very fond of him and the three of us would often go out together. We'd always wished he could find a nice boyfriend, and here I was ready to nail the first one he'd shown any interest in for more than a week or two.

"Well, you can be a little hasty sometimes Peter," Phillip said, telling me what I didn't need to know. He loved to rub it in sometimes. "You know, a little too eager to jump to conclusions?"

"Humph!" I think I replied, with a disdainful air. Good come back, that one.

"Anyway, why don't you invite them both over so I can meet the new beau? I'll be home at the weekend."

"Oh, must I?"

"Peter?"

"Well, it's just that I wanted to have you all to myself. Entertaining Bruce wasn't part of the plan."

"We'll have lots of time for us," he said. "Don't worry about that. Besides I'll be home for good in another month. Then you'll be tired of me hanging about all the time."

"That will never happen. I'm going to tie you to the bed and have my way with you every day!"

"Stop," he laughed. "You'll get me going and I have a paper to finish for tomorrow. I'm hanging up now. Bye!"

Drat, I thought. Much as I loved Brian, the thought of having to entertain Bruce was not at all appealing. But maybe he'd be less of a chore away from the theatre. Well I could dream couldn't I?

Now that we were finally living in Laguna in our new home and Phillip was going to be home for good in a month or so, I was inclined to feel just a bit more charitable toward Bruce. So I called Brian, and asked if they would like to hang out with us on the Saturday.

It turned out to be a wretched day.

For one thing, contrary to our usually predictable Southern California sunshine, it rained the entire day, making it impossible for us to picnic outdoors—something I had planned on. We were stuck in the house, listening to Bruce yammer on incessantly about how he was going to change the face of theatre in California, which was apparently sadly lacking in creativity—a fact that had escaped us prior to his pronouncements. There is nothing more irritating to me, than an amateur with minimal talent, decrying the works of celebrated people who have proven themselves time and time again.

It was impossible to interrupt his unceasing blabbering as he never took pause to breathe, never mind ask us to express an opinion. What made it really sad for me though, was the rapt expression on Brian's face as he drank in every word the ninny had to say. Phillip, bless him for his extraordinary patience, sat with a fixed smile on his face as Bruce ranted on, and on, and onnnnnn. Finally, I jumped to my feet and announced I was starving and had to throw some food together in the kitchen.

"I'll help you!" Phillip exclaimed, getting up quickly. However, we were not to be spared as Bruce followed us into the kitchen still in full throttle. At one point, Brian, sensing that Bruce was totally out of control—What, I thought, had taken him so long?—mentioned that I painted.

"Did you notice some of his work, here in the house?" he asked Bruce. "Isn't it great?"

"Mmm, fabulous..." Bruce replied, not even bothering to show the slightest interest. "But as I was saying," he continued, hardly missing a beat, "Only the other day our director was saying that Hal Prince has really lost his edge..." And he was off again. I had deliberately avoided looking at Phillip through much of this but now we caught each other's eye, and I could feel suppressed laughter welling up in me like a geyser about to explode.

"Excuse me," I gasped. "I have to go to the bathroom." I ran from the kitchen and took the stairs three at a time. Phillip told me later that he could hear me laughing, but as Bruce was still pontificating, neither he nor Brian seemed to notice.

"Brian's eyes were getting a bit dazed looking though," Phillip chuckled. "I think even for him, Bruce's stories were wearing thin."

"How can he stand it?"

"There's obviously something there for him we can't see," he replied. "Haven't you ever wondered how other people perceive you and me?"

"Not like that, surely!" I said defensively.

"That's the crazy thing about relationships." Phillip smiled and put his arms around me. "Sometimes it's hard for others to see what the attraction is between two people. I'm sure some wonder why you want to tie yourself to me."

"Well, they'd have to be blind to wonder that," I said, snuggling close. "Anyone can see that I'm the lucky one in this relationship!"

Okay, so call me a brat, but I couldn't let it rest there. I had to talk to Brian about this, so the next day I called him and asked him to meet me in town for a coffee. Happily, Bruce was rehearsing for God-knowswhat, so Brian readily agreed. When I saw him entering the coffee shop looking so buzzed and full of the joys of whatever, my resolve weakened a little.

I loved this guy so much.

In the four years we had been college buddies we had been a support system for each other. He had listened to my endless moaning about being separated from Phillip. He had kept me focused even when I was ready to throw it all in.

Such desperate depressions we artists go through!

Anyway, he'd become very dear to me and I didn't want to see him hurt by what I was sure was Bruce's shallowness—or by my meddling. Interestingly enough, he was the one to broach the subject.

"You don't care for Bruce very much, do you?" He looked at me carefully over the rim of his coffee mug as he asked, making sure that I was not about to evade the question.

"Uh...why do you say that?"

"Because it's obvious...to me at least. Look, I know Bruce is hard to take sometimes.

No!

"He's over-the-top with his enthusiasm for the theatre.

Yep!

"He acts like a know-it-all, when he really doesn't have that much experience.

You don't say?

"But all that is just a facade really.

Huh?

"He's really very shy and all that bravado is just to cover it up.

Oh no! Is that what he told you?

"When he's alone with me, he's the sweetest guy in the world—so affectionate and lovable.

I may just gag here!

"I really, really want you to like him, Peter."

He looked at me with such sincerity, that I felt like a weasel for the things I'd been thinking. After all, Bruce was no worse that any other attitude queen—and God knows there's a lot of them around. Maybe some of Brian's good qualities would rub off on him. It was just that I felt Brian deserved so much better.

"Well," I said hesitantly, "I may have been too hasty..."

"It would mean a lot to me. We're thinking of moving in together, you know."

"What?" I gaped at him. "So soon? You've only known each other a few weeks."

"I know, but I've seen this really cute house just off PCH, and I'm going to buy it for Bruce and me."

I was astounded. He couldn't be serious, I thought, but one look at his earnest expression told me he meant every word.

"What, you came into a fortune?" I joked.

"No, my Dad said I could have the money he and Mom put aside for me. It was supposed to be in trust till I was twenty-five, but they've seen the house and think it's a good investment."

"Do they know about Bruce?" I blurted, none too tactfully.

He frowned and looked me squarely in the eye. "Are you going to even attempt to like him, Peter?"

"Yes," I replied meekly. "Yes I am. I can see he means a lot to you, so then...I will."

"Thank you," he said, his smile returning. "You're my best friend. I don't want anything to screw that up."

"You don't have to worry about that." I squeezed his hand. "You've put up with a lot of crap from me over the years. No other friend would have listened to my whining like you have."

He grinned at me. "True...you owe me!"

Later at home, as I told Phillip of Brian's plan to buy a house for himself and Bruce, he looked at me with just the kind of expression I must have had on my face when Brian broke the news to me.

"Is he serious? With that twerp?"

Coming from Phillip, who rarely had a bad word to say about anyone, that was a damning statement, and I immediately became uneasy all over again about the situation.

"Of course, it's none of our business," he added quickly. "I just wish he'd found someone a lot more deserving of his love."

"Maybe we're being too judgmental..." I said without much conviction. "...maybe when we get to know Bruce better..."

Phillip grimaced. "I have a nasty feeling we've seen all there is to Bruce already. I don't often take a dislike to someone so quickly, but he really got up my nose! Just the way he dismissed your work set my teeth on edge. All he's interested in, is Bruce. Believe me, he's an operator, out to get what he can. I just hope Brian sees the light before it's too late."

"He's so in love with him," I sighed. "He told me Bruce was a different person when they're alone. What we saw is an act to cover up his shyness."

"Bull! Who's he trying to kid?" Phillip started to laugh. "Oh boy, now there's an original excuse."

"That's what I thought, but Brian's totally suckered in." I touched Phillip's arm lightly. "But for his sake..."

"I know, I know. We'll just have to grin and bear dear Bruce's company if we want to see Brian—and of course, we will."

"How was work today?" I asked, feeling it was time to change the subject.

"Pretty good. I really like what the company's long term plans are. There seems to be a lot of room for advancement, something I was concerned about. Some of the guys there are very ambitious; looking to start their own companies eventually, which is what I'd like to do."

"And so you shall, my pretty, so you shall," I chuckled, pulling him into my arms and nibbling his ear. That always drove him nuts, and once I had aroused his interest, so to speak, I figured dinner would be a little late that night.

"I need to shower first," Phillip protested. "I've been in these clothes way too long." He grinned at me. "And keep your hands off the cold water faucet while I'm in there."

I affected an air of innocence, but I knew only too well what he meant. One of the little flaws of our new home was that the plumbing was not quite up to standard. If you turned on the cold water in another part of the house while the shower was running, it would turn the water from merely hot to scalding. It had caused me to leap about with great alacrity a couple of times, when Phillip turned on the garden hose, forgetting I was in the shower. We'd employed several plumbing experts to try and solve the problem, but to no avail. Eventually we gave up and decided it was just something we had to deal with.

"Better still," he now said with a wink. "Why don't you join me. Then I know I'm safe."

"That's what you think," I yelled, chasing him up the stairs.



The rest of the year sped by in a blur. We were both so busy with our separate occupations that before we knew it Christmas was fast coming upon us. We decided that we'd throw a big party to celebrate the first one in our new home. I went slightly berserk buying decorations, holly wreaths, candles, lights, etc., etc.

Everyday, when Phillip came home, I had bought something else till he yelled, "Okay, that's it—no more. We won't be able to move around in here if you keep this up!"

"We still have to get the tree tonight..."

"I know, and there has to be some room in here for it." He grinned at me. "I was thinking of getting a live one..."

"Of course it has to be a live one. Who wants one of those artificial thingies?"

"By live, I meant with roots," he explained patiently. "One we can plant out back afterwards. It'll be like a souvenir of our first Christmas here." "That is so romantic," I said, giving him one of my come-hither looks I thought I had perfected by now. They always seemed to work on him anyway, but not this night.

"Save that thought for later," he chuckled. "Let's go tree shopping at the nursery."

"Okay-dokay."

In December, even in Southern California, the weather can take on a slight nip in the air, and as we walked through the tree nursery, I shivered in my leather jacket, which had obviously been made for its looks rather than for keeping out the cold. Phillip seemed to know exactly what he was looking for.

"Have you been here already?" I asked him.

"Well, yes as a matter of fact." He gave me a sheepish smile. "I just wanted to make sure they actually had what I wanted."

"And did they?"

"Uh, yeah...I paid them for it yesterday so they'd keep it here till you saw it. You have to like it too; otherwise we'll get something else." He stopped before a tall, handsome spruce. "What d'you think?"

"It's a beauty all right," I said, admiring the tree. "Why would you think I wouldn't like it?"

"Well, remember that year when Paul and Eve took us to find a tree, and you couldn't make up your mind till you'd seen every tree... 'This one has holes in it'... 'This one's not tall enough'...and then we had to drive to another lot and you drove us all crazy? Well, I just wanted to avoid that this year if I could. I really hate walking up and down lines of trees in the cold. Does that sound petty?"

"Yes, it does—and I'm not talking to you for at least the next five seconds!"

We laughed together as I punched him lightly on the arm. I did remember that Christmas and how mad Dad got at me, when I made them traipse all over Pasadena, looking for that darned tree. Phillip obviously wasn't about to take the chance of me screwing things up this year. We lugged the tree to the car and then had a hilarious time tying it to the roof of the car. Perched precariously above us, it necessitated my holding on to it as Phillip drove carefully home. Fortunately we didn't get stopped by a cop. For sure he would have given us a ticket, for reckless yuletide endangerment or something. Then of course, we had to drag it up the steps to the front door. After much heaving, puffing and panting from us, it finally stood in front of the bay window in the living room.

Naturally, I couldn't wait to decorate it, and started pulling strings of lights out of the boxes, before we'd even taken our jackets off. Phillip laughed at my antics. I think I was a constant source of unintentional amusement to him. But before long, he was standing on a ladder helping me wind the lights down through the branches. It really was a splendid tree, and when every available needle was covered with some bauble or other and we turned the lights on, it took on an extra beauty all its own.

"Now, champagne!" Phillip ran to the kitchen and came back with a bottle and two glasses. When we had saluted the tree with raised glasses, he kissed me tenderly and murmured, "Merry Christmas, sweetheart. My Christmas wish for us is to have many, many more here in our own home."

I kissed him back, happy with the thought that, of course, that wish would come true. Never in my wildest imaginings could I ever foresee life without him. That just wasn't possible.



Our Christmas party was memorable in many ways, and until the bad news—enjoyable. Everyone seemed to be having a good time. We had invited too many people for us to be proper hosts all the time, but most of our friends were pretty self-reliant and didn't need hand-holding. My mother looked stunning as always, and even Martha's prattling didn't get on our nerves too much. Rod and 'A' were each the life and soul of the party, and soon had a group of our friends around them listening to

their witty stories. However, it seems there always has to be one fly in the ointment—and of course, it just had to be Bruce.

I couldn't help noticing that when he and Brian arrived, Brian looked pale and out of sorts. What on earth has Bruce been doing to the poor guy? I thought, as Brian gave me a perfunctory squeeze. So unlike the crushing bear hugs he usually bestowed on me.

I was trying as hard as I could to find one redeeming feature in Bruce and was failing miserably. He just wouldn't, or couldn't, shut up and it was hard to ignore the betrayed looks on some of our friend's faces as they listened to his endless dialogues on his acting 'career'. Several times Phillip or I, or both of us together interrupted him on some pretext or another to allow our friends time to escape.

"They'll never come to another of our parties," I moaned.

"Not unless we preface the invitation with, "This gathering will be Bruce-less," Phillip laughed, not entirely with mirth.

"Poor Brian. I think even he is beginning to see the light, though. He doesn't look too happy right now." I smiled across the room at him, and he returned my greeting with a glum nod.

He walked slowly toward me and wrapped his arms around me. "Can I talk to you guys for a moment?"

"Of course...In private?"

He nodded sadly.

"Let's go in the den," Phillip said, taking his arm.

Uh oh, I thought, here it comes. He's decided he's had enough of darling Bruce. Phillip closed the den door behind us and we looked expectantly at our friend.

"I didn't want to tell you this tonight...but I went to the doctor a couple of weeks ago..." he began, and as I listened, a cold fear gripped my heart. This wasn't going to be about Bruce after all.

"Oh Brian," I murmured. "No..."

He looked at us with tortured eyes. "The doc said I'd had it for a couple of years...full blown. I've been having these headaches and nausea...going to the bathroom, you know..." His eyes welled with tears. "I

haven't told Bruce yet. Thank God we've been safe all the time we've been together...but he asked me the other day what was wrong..."

Cruelly, I thought—You mean he noticed something was wrong, even when it didn't directly concern him? But I kept my mouth shut.

"Come sit down," Phillip said gently, guiding him to a chair.

"I'm sorry. I'm ruining your party for you. I was going to wait for a better time. It's just that with everything so festive all around me...and me thinking I probably won't see another Christmas..."

"Ssh..." Phillip put his arms around him and for a moment I stood transfixed watching my lover comfort my best friend.

How could this be happening? Not to Brian! Dear sweet Brian who had been so stalwart and supportive during the years of our friendship. I had been so wrapped up in my own concerns, that I had not even noticed he was sick. I felt tears sting my eyes and a rising anger at the injustice of it.

I went to him and took his hand. "But there's so much more they can do nowadays," I said urgently. "New drugs that hold it in check..."

"That's not going to work for me." He looked at me through his tears. "The doctor told me I'd waited too long to get tested."

"But they're going to try...?" Phillip asked him.

Brian nodded. "There's a combination of drugs they're trying; a cocktail they call it—if you can believe that." He laughed wryly. "Apparently they've had some success with it, but my doctor said it's not a miracle cure."

I looked at him in anguish. All the joy I'd felt previously was now wiped out, extinguished like a guttering candle. Phillip put his arm around me and the three of us sat there, holding each other in silence till a loud knocking at the door and the sound of Bruce's high tenor voice yelling, "What's going on?" made me spring to my feet and open the door.

"What are you guys doing in here?" he demanded, looking and sounding like a petulant child. "Why am I left out? What's going on?"

I wanted to scream at him to go away, but of course I couldn't. I stood aside so he could see Brian.

"Oh, what's wrong?" His voice took on a querulous edge on seeing Brian's obvious distress. He looked at me accusingly. "Have you been talking about me?"

"For heaven's sake," I snapped at him. "It's not always about you, Bruce."

"Peter..." I shut up as Brian admonished me. He stood up and waited as Bruce went to his side. "Sorry honey," he said. "I was telling them something that I should have told you first..." He looked at me apologetically. "Could we have a little time to ourselves? I think I should tell him here. At least he'll have you guys around..."

"Tell me what?" Bruce whimpered.

Phillip took my arm and led me out of the den. "Take all the time you need, Brian." He closed the door gently, then steered me toward the kitchen. "I think we both need a drink right about now."

The music and the sound of laughter in the house seemed decidedly at odds with how I was feeling, and suddenly I wanted them all gone. "Oh Phillip," I sighed as he handed me a neat Scotch. "What on earth can we do for him?"

"We can be there for him whenever he needs us. That's about all we can do."

"Why didn't he go to the doctor's sooner?" I murmured, almost to myself. "Of all the people I know, I could have sworn Brian would be the one least likely to play with fire."

"It only takes one slip," Phillip replied. "He might have thought the other guy was negative, or the guy told him he was..."

"But even so..." I protested.

"Besides, it's too late for him to start blaming himself for being careless. It's happened, and now he has to deal with it the best he can."

"I'll bet you anything Bruce comes screaming out of there and disappears forever," I said bitterly. "Brian's suddenly become a liability..."

"You don't know that," Phillip chided me.

And he was right. Despite all the odds I would have given that Bruce would be useless faced with this dilemma, when the door to the den

opened and they came out, Bruce was subdued, but his arm was around Brian's waist and he was very much in control.

He smiled politely at us as we went to join them. "We just wanted to say goodnight to you both...and thanks for the lovely party. We're going home now."

Phillip said, "If there's anything you need, you know you only have to call us."

We walked them to the door and watched sadly as Bruce helped Brian into their car and drove off. The party had totally lost its allure, but fortunately there was a general departure soon after. I refused my mother's offer to help clean up, glad of the task ahead that might help take my mind off the worst part of the evening. But as Phillip and I gathered up the dirty plates and glasses, we talked of nothing else. When the bulk of it was out of the way, Phillip poured us both a nightcap and we sat on the floor under the Christmas tree.

"A very different evening to the one we expected," he murmured.

"It's just totally deflated me," I said sadly. "All the happiness I was feeling with having you home and our house filled with Christmas cheer—it's just gone. I still can't believe it." I looked at him wistfully. "Thank God, I have you."

He leaned over and gave me a lingering kiss on the lips. "You'll always have me, sweetheart," he whispered. "Always."



In the months that followed, Brian's health went on a roller coaster ride. He was admitted to hospital three times in one month. He grew thin and pale, and nothing the doctors did, nor the medication he took, made any difference. He was dying—and nothing was going to change that.

I spent a lot of time with him, and I have to admit I was impressed with the way Bruce had stepped up to the plate. It was almost as if he'd become another Bruce—an unselfish, caring, totally dedicated provider. Seeing him taking care of Brian's every need made me feel bad about my prior impression of him. If I'd thought about it more rationally of course, I would have guessed there had to have been an ulterior motive.

I was just so happy to see Brian so well taken care of, that it never occurred to me at the time that Bruce was just being Bruce after all. He knew Brian was going to die and he was making darned sure he had a roof over his head when that happened. Not only that, but that he would have enough money in the bank to live comfortably for the rest of his life. So what was a few months hard labor when the pay-off was going to be so very handsome? In order to prevent Brian's parents claiming his estate when their son died, Bruce had a lawyer draw up a will specifically excluding them from any right to Brian's property.

In a way, of course, one could say Bruce was just protecting himself, but it was the way he did it that infuriated Phillip and me. It was so sneaky, and Brian was so weak and out of it by the time he signed the will, that he probably never even read it. Brian's parents were hurt by the language in the document, and later his dad told me it had never crossed their minds to take anything away from Bruce.

"He's not our favorite person by any means," he told me."But Brian thought the world of him and he did look after our son in his last months. So why would we be mean to him?"

The day Brian died, Phillip and I were over at his house sitting with him while Bruce took a nap. For Brian's sake neither one of us had mentioned that we knew anything about the will, and I resisted making any comment to Bruce, hard as that was. I wanted to think that Bruce really did care for Brian, even if it was just in his own way. I hated to think it was just the money that attracted him, and the fact that Brian loved him so much, hinted at perhaps there was more to Bruce than either Phillip or myself could see. It would be several more years before I realized I had been wrong again.



Brian's death hit me hard. A part of my life was suddenly gone. My buddy—the one I'd shared so much with was no longer around. I could no longer look forward to his friendly encouragement, his off-the-wall sense of humor, his phone calls at odd times of the day. All of that was gone, and I bitterly resented it.

Phillip of course, was the pillar I could lean on. I knew he too felt Brian's loss, but he always managed to put aside his feelings to be strong for me. Now that I'm a deal older and, I hope, considerably more mature, I can see that I depended on him way too much. Perhaps it would have been better if he'd been less of a rock and quicker to tell me to pull myself together—but that was not his way. He loved me and in his mind that meant he'd always be there for me, just as he was sure I felt the same way...and of course, I did.

Brian's parents asked me to give a eulogy at Brian's memorial service. As much as I was loath to bare my feelings before a crowd of people, of course I said I would. The words came easily enough. There was so much to say about Brian that was funny and good. Towards the end, I

mentioned that I knew having Bruce to share his life meant so much to Brian. I even commended him on his unselfish devotion in the final months of Brian's life. I didn't quite choke on the words, nor did a lightning bolt strike me down, so it must have sounded sincere enough.

Afterwards, Brian's parents came to thank me. They looked totally grief stricken, and my mother remarked later that it must be the hardest thing in the world to have your child go before you. Mom and Dad had come down for the service and stayed over with us that night. It was good to have their company and to feel the warmth of their love for us both. I counted myself as one of the lucky ones in life—to have Phillip and my parents close to me at that time was a great comfort.



Life goes on and time lends a healing hand. The weeks, months and years passed in their usual hectic fashion. Phillip worked hard at Harley's office, always involved in some new project or other. I was inundated with offers of commissions—too many really—and Frederick kept changing his mind about where my next exhibition should be.

"New York! That's where your fame lies," he exclaimed rapturously time and time again. Much to his chagrin, no one in New York seemed at all interested in his premier artist—me.

I finally persuaded Phillip that he and I should take a vacation together in Mexico. "If we don't just go, we'll be old as Methuselah by the time we eventually get away," I complained.

"Well, we'll look pretty bad on the beach if we wait that long," he chuckled. "Can't say I'd want you to see me in Speedos when I'm nine hundred years old!"

When we decided on the dates I called a travel agent who found us a villa on the sand just outside Puerta Vallarta. It was the most glorious time. We were both so ready for this vacation. Our minds and bodies responded totally to the warmth of the sun and the power of the ocean waves as they crashed on shore in front of our little villa. If I could have made time stand still for us then, I would have. Everything was perfect, every day. I could feel the stress of the past year slip away as we lay on the

soft warm sand, letting the sun's rays caress our bodies. We toured the town's antique stores, ate in out-of-the-way restaurants and at night, we gave ourselves up to the passion we felt for each other. It was a time to remember and treasure forever.

Then, halfway through the week, the Mexican coast was hit by a sudden tropical storm that seemed to spring up from nowhere. From an ominously black sky, sheets of rain poured down on us, sending us scrambling for cover. Thunder claps, the like of which I'd never heard before, broke over our tiny villa, making us feel we were in a war zone. As we gazed from the window out across the roiling ocean, we were awed at the height some of the waves attained before they crashed on shore with a pulverizing intensity that shook the ground beneath our feet.

"Should we leave?" I asked nervously.

"And miss this spectacle?" Phillip looked at me in amazement. "Look at that ocean—think what a picture that would make!" He picked up his camera and calmly began snapping away. I didn't need a camera. This scene would be imprinted on my memory forever.

"You're right," I said, still in awe of nature's fury. "When we get back I shall paint this."

As quickly as it had come, the storm passed over us heading northwest out over the ocean. The sun broke through the leaden sky and although the sea remained rough for the rest of the day, it was as if the storm had never happened. That night, we walked into town for dinner to find that the storm was not at all the main topic of conversation among the locals. Our waiter told us they are so used to those sudden squalls that people just hunker down and wait for them to blow over.

"Just part of the local color I guess," Phillip remarked as we sipped our wine.

As we left the restaurant, something happened, that at the time, I dismissed as a bit of nonsense. A young gypsy woman begging to read our palms accosted us. I started to step out of her way, but Phillip chuckled and held out his hand.

"What can it hurt?" He smiled at me. "It'll only take a moment or two."

The girl stared keenly at Phillip's palm, then looked up at him as though startled by what she saw. With a quick movement she turned to me. "Give me your hand." Before I could react she had grabbed my hand and held it close to Phillip's. "Your lives are forever entwined—until the day you die."

Well, I could have told her that. No surprise there, but nice to hear, nevertheless.

She sucked her breath in between her teeth as she continued. "I see danger for you both. You must not trust those in power."

In power? We didn't know anyone 'in power'.

"You..." She fixed me with a look that almost made me take a step backward, had she not held my hand even more tightly. "You will have the gift."

"What gift?" Phillip asked. "Do you mean his talent for painting?"

"Phillip," I said. "Don't tell me you're taking this seriously..."

"No, not that gift," she interrupted me, looking again at Phillip. "You will use this gift one day—to avenge yourself."

"Oh, for goodness sake!" I pulled my hand from her grasp, irritated by the way she was starting to spoil our evening. "How much?" I asked her, digging in my pocket.

She was still looking at Phillip as she took the ten-dollar bill I held out to her. "So handsome," she murmured, touching his face gently. "The gods are jealous."

Then she was gone.

"Well," Phillip chuckled. "What d'you make of that?"

"Garbage!" I was still annoyed. "All that talk of those in power and avenging ourselves. What the heck was that?"

"It was all a bit over the top, wasn't it?" He put his arm round my shoulders. "Come on. Let's go find that little bar we like. I'll buy you a nightcap."

Gladly I fell in step with him, happy to forget the whole incident.

* *

Like all good things, our little vacation was soon over. On our last day there as we strolled through the bazaars and bought silly souvenirs, I caught sight of the young gypsy girl who had read our palms two nights previously. Without warning, a strange insidious feeling took hold of me and I started to tremble uncontrollably.

"What's wrong sweetheart?" Phillip looked at me with concern.

"I don't know...I feel a bit nauseous. Did you see her?"

"See who?"

"The gypsy girl...She was over there a moment ago."

He looked around then shook his head. "I don't see her." He took my arm. "Let's go sit down over there." He indicated a sidewalk cafe. "Maybe the heat's got to you. It is a bit warm."

He ordered us a cool drink and after a few minutes I began to feel better. "Sorry about that," I told him.

"Just as long as you feel OK. Do you want to go back to the room?"

"Yes." We stood up to go, and he put his arm around me as we walked back to the hotel. I turned to look at him, for the thousandth time admiring the beauty of his profile, and I had to fight the urge to stop and hold him in my arms, right there on the street.

"Phillip," I said, leaning into him a little. "I do love you with all my heart."

"Would you please wait till we get back to our room before you get me all hot and bothered?" He laughed, and tightened his grip on my shoulder.

The love we made that afternoon still haunts my memory to this day. Sometimes when I am alone and I allow myself to drift back to my life with Phillip, that day stands out from all the others. Now it seems as if it were a pivotal point in our lives. Of course I didn't know it then, but events over which we had no control were already underway. Events that would change our lives forever.

That afternoon, lying in the shelter of my lover's arms and basking in the afterglow of our lovemaking, I suddenly and inexplicably, felt lost and alone. Startled by this alien feeling, I tightened my arms around him and involuntarily gave out a little moan of fear. What had happened? Had I drifted off and dreamed that feeling of desolation?

Phillip's hand stroked my hair comfortingly. "You all right, Peter? Were you dreaming?"

"I must have been. I thought I was alone, but you're still here, thank God."

He kissed my forehead. "Yes, of course I'm here. I would never leave you."

I held him tightly against me, my lips seeking his mouth, my need for him burning in every fiber of my body. His mouth crushed mine, and our bodies strained together in an all consuming passion that carried us over the threshold of ecstasy into the realm of limitless joy.

Whatever fears I'd harbored were swept away by the sheer power of our physical and spiritual love for one another, and the boundless contentment we felt as we lay, spent, in each other's arms. This is how I remember it—that is how it was.



On our return, I soon forgot my uneasiness as I threw myself into the wealth of work that awaited me. Frederick had arranged another exhibition, this time in San Diego, and I determined that a seascape should be the centerpiece. The scene of that incredible storm at sea we had witnessed in Puerta Vallarta was still strong in my memory. I knew simply transposing to a canvas what I remembered, would be a very powerful statement.

It was almost too easy for me. My brushes seemed almost to have lives of their own as they swept in broad strokes across the large canvas. I spent long hours in the studio, totally lost in the beautiful fury that began to emerge in front of me. Phillip, when he would return home after a long day, would stand behind me watching silently as I worked. When I eventually would throw down my brush and turn to him for a welcoming kiss, he would tell me how impressed he was with it so far.

"It's like we were there again, watching it from the villa," he said, the day I finally finished. This had taken longer than any of my other works, and it had been a labor of love. As we stood side by side, looking at the completed work, he put his arm around my waist and hugged me to him. We remained there for a long time, gazing silently at the painting. I could tell he was deeply moved by what he saw.

"This has to be your own personal masterpiece," he said with pride. "Just wait till Paul and Eve see it. They will be thrilled."

My parents were arriving that night for the weekend. "Wow, I almost totally forgot they were coming!" I exclaimed. "I better start thinking about dinner."

"Uh uh, no way." He grabbed me in his arms. "We're going out to celebrate the completion of yet another brilliant piece of art by the unstoppable Peter Brandon!"

We laughed together in each other's arms and truly I thought my heart would burst with happiness. When my mom and dad arrived a couple of hours later, Phillip grabbed a bottle of champagne from the fridge and shepherded them upstairs to the studio. His pride in my work was a source of constant joy to me, and that night his upbeat mood was contagious as my parents stood in obvious awe of what I'd created.

"I've said it a million times," my dad murmured. "I just don't know how you do it...It's amazing."

My mother had tears in her eyes as she hugged me tightly to her. "We are so proud of you, Peter." She turned again to the canvas, wiping her eyes. "Look Paul, look at the strength in those waves. You can *feel* the power!"

All this adulation was beginning to embarrass me, just a tad, you understand—so I made a big deal of pouring the champagne and handing out a glass to each of them. Phillip smiled at me, that smile that still had the effect of making me weak at the knees.

"Peter," he said. "To you, to this wonderful painting and to your exhibition. This will knock 'em dead."

"Hear, hear!" My folks raised their glasses and I murmured some nonsense of thanks, happy to be surrounded by those I loved, and who loved me. I felt it couldn't get any better than this.



There are so many times in one's life when you want to hold on to those moments of joy. Moments that are all too fleeting, but that stand out in stark contrast to the times when tragedy strikes.

Three months later, almost to the day of that wonderful evening, my mother called with terrible news. Phillip was still at work, caught up in a brand new project. I had been idly reading an art magazine's review of my last exhibition while I waited for him to call and let me know when he was on his way home.

"Peter?" My mother's voice had a strange querulous edge to it.

"Mom, what's wrong?" My hand shook as I knew with a dreadful certainty what she was about to say.

"It's your father..." Her voice was almost a faint whisper. "Oh Peter...he's *gone*."

I felt the blood drain from my face and I gasped as if someone had dealt me a vicious body punch. I curled up into a fetal position on the couch as I listened to her tell me that my dad had been stricken with a massive heart attack that had killed him instantly. There had been no warning signs.

"He'd been so careful ever since the last time..." she went on brokenly. "I just can't understand how this happened...!"

I pulled myself together long enough to tell her Phillip and I would come up right away, then I called him at the office. He was as devastated as I was, but said he'd come straight home so we could drive to Pasadena together. Working on auto-pilot, I threw some things into an overnight bag for us. My mind was filled with thoughts of my father and how, although somehow I had known this moment was inevitable, I'd always believed he and my mother would grow old gracefully together. Now, that could never be...and how would Mom cope without him?

When Phillip arrived home he took me into his arms. We stood, locked in an embrace of grief, silently consoling each other. I knew his grief was as great as mine. We had both lost a father and a best friend. An irreplaceable part of our lives had been taken from us, and could never be brought back.

"Come on," he murmured, after a while. "Eve needs us now."



How does one cope with the death of someone so important to you? It had been bad enough when Brian died, but this feeling of total loss and desolation was too hard to bear. For my mother's sake, of course, I

was the rock she needed to lean on. For her, the loss was even greater. The man she had known since high school, her only love, and her constant companion, now gone forever. On reflection, my words seem only to make a maudlin sentiment of how she must have really felt inside.

Many weeks later when I asked her how she was feeling, she replied, "Robbed. I feel like my most precious possession has been stolen." It took her a long time to get over the loss—and sometimes, even now, I wonder if she ever has.

And Phillip? Well, of course, he was a pillar of strength for both my mother and me. Night after night, as we lay in bed in each other's arms, he would soothe and nurture me. I don't think I could have got through that terrible time without him.

After the funeral, we brought my mother back to our house to stay for a few days. It was then that Phillip first mentioned his idea of turning the guest quarters under my studio into an apartment for her.

"I could enlarge the existing square footage into something more spacious and livable," he said with enthusiasm. "Put in a kitchen and a bigger bathroom. What do you think?"

"You mean, have her live here with us?"

"Right. She'd have her privacy and we'd have ours—but at least we'd be right here if something happened and she needed us. Of course, she might not want to leave Pasadena, but it occurred to me that she has a lot of friends here, in addition to us. I think it would be good for her. Perhaps help her cope with all this a little more easily."

"Well, we can certainly ask her...but you do it Phillip. She might think I'm just being the dutiful son if I bring it up." And so, that night after we'd had dinner, he broached the subject, and totally caught my mother off-guard.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly!" she said, her eyes glistening with tears. "That's such a nice thought Phillip, but I couldn't get in the way of your lives. It wouldn't be fair to you both having me constantly hanging around."

"But you wouldn't be," Phillip assured her. "You'd have your own place, totally independent of us. You'd come and go as you pleased. I'll

put an entrance from the garage into the new kitchen I'll design. Here, look..." And before our eyes he quickly sketched the existing guest quarters, then drew in the improvements he had in mind. My mother watched in amazement as he pointed out where her bedroom would be and how she would have access to the verandah he would extend in front of the living room.

"I can't believe you'd go to all this trouble." She looked at me. "Peter, are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely—and this was all Phillip's idea."

"Well, let me think it over. There's so much to consider. Selling the house, deciding what to keep...I just can't think about all that right now."

"No of course not, Eve," Phillip told her, taking her hand. "You mull it over for a few days...but remember, we would really love to have you here. Besides..." he winked at her, "you could help keep Peter in order. He still needs a little parental control." They both laughed at my affronted expression and, as I joined in, I loved him all the more for lifting my mother's spirits.



Time seemed to go by in a hectic rush. Once my mother agreed to take us up on our offer, Phillip threw himself into drawing up the blue-prints for the renovation, getting the appropriate city permits and finding a reputable contractor to undertake the work. Within a few months, thanks to Phillip's supervision, the work was completed and my mother was safely ensconced in her new home.

To say she loved the bright and spacious apartment Phillip had designed for her would be to use an understatement. She had, of course, seen some of the work in progress, but the finished effect was much more than she had hoped for. It wasn't long before she had taken over part of the back yard next to her patio and planted dozens of flowering shrubs. As the weeks went by Phillip and I could both tell that she had benefitted from the move.

In the beginning she was ultra-careful not to get in our way, but in time we all settled into a casual and easy co-existence. She and I would enjoy morning coffee together either in our kitchen or on her patio, then she was off to visit friends or to some function or other. Needless to say, Martha was in seventh heaven having my mother live so close.

Fred had become an important figure in her life again. They spent a lot of time together and secretly I hoped that one day they would marry. I have always felt my dad would have wanted her to remarry—and to whom better than their life-long friend? She soon put any of those ideas firmly out of my head with the odd remark that, although Fred was a wonderful man, there would never be a replacement for my father. Of course, I could totally understand that. Never could I imagine anyone but Phillip, in *my* life.

One day, round about that time, he mentioned to me that we should have our wills drawn up.

"What for?" I asked, surprised.

"Well, it's just that since Brian and your dad passed away, I've been thinking that we should do something about it. I don't want you to have to face a mess if anything happened to me. We own a lot of stuff together and that shouldn't be a problem, but what if one of us gets into an accident or something? We've never discussed what we'd like done, you know..." He broke off as he studied my look of stupefaction. "Earth to Peter!" he laughed. "Were you listening, or somewhere in space?"

"No, no I was listening. I just can't believe you're talking about this. Nothing's going to happen."

"Probably not, but it doesn't hurt to be prepared. And what if we were both in an accident together? Then Eve would have to deal with it all. So if we make some provisions, it would be easier for her."

"Well okay..." I said slowly, seeing that he was serious about this. "If that's what you want to do..."

"I think we should. We can talk to your dad's attorney and just tell him what we want, then he'll take care of the rest."

And so we did. I have to admit I had never given any of this a thought and as I listened to Phillip and our lawyer go over the various points, I was amazed at how important it all suddenly seemed. We made my mother the executor if anything should happen to both of us at the same time, otherwise we would act for each other.

I felt pretty miserable as we left the law offices. I hated being faced with the thought of Phillip's demise and having to deal with the repercussions that would bring. Or did I feel worse about the chance of us both being killed together in an accident and my mother having to face it all alone? God, what options! In my depression, I had visions of my mother tending graves for the rest of her life!

"Oh Lord," I muttered as we walked across the parking lot to our car. "What's wrong?" Phillip asked.

"This death thing—it's got me all of a-twitter, as 'A' would say." I tried to laugh, but I wasn't fooling anyone.

He put his arm round my shoulders. "Come on silly," he scoffed. "Like you said, nothing's going to happen. I'm just being anal as usual."

"No, you're not," I told him as we got into the car. "You're being protective as usual. I know you're doing this for Mom and me."

"Well, you need cheering up, my boy." He squeezed my leg as he started the car. "I think a nice lunch down by the ocean will do the trick. What d'you say?"

"If you're buying!" This time, we both managed to laugh.



That summer, there were two memorable events. It was the ten year reunion of the class of '86, and Phillip and I didn't dare miss it, as Candace had threatened us with bodily harm if we didn't go. She had been calling us at least twice a week to make sure we would attend.

"Everyone will be there," she enthused. "Poor Roger is dreading it. He hates these kinds of things. I'm having to blackmail him by threatening to withhold sexual favors indefinitely if he doesn't come."

I didn't believe her for one minute, about the sexual favors being withheld, I mean. Roger, her husband was, in a word, hot—and a very nice guy. No way was Candace going to risk his eye roving elsewhere.

So we went and had a great time catching up with all our old classmates, some of whom we had never seen since graduation. Everyone seemed genuinely glad to see Phillip and me. I found myself feeling pretty elated that they cared so much about our achievements, and the fact we were still together.

Holly, the girl Phillip took to the prom all those years before, was in the throes of a nasty divorce and I had a sneaky feeling she had been looking forward to seeing Phillip again, just a bit too much.

Had no one told her about me? I wondered.

She got the picture very quickly, however, and a couple of times I caught her giving me the evil eye as the evening progressed. That apart, it was a good evening and Candace and I yakked up a storm just like old times. She was pregnant again, her third. She looked terrific—and Roger did not give the impression of having been sexually starved, even for a moment.

A nice surprise was seeing Ron Holmes, our school swim captain, arrive with a guy he introduced as "Ted, my partner." I think my mouth must have fallen open a little and I had a temporary feeling of deja-vu as I considered the implications. What if I had known Ron was gay when I used to fantasize about him in my pre-Phillip days? Probably nothing, but I love a good fantasy. At the same time, I felt vaguely annoyed that I had not known him better then. I could not help but feel that the restrictions school-life imposed upon us as kids did much to preclude a deeper understanding of what our friends were all about. Anyway, we had a grand time catching up, and before the end of the evening we had extracted a promise from Ron that he and Ted would visit us in Laguna.

The second excitement was my exhibition at the Laguna Art Festival. This annual event is huge and brings people from all over world to Laguna's doorstep. The town becomes almost unlivable for the locals, but the prestige (and revenue) involved more than makes up for the inconvenience. My seascape was the center point of the works I displayed and despite the ridiculous price tag I put on it, I had several offers to purchase it. I really couldn't part with it. It meant too much to both Phillip and myself, but I did take orders—six in all—for copies.

That, and the work that Frederick found me, kept me pretty busy for the rest of the year.

And so, as the year drew to a close, a year in which many things had changed for all of us, I still could not help but feel that the future held nothing but good things. The gypsy woman had told me I had the 'gift'.

Sadly, at that time it was conspicuously absent.



Christmas and the New Year celebrations passed with the usual welter of parties and late nights. Our older friends Rod and 'A', back from their travels around the world, always threw the biggest 'bash' of the season, and that year was no exception. They spared no expense when it came to decorating for the Holidays. It seemed every square inch inside and outside boasted a myriad of twinkling lights.

Phillip and I always enjoyed going there. Phillip loved the two amiable, loveable men, and would spend hours listening to their outlandish stories of their exploits in the British theater—when they were 'dashing young things', as they put it.

That particular Christmas party at their home in Laguna though, was one that when I stop to think of it, heralded some of what was to come. As we stood on the verandah, holding our glasses of champagne and staring out into the inky darkness of the night, Phillip suddenly turned and looked at me intently.

"If anything should ever happen to me..." he said, his voice low and gentle, "...promise me you won't grieve forever."

"What on earth are you talking about?" I asked, half laughing. "Nothing's going to happen to you."

"Well, we don't live forever you know..."

"But we will," I interrupted. I put my glass down and wrapped my arms around him. "We're going to live at least long enough to have to wear Depends—remember?"

His deep chuckle against my throat gave me a thrill. "You're right. I don't know what I'm talking about." He kissed me hard on the mouth. "Must be the champagne going to my head."

I held him tight, disturbed by what he had just said. Over the years, we had lost so many that were dear to us. I could never believe that life would be cruel enough to take him from me too. And yet...a shiver ran through me, and I held him even tighter against me

"Oh, you two!" 'A' came bustling out onto the verandah. "Stop that canoodling out here. You're not supposed to be so in love after all these years!" He gave us a roguish smile while he wagged his finger. "An old married couple like you still enjoying each other so much. Whatever next?"

We laughed with him and allowed him to shepherd us back into the house where the moment was forgotten. In the warmth of good company, thoughts of death and dying seemed remote and unreal. We'd had our share of bad news. Now, it seemed it was the time to put sadness behind us, and look forward to the future.



The New Year started out well. There was a rumor within Phillip's office that the company was about to land an enormous contract for development of a huge parcel of land in Laguna. Nothing had been finalized, but there was a definite air of excitement among some of the employees as they speculated what it might mean for the company's expansion plans.

"If it happens," Phillip told me, "It'll mean long hours, probably for months. I hope you won't get on my case too much!"

"Me? Would I ever do such a thing?" I chuckled wryly. "I promise not to whine. Well, at least not *every* time you're late."

I think it was around that time that I decided I was going to paint a portrait of Phillip and present it to him on his birthday. As that wasn't till August, I knew I had plenty of time, but as busy as I had been—and who knew what Frederick would come up with in the future months—I figured it was a good idea to get an early start. Of course, over the years I

had sketched and painted Phillip several times, but I wanted this to be the best I had ever done. I also wanted it to be a surprise, so I had to hide it in a corner of the studio after each time I had worked on it. I didn't need him to pose for me. His features were indelibly imprinted in my mind. So while he was at work, I started his portrait.

It came easily and naturally to me. I started with the dark mane of hair, that if allowed to, would fall across his brow. He kept it neatly combed for work, but when we were alone together I would loosen it with my fingers and release the wild tangle of curls I admired so much. As I finished painting his eyes, they seemed to gaze back at me with that look of candor I knew so well. I would talk to him as though he were actually there in front of me in the studio. Sometimes I laughed to myself, thinking what a ninny I was, but we were so close, even when apart. We were a part of each other.

At some point, late in January, I asked him what had become of the fabulous land deal that would keep him in the office till all hours.

"Oh, that's a sore subject," he growled in reply. "Everyone's pissed off. Looks like someone else got the contract. A bit fishy if you ask me."

"Really? In what way?"

"Harley's been acting weird for days now. Biting off heads, coming in late most days. I heard him railing at Martha the other day on the phone."

"What a surprise," I snickered, not very nicely. "Don's a bit of a cold fish, but you'd almost have to be, to put up with her every day of the week."

"Mmm, but I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he's blown it somehow."

"How d'you mean?"

"I don't know exactly. He just seems to be acting a bit guilty."

"Maybe he's seeing another woman?"

"Oh, Peter—trust you to get into the sleaze."

"Excuse me?"

"Just kidding. I don't think Don Harley's the roving kind somehow."

"Well," I replied. "As long as he doesn't screw things up for all of you. He's had that business for years. It'd be a shame if he blew it all now."

"I don't think there's much danger of that. Anyway, I'd like to branch out on my own—probably in a couple of years..." He stopped suddenly. "Oh, I just remembered, Bob and Ralph called yesterday. They want us to go with them next week to see that gay show in LA that's causing all the fuss...What's it called?"

"'Camouflage' or something, I think," I replied. "Do we want to see that?"

"Well, we haven't seen the guys for ages and they want to do dinner first...I said I'd talk to you."

"I suppose we could," I said, without too much enthusiasm. "It'll be nice to see them, but I can take or leave the show."

"Okay, I'll let them know we'll meet them for dinner, but skip the show."

"Sounds good."

Three or four days before we were due to meet Bob and Ralph in LA, Phillip came home looking very troubled.

"You look like you need a stiff drink—or something," I said, trying to be cute.

He looked at me, an expression on his face I had never seen before. He pulled me into his arms. "Oh Peter," he said, his lips touching my ear. "I heard something today that really put my head in a spin."

"Something bad?" I asked him.

"Potentially devastating to the company, if what I heard, or rather overheard is true."

"My God, what is it?" I asked, as he released me from his embrace.

"Somebody in the office was trying to get an illegal land deal through, from what I could understand of the conversation." He shucked off his jacket and slumped onto the couch. "You see, I had just picked up the phone to make a call when I heard voices on the line. I was about to hang up when I heard some guy really yelling about how he'd been let down, except the words he used were—'fucked by your colossal inepti-

tude!' I guess curiosity got the better of me as I listened in for a moment or two, and it got worse. The guy just went on and on about the millions he was going to lose. Jeez, he was really pissed!"

"Who was he talking to?"

"That's the bit I don't know. Who ever it was never said a word while I was listening. Then it just became too hairy and I put the receiver down. I felt like I was listening to something really traitorous, you know. The crazy thing is that the guy doing all the talking sounded really familiar. At first I couldn't put my finger on it. Then I got it. Remember Senator Bowman, the one who tried for the presidential nomination a few years back?'

I didn't remember, as a matter of fact. I'd never been that interested in politics. That was much more Phillip's forte.

"Uh, not really..."

"Anyway," he said impatiently, "it sounded just like him. I couldn't believe it at first, but then the more I thought about it the more convinced I was that it was him. Just a couple of nights ago I saw him on CNN talking about his latest favorite subject—family values. He's such a hypocrite seeing how he's been divorced twice. Anyway, he has a way of saying certain words where he kinda drags out the last syllable. It's an affected mannerism that you listen for after a while. The guy on the phone had exactly that same inflection."

"Jesus," I whispered. "A Senator doing something illegal. That's incredible..."

Phillip looked at me with a raised eyebrow. "You really are a bit naive, Peter. He wouldn't be the first and certainly won't be the last. But it's amazing to think he's dealing right here in Laguna and, if I'm right about this, right where I work."

"What're you going to do?"

"Well, I'm going to have to tell Don. He should know what's going on in his company before it ruins him. I would have talked to him before I left, but he'd taken off in a hurry. Some meeting or other. You're the only one I've mentioned this to. I'll speak to him tomorrow about it." I looked at him just a little skeptically. "Isn't he going to think it's a bit way out for someone of Bowman's reputation to be involved in something like this?"

"I know it sounds crazy Peter, but I'm almost a hundred percent sure it was Bowman. He had that really distinctive voice, you know?" He looked at me with concern. "You think I could be wrong?"

I gripped his arm. "Not if you're that certain. You don't go around making wild statements as a general rule."

"Yeah, but Don might not go for it. He's nervous as it is. He'll probably not want to believe Bowman's involvement. We'll just have to wait and see when I tell him tomorrow."

And of course Phillip was right. When he came home the next day he told me he was really upset by Don's reaction.

"He looked at me as though I had ten heads. Totally blew me off, saying it was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard. Then he asked how I could be certain that the call was being made to his office. He said it could have been a crossed line anywhere in town—which is true, but I don't think it was. Anyway it ended up with him saying he'd check it out, but he didn't believe for one moment that anyone in our company could be involved in any kind of illegal dealings." He paced the room, impatiently. "Peter, I know what I heard. Don's being way too cavalier about it all."

"Well," I said, trying to placate him. "You've done your best to alert him to it. If he decides to ignore it, you can't blame yourself if it blows up in his face."

"But I'm afraid it could blow up in *all* our faces. The company's that is—and then what? I have to tell you Peter, maybe it's my devious mind, but I'm a bit suspicious about Don's reaction."

"You don't have a devious mind. You're just concerned. Did you mention it to anyone else at the office?"

"No. D'you think I should?"

"I don't honestly know. Maybe you should wait and see if there are any repercussions before you say anything else. Seems to me, if a Senator's involved it would have to be something mighty big, and not that easy to sweep under the carpet."

"Well, like you said, I tried. And he did say he'd check into it, so I guess I'll wait and see what he finds out—if anything. I just wish I could get rid of this feeling that something dire is going to happen."

It amazes me how easily now I recall these conversations. If only they had come back to me sooner. But of course, who can tell what it would have benefitted? It seems that everything had to run its course, and the chips had to fall where they should.

When Phillip talked to Don Harley the following day, it was as he had predicted. Don assured him that nothing nefarious was taking place within the company. He said he'd called the telephone company. They told him they'd had some sort of power surge or other in the vicinity, but as it had affected so many homes and businesses, they'd been flooded with complaints and there was no way to check them all out.

"So you see, Phillip," Don said in what Phillip described to me later as a decidedly patronizing tone, "what you heard could have been coming from just about anywhere in South Orange County" Before Phillip could reply, Don changed the subject totally, asking how Eve was and did I have any new exhibitions and the like. Phillip, of course, had answered politely, and then Don surprised him by saying, "I understand you and Peter are going to LA to see that play everyone's talking about. The one that's so controversial."

"Why, yes we are. I didn't know you were aware of it."

"Oh, I read the papers now and then." He smiled at Phillip thinly. "When are you going?"

"On the twelfth. We're meeting friends for dinner first. We weren't really keen on seeing the play but our friends insisted—so we're going."

"Well, I hope you enjoy it. I'll be interested to hear if you think it's worthy of all the controversy."

Phillip told me later that he thought all that was just a way of getting him off the matter at hand. "I think I'll call the phone company myself," he said. "Just to see if what Don said has half the ring of truth. And none of what he did say changes my mind about who was doing the talking.

Now more than ever, since I've had some time to really think it through, I'm convinced it was Senator Bowman."

"Phillip," I said, worried by the way this was going, "Should you really poke around in all of this? Suppose Don finds out you don't believe him...?"

"Don't worry. I'll be careful. Anyway, I won't do anything till after we get back from Los Angeles."

Looking back now on that time, there was no possible way we could have known that the information Phillip gave Don Harley was immediately relayed to the men who would be responsible for the events that would shatter our lives forever.

The night before we went to meet our friends, Phillip brought home a giant bouquet of flowers. "Sorry I've been such a bore about all that mess at the office," he said as he presented me with them. "I've decided you're right. To try and shake things up more wouldn't solve anything. It might only make things worse."

He kissed me tenderly and I clung to him, thankful that he'd decided to let it go. I know it probably rankled still within his mind, but I was grateful it would go no further. We were both in an incredibly romantic mood that night. We went upstairs and made sweet and tender love. All the years we had shared had done nothing to diminish our passion for one another. To me, the sexual side of our relationship only seemed to get better as the years passed.

That night, as we lay in each other's arms, the words "never again" were not whispered in my ear by the Fates. Even if they had been, I would not have believed them.



Dinner with Bob and Ralph was always a fun event. Phillip's college mate, Ralph Wicks had a wicked sense of humor and kept us entertained throughout the meal with his tales of the sexual lives of his co-workers. If half of what he told us was true, he worked with a veritable slew of kinky people.

"My favorite story," Ralph chuckled, "Is about this group that some of them are into. They dress up in baby clothes—complete with diapers!"

I gaped, open mouthed at the thought of it, while Phillip burst out laughing.

"But what do they do?" I asked naively. "Stand around and have cocktails dressed like that?"

"Right," Ralph snickered. "But not the kind you drink. You wouldn't believe some of the things they tell me—and they're all straight." He laughed as we listened, wide-eyed. "And most of them are married and living in only the most respectable neighborhoods. Can you imagine?"

Bob winked at me. "That's what they mean by 'family values', I guess."

Before we knew it, it was time for the play, and reluctantly we paid the bill and left the restaurant.

"I don't think the play will be as entertaining as your stories, Ralph," I remarked as we walked the couple of blocks to the theater.

"He only wants to see it for the nudity," Bob laughed. "Where did you guys park?"

"In an alley about a block from the theater," Phillip replied. "They really should have provided some real parking when they turned the place into a theater."

"Right," Ralph agreed. "We're getting a cab home. Saves a lot of hassle."

I don't know if it was the effects of the wine I had with dinner, or just the fact the play was, in a word—*dire*—but I actually dozed off in the middle of the first act. Phillip told me at the interval that I hadn't missed anything.

"Do we want to go back in?" Bob asked. "It's really terrible."

"Oh, we haven't seen the best part yet," Ralph complained. "It all happens in the second act."

Bob sighed. "He's talking about the nudity, folks. Well, if you insist."

The second act did indeed have nudity in it, along with the worst dialogue ever put in actor's mouths.

"God almighty!" I whispered to Phillip. "The only controversial thing about this thing, is its waste of talent and theater space."

As we left the foyer, slightly dazed by the awfulness of what we had just seen, Phillip chuckled and threw his arms round his friends' shoulders. "Well, thanks guys for that astounding experience. I really would have missed it for anything!"

"What the heck *was* that?" Bob asked. "Boy, Ralph, that's the last time you get to choose what we see in future."

"It was pretty awful," Ralph admitted with a rueful grin. "Even the sight of that beautiful guy's butt wasn't enough compensation."

"Hey, it was good seeing you guys, anyway," I said.

"Likewise," Bob said. "You guys drive carefully. Hey, give us a call when you get home—that way we know you got there OK. Don't forget now...We'll wait up till we hear from you."

"Will do," Phillip replied. We hugged goodbye, and then Phillip and I walked to where we had parked the car earlier.

"Bob's a worrywart," I remarked.

Phillip chuckled. "A nice worrywart, though. He always likes to know his friends get home safely."

I could see the car parked about twenty yards inside the alley. Phillip walked slightly ahead of me, pulling his car keys from his jacket pocket. In my mind's eye I can still see the dark figure that loomed from the shadows behind him.

"Phillip!" I yelled. "Look out!"

I started forward to help him, but suddenly I felt my shoulder grabbed in a powerful grip. I turned and faced a masked assailant and raised my arm to ward of the blow I saw coming. Whatever he hit me with—a tire iron I found out, much later—shattered my forearm. I screamed from the pain, but self-preservation kicked in and I struggled against him, reaching out with my good hand to rip the ski-mask from his face. Under the garish light of a street lamp, his face leered at me, pale and ghastly. Long stringy hair plastered his forehead. He was sweating and panting.

Behind me, Phillip gave a cry of pain that was suddenly cut off as I jerked my head in his direction. My attacker, seeing his chance, struck me a blow to the side of my head that brought me to my knees.

"Phillip!" I cried out just before the man hit me again.

Phillip—was my last thought as the world dissolved into inky darkness around me, and I sank into merciful unconsciousness.



At about seven the next morning, my mother received the first inkling that all might not be well, when Bob called her.

"Hi, Mrs. Brandon, it's Bob. Phillip and Peter's friend up in LA?"

"Hello Bob," she replied, somewhat surprised. "How nice to hear from you..."

"Mrs. Brandon, have you seen the guys this morning?"

"Why no, I haven't. Is something wrong?"

"Well, we asked them to call us when they got home last night, and we didn't hear from them. We called several times but just got the machine. I didn't want to call you last night—it was pretty late. Maybe you could go check and see if something's wrong with their phone?"

"I'll go round right now, Bob. I'll have them call you right away."

My mother put the phone down and walked to our kitchen door. She thought that if Phillip had not already left for the office he would most likely be in the kitchen having coffee. But as she peered through the door's glass panes she could not see any sign of a light or movement in the room. After tapping on the glass several times and getting no reply, she walked round to the front door and rang the bell. Worried now, that neither one of us answered the door, she went back to her apartment and found our house keys. Phillip had given her a set for emergencies when she first moved in with us.

Letting herself in, she called our names then went to the garage and immediately saw Phillip's car was missing. Running back into the kitchen she found the Rolodex I kept by the phone. It was open at Bob and Ralph's number. I had called them just before we left to let them know we were on our way. Quickly she dialed their number and told an anxious Bob that we obviously had not come home.

"Phillip's car isn't in the garage," she told him. "Do you think I should call the police?"

"I already did that this morning," Bob replied. "They said they couldn't do anything until a person is missing for over twenty-four hours. I think I'll call AAA—they might have a report on any serious road accidents between here and Laguna."

"Oh, Bob..." My mother was badly shaken. "It's just not like them to not let us know where they are. Something must have happened."

"Don't worry," Bob said soothingly. "We'll find out soon enough. I'll call you as soon as we hear anything."

After she hung up, my mom called Fred and he came straight over. "I've called Ed Hamilton," he said, hugging her. "He's going to check the hospital admissions for the last few hours."

Just then the phone shrilled loudly, and with a shaking hand my mother answered it, hoping against hope it was either Phillip or me calling with some silly story as to where we were. But of course, it was not.

Phillip was dead, and I was in a coma—and not expected to live. My mother collapsed onto a chair as she listened to a police sergeant relate what had happened. Fred took the phone from her, and listened to the rest of what the man had to say.

"You mean they were attacked?"

"Yes sir, By person or persons unknown. Looks like there were no witnesses and they were there some time before anyone found them. I'm afraid Mr. Jennings was pronounced dead at the scene. Mr. Brandon is in very bad shape."

"Where is he?"

"He's been taken to City Emergency. He's on life support. I'd hurry, if I were you."

Grimly, Fred put the phone down and gathered my mother in his arms. "We have to go to LA right now Eve. Peter is very badly hurt."

The nightmare for my mother had begun.

The endless drive to LA through the early morning rush hour gave her too much time to imagine the horror that had occurred. She sat, silently weeping beside a stoic Fred as they inched their way up the 5 freeway. In her wildest imaginings, she could never have foreseen this tragedy coming so soon on the heels of my father's death. She told me later, that at that moment, she felt her life was irreparably shattered. That she would never recover from the desolation that now enveloped her. Her mind could only keep asking, Why? Why?

After an interminable time on the road, they finally reached the hospital and were allowed to see me. The doctor told her the extent of my injuries—a broken arm, three broken ribs, multiple contusions and a fractured skull.

"That's the worst thing, I'm afraid," the doctor told her. "The injury to his head has caused severe trauma to the brain. It's inoperable, unfortunately. Far too risky. He wouldn't survive it."

"Then what's to be done?" Fred asked, looking at my mother's stricken expression.

The doctor looked at them both, his expression grave. "I'm sorry. We don't expect him to last through the day."

"No, no! I can't lose him too," my mother sobbed, sagging against Fred as she gazed at me lying there, swathed in bandages and hooked up to almost every conceivable machine.

"Mrs. Brandon," the doctor said with a firm but compassionate tone. "The kind thing would be to turn all this off. Even if he survives this he will most likely be in a vegetative state for the rest of his life. You can't surely wish that on him."

"Of course I don't!" she snapped at him. "But he's my only son. All I have left. He has so much talent, so much to live for...and *Phillip*...How could this happen?"

Gently, Fred led her from the ICU. A uniformed police officer and a plain-clothes detective were waiting to talk to her outside the room.

"Mrs. Brandon? I'm Detective Dooley. This is police officer Frank Meeks." He indicated the tall, intense looking man by his side. "I'd just like to ask you a few questions. I know this is a terrible time for you, but if you'd just spare me a moment or two..."

"Mind if I take a look at him?" Meeks asked. Dooley nodded, and Frank Meeks, the man who had killed Phillip, entered the ICU and stood staring at me, probably wondering at that moment if there was a way he could finish the job.

After Dooley had questioned my mother for a short time, he and Meeks left, and my mother told the doctors she would not sign any papers to turn off the life support until she was sure there was no hope.

"Well, he won't survive the night," the doctor told Fred. "Then the matter will be out of her hands. Best for everyone really."

"No doctor," Fred replied. "The best thing for *everyone*...would be if this horror had never happened."

Well, I didn't die that night, or the next day, or the next. It seems my brain, as stubborn as the rest of me, refused to go out without a fight. It formed a protective bubble that stopped the skull bone from pressing on it. The doctor, finally made aware that something was going on in there, ordered a CAT scan. When he saw the reports he told my mother is was nothing short of a miracle.

Now nothing would deter her from making sure I had every chance of survival. As soon as I could be moved, she had me transferred to a hospital near home, and with Ed Hamilton's help arranged for a physical therapist to attend to me on a daily basis. This was recommended to stop the muscles in my body from atrophying,

In the meantime, she had undertaken the other painful task of taking care of Phillip's funeral arrangements. How could any of us have foreseen that his careful planning of our wills would come into use in such a short span of time?

So where was I through all of this?

Somewhere out there in limbo it seems. I have very little memory of it. A floaty feeling every now and then. The vague recollection of voices,

in turn seemingly questioning me, urging me, soothing me. Nothing clear, until I guess it was near the time I awoke. Phillip was there, holding me in his arms. I felt I had been wakened from a long unpleasant dream, but now everything was going to be all right again. Then I really did wake up and Phillip was gone. Gone forever—or so I thought.

The first thing I saw was the startled expression on the face of a young man I did not know. He was gaping at me like I had just come back from the dead—which I suppose I had. Then my mother was there, holding me and crying tears of joy. But Phillip was not there—and after my mother haltingly told me what had happened to him, I could see no reason to celebrate my recovery.

"It would have been better if I'd lain there unknowing for the rest of my worthless life," I said with a deal of bitterness to Andrew one day about a week later as he gave me my daily massage. It had been Andrew I had first seen when I awoke. He had been my physical therapist for many months, and along with his partner David, had formed a deep friendship with my mother.

"Don't say that," he remonstrated with me. "Eve has gone through all kinds of hell waiting for you to recover. For her sake, if not for your own, you should try harder to look at this miracle as the precious gift it is!"

"Did you rehearse that line?" I asked, frowning.

"Well, the miracle bit," he replied, sounding a bit sheepish. "But about Eve, no. She is totally thrilled you're back with her. You should make an effort to at least be more thankful when she's in the room."

"Oh, I know. I'm an ingrate." I turned over and looked at him, unable to return his smile. "It's just that, all this would have more meaning for me, if Phillip were here too. Imagine how you'd feel if David, the love of *your* life, was taken from you."

He shuddered. "I have thought of that, Peter...many times, believe me. I know what you're going through has to be even worse than I could ever imagine...but you're back now. You have a chance at a fresh start, a new life."

"A new life, without Phillip? It's not what I want, at all."

There had been many changes all around me while I had lain unconscious. Frederick Hanson had died a year before I recovered. He had tried to persuade my mother to sell him all my paintings, but she had refused and they'd had a falling out over it. Eve was never one hundred percent certain that Frederick could be trusted, and besides, as she told me later, she would not make that kind of decision in case I disapproved when I eventually did wake up. She was always convinced that I would—never did she waver from that conviction. Apparently Frederick did not take her decision well and cut off communications with her, never bothering to find out how I was progressing. As far as he was concerned, I guess, I had died—but he went first.

In addition, it seemed so many friends had moved on or away in the years that I had been incommunicado. Bob and Ralph were now living in Santa Fe. Candace and her husband Roger had moved to Colorado. She had called a couple of times and we had made promises to visit each other 'one of these days'.

Poor Andrew—what he went through with me in those first weeks after my recovery. Yes, I was there in body, and yes, I went through the daily routines of getting better. Despite myself, every day I could feel my body recover it's strength. Three years of inertia plays havoc with muscle and sinew, not to mention your innards! It was a long haul back to feeling like my old self and it might never have happened, despite all Andrew's ministrations, had it not been for that day when my mom and I went to Phillip's graveside.

Mentally, I was a mess. Totally lost in my own misery, unable to throw off the deep grief I felt each day when I awoke. Of course, at that time, I was under the impression that Phillip and I had been the victims of a 'gay bashing'. It was not till later that I was to discover that it had all been a carefully orchestrated plot to silence Phillip. Well, not so careful really. I should not have survived.

Laboring under this false impression made Phillip's death seem even more pointless to me. The thought that his life, so full of promise and ambition, had been cut off by some mindless morons was more than I could bear. The wrench that I felt inside each time I thought of how he had been taken from me so violently would keep me awake at night as I lay there, imagining his final moments. Had he felt any pain? How long had he suffered? Why had I not been able to save him? These overwhelming thoughts brought me a deep depression from which I sometimes could not break free. I really did not want to go on. It was in those moments that I remembered my boyhood ideal of comparing Phillip and myself to Alexander and Hephaistion. It is said Alexander went near to madness when he lost his lover—and I could understand why. I think at that time I was very close to a mental breakdown.

Until that day.

I can never really describe in words what it felt like to hear him whisper, so close to me...So close that I felt I could have reached out and touched his face...

"Peter, I'm here."

That was all I heard, but it was enough. Enough to give me the reason to go on and to find who wrenched him from my side. But Phillip was not content to just let me know he was there looking out for me, he had to send me help—and that's when Jeff came into my life.

Even though I felt buoyed by my epiphany at Phillip's graveside, there were still aspects of our ordeal I could not face. Even though a loving mother and friends surrounded me, I was still afraid to face just what had happened that night in LA. I could not remember it and would not take the steps necessary to stir some sort of latent memory. Then along came Jeff Stevens who, metaphorically, picked me up by the scruff of my neck and shook me till I *did* remember.

"You're still wallowing in self-pity," he told me, playing the devil's disciple—and boy did that make me mad. Mad enough to throw him out of my house. Well, tell him to leave. We didn't get physical then—that came later. But I guess I'd met my match in stubbornness, because back he came for round two and made me fall in love with him in the process.

Even the fact that he took a bullet protecting me from that psycho cop, Frank Meeks, didn't send him heading for the hills. When I think back on how patient, understanding and compassionate he was in those

early days of our relationship, I reckon the man has to be somewhat of a saint—and one of the best looking saints I've ever seen.

It didn't seem possible somehow, that another man could take Phillip's place in my life. He had been everything to me. We had grown together from boyhood to manhood, our love for each other becoming stronger with each passing year. Sometimes, I felt he was the reason I lived. And then, without him; what reason did I have?

Well, he gave me another reason, another chance at happiness, another precious gift. This may sound just a little crazy, but I am thoroughly convinced Phillip somehow waited till everything was just right, before he set in motion the events that would lead to the murderers getting their just desserts—and me, finding the man who would become as important to me as he himself had been.

PART 2

CHAPTER 1



"He's coming round."

From somewhere far off, it seemed, I heard Andrew's voice, filled with relief. I opened my eyes slowly, waiting for my vision to clear. My mother's face hovered over me, creased with worry.

"Peter darling. Please wake up. You've been out for ages. Ed Hamilton is here. He wants to take you to the hospital."

"What happened?" I asked, still groggy. Then I remembered, and with a surge of panic asked, "Is Jeff home?" I could tell by the look on my mother's face that he was not, and I sank back on the couch pillows in despair. I looked at Andrew and he shook his head.

"They've located Joe's car," he told me. "But there was no sign of them. The police are on full alert looking for them."

"Oh my God," I whispered. "What can have happened to them?" I sat up trembling with anxiety. "Why did I let him go? I should have insisted he stay home. I *knew* something was wrong..."

"It's too late for that now," David said, ever sensible. "The police are conducting a huge search for them. They'll find them. It's just hard waiting for news..."

"I can't sit around waiting!" I lurched to my feet and gasped as an allpervading sick feeling enveloped me. "Jesus. This feeling is getting worse. I've got to do something."

"What can you do?" my mother cried. "You can't go looking for them—you don't know where to start. Please let the police handle this, Peter." She grasped my hands and tried to make me sit back down on the couch. Gently but firmly, I resisted her efforts.

"Mom, I can't just sit here and wait. This whole time I was unconscious, I dreamed of Phillip and our life together. Rather than a dream, it was like a total recall of every detail—from our first meeting to how he became the most important person in my life. It was like he came back to remind me of everything that has led to this moment. I'm going up to LA. I know it sounds crazy for me to think I can find Jeff when the police can't, but I have to try. I owe Jeff that much. If something has happened to him, I'd never forgive myself if I didn't at least attempt to help him."

"But where would you look?" Andrew asked, moving to my side.

"Did the police say where the car was found?"

"Uh huh. Corner of Fourth and Figueroa, near the Music Center."

"Then, that's where I'll start."

"But the police will have combed that entire area already," David said. "If there were any clues to their whereabouts they'd be following up surely."

"David's right, Peter." My mother gripped my hand even tighter. "Please don't go there. It might be dangerous..."

"Mom, you have to realize something. If Jeff is in danger, I have to go find him."

Dr. Ed Hamilton, an old family friend, entered the room at that point. He looked surprised to see me on my feet, and frowned at me as he approached. "Peter, you should be taking it easy. I want you to come to the hospital with me so I can do some tests."

"I can't Dr. Ed," I replied. "I have to go to LA."

"Don't be ridiculous," he snapped. "You're in no fit state to go anywhere tonight. You've suffered some sort of trauma and there may be

damage to your nervous system. You must let me examine you properly."

"Peter, please listen to Ed," my mother moaned. "We're all worried to death about you."

"And what about Jeff?" I asked tersely. "I know he needs my help."

"You'll be no help to him if you go off half-cocked to LA," Ed said, grabbing my wrist and feeling my pulse. "You're still in a state of considerable excitement. You have to take it easy."

"Ed's right Peter," David said. "You can't go without some sort of plan. We'll go with you, but we have to know where we're going and what we're going to do when we get there. If we go barging around up there we may make matters worse—and you can bet the cops won't be too happy about us trying to interfere."

"What about Nick?" Andrew suddenly asked.

"What about him?"

"Well, he's a cop. He'll be able to tell us what to do."

Nick Fallon was the detective who had been involved in the Jeremy Kennedy murder case when Jeff and I had visited Andrew and David in New York. He and his boyfriend Eric had ended up being our good friend. We were still in constant touch by phone and email.

"Nick's in New York, Andrew," I reminded him. "What can he do from there?"

"Give us some advice...Talk to the police in LA. I don't know...some-thing."

"Actually, that's not a bad idea," David said. "He might be able to get us some inside help."

"Wait, wait!" Ed was getting angry. "First things first. Peter must come to the hospital for a check-up."

"Dr. Ed..." I said, as patiently as I could. "Believe me, I'm fine now." I looked around at the anxious faces that surrounded me. "When I was out, I dreamed about Phillip and I asked him for help. He came through for me when I was in the coma, just like he did so many times when he was alive. He's not going to let me down now. This I know. I don't need to go to the hospital Dr. Ed, but I thank you sincerely for caring so

much. I am going to LA to look for Jeff—and with Phillip's help, I'll find him."

There was a prolonged silence in the room as each person digested what I had just said in their own way. There was doubt written on all of their faces. Then Andrew smiled at me as he said, "Way to go, Peter."

"You'll still come with me?"

"You bet." He looked at David for support.

"Of course we'll come," David said. "But let's call Nick in New York for some expert advice."

As I nodded in agreement, Ed shook his head in resignation, then gathered up his coat and bag. My mother walked him to the door, giving him a consoling pat on the shoulder.

"I'm going to wake Nick up if I call now," I said as I looked up his number. "It's after midnight in New York."

"That's right," Andrew said, "D'you think he'll mind?"

"We're going to find out." I punched in the number.

"Yeah?" The voice on the other end sounded decidedly pissed.

"Nick? It's Peter Brandon."

"Peter?" A pause. "What's wrong?"

"Jeff's been missing for hours..." I launched into the story and Nick listened quietly. At one point I heard another voice asking who was on the line, then Nick whispering, "It's Peter..."

"Sorry to wake you and Eric," I apologized.

"No problem. Listen Peter, from what you've told me there isn't a whole lot to go on. The LA cops will already have dusted the car for fingerprints and will be following up on any lead they get there. I suggest you wait till they have some kind of idea what might have happened. If there was a scuffle at the car, any sign of a struggle, traces of bl...uh..."

"Don't worry Nick," I said. "You don't have to spare me the thought that something really bad has happened. I'm already thinking the same thing. I just want to get up there and find out what's happened to him."

"I know you do, and believe me I understand...but let the police do their work first. That way, there's some direction in which to go, you know?" "Nick, you know these feelings I get now and then?"

"Yeah, I remember. How could I forget? You having those feelings, saved my life."

"Well I have a very strong one now. Like I'm going to come out of my skin. I have to go to LA—I just have too!"

"Right." He paused for a moment. "I'll call you right back."

I looked up as Andrew, David and my mother gazed at me expectantly. "He's going to call back."

And in a few moments, he did. "Eric and I are coming out," he said as soon as I answered. At any other time I would have given a smart-ass retort to that statement, but just then humor was far from my mind.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we're coming to California. So happens we were going to Key West for a week starting tomorrow, but we'll switch the tickets for LA."

"Oh my God, Nick. You can't do that."

"Of course we can. For Jeff and you, we can."

My eyes brimmed with tears as I thanked him. "Tell Eric, thank you too," I choked.

"You can thank him yourself in a few hours. I'll call you with the time of our flight."

"They're flying out here," I said, still not quite believing it. "They're going to help us find Jeff."

"Yea!" Andrew crowed. "Okay, we have to get organized. David and I need to go home and pack an overnight bag. We need to find a hotel room for Nick and Eric and for ourselves. We need some kind of base to work from..."

"Stop...I can't believe this!" My mother was looking at us, appalled. "You can't be serious. Going off like this, like you're all caped crusaders or...or something. You're not...you might get hurt. I won't sleep a wink if you go through with this."

I took her hand in mine, trying to reassure her. "Mom, don't worry. Now that Nick will be there, we'll be doing everything sensibly. We won't go stumbling around. He'll work it all out." Of course, I didn't know what the hell I was talking about. For all I knew, Nick might well lead us down many a dead-end, but we were going to try no matter what. My mother was not at all convinced, but she knew there was no longer any point in trying to dissuade us.

"We'll be fine Eve," Andrew said, breezily. "We've done all this before, remember? In New York, when crazy Morgan who I thought was my friend, tried to shoot Nick and me—the guys rescued us both..." His jaunty tone faltered as he saw the look on my mother's face.

This was definitely not the time to remind her of that story!

"What Andrew means," David cut in, "Is that we will be very careful not to find ourselves in any kind of trouble."

Mom looked at me not at all convinced, but she knew there was no point in trying to change my mind. "Please, just be careful," she pleaded. "And stay with the police. They know what they're doing."

I didn't want to tell her that the police would probably not take kindly to the five of us tagging along, but I nodded in agreement. "Let me walk you home, Mom." I looked at David and Andrew. "Why don't you two meet me back here when you've packed a few things? By that time we should know when to expect Nick and Eric."

"Okay. Say goodnight, Andrew," David said, grabbing Andrew's arm and hustling him out before he could tell any more lurid New York stories. I smiled at my mother, and put my arm round her as we walked through the kitchen to the back door.

Her apartment was only a few steps away, and as she turned to open her door, she paused and looked at me intently. "I know you have to do this, and I want Jeff back safely as much as you do. But please, please be careful. I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you. Promise me, you won't do anything rash."

"I promise, Mom." I kissed her cheek gently. "Now, try and get some sleep. We'll keep in touch and let you know what's happening."

After she closed the door I walked slowly back to the house. The phone was ringing as I entered the kitchen and I ran to pick it up, even then hoping to hear Jeff's voice.

"Hey Peter, it's Nick. We're all set. I called a friend at the airport and he got us on the first flight out. Plane leaves in a couple of hours, so we should be in LA round ten in the morning." He gave me the flight number and airline and I told him we'd be there to meet them.

"Thanks again Nick, for this. Having you here will be a huge help."

"Think nothing of it. Like I said it's our pleasure to do this for you and Jeff. Uh...Peter," he added after a pause, "keep thinking positive. Try and keep the worst scenarios out of your mind. I know it's easy to suspect the worst, but there could be a dozen different reasons why he can't be in touch. He *is* a private investigator and the friend he's with is in law enforcement."

"You mean they could be on a case together?" I asked, doubtfully. Jeff would have told me...

"It's possible. Anything's possible, so don't be thinking it has to be bad."

"Right Nick. I'll see you in a few hours then."

I hung up and walked upstairs to the bedroom. I threw a few overnight things into a bag, then as I turned to leave the room, I spotted one of Jeff's shirts lying on a chair. It was the one I had playfully pulled off him the night before, as I tried—successfully as it turned out, to manipulate him onto the bed for a little early evening delight. I picked it up and held it to my face, inhaling the spicy fragrance from his body that still lingered there. I was suddenly overcome with emotion as I closed my eyes and clutched his shirt to my chest.

"You have to be all right Jeff," I whimpered. "You just have to be. I can't lose you. I can't lose the second man who has meant everything in the world to me." I shuddered as that thought flooded my mind, and at the same time the worst feeling of nausea enveloped me in a sickening wave.

"Oh God," I gasped, my knees buckling under me. I fell to the floor, the wind knocked out of me. Then with an almost brilliant clarity I saw him. Jeff! He was lying on a dirty concrete floor, his feet and legs tied, his face covered with blood. I cried out in horror as my worst fears were realized. He was in terrible trouble. Hurt, alone. The vision faded, and

for a moment I thought I had hallucinated. But no, it could not have been. I was convinced that what I'd seen was an evocation of the somewhat primitive psychic power I had attained since waking from the coma.

"Phillip..." I murmured, "...did you do that? Help me find him, please."

I knew now what I had to do.

I could not wait for the others. I had to go find Jeff immediately before it might be too late. I darted from the bedroom, and not even bothering to pick up my bag, I ran downstairs to the garage. The tires of my car screamed in distress as I took off like a bat out of hell down on to the Coast Highway, heading for Interstate 5.



As I drove north toward LA, I tried to devise some kind of plan. First, to find the spot where Joe's car had been found. Perhaps I could get some kind of psychic spark if I could see the place they'd last been to.

"Not a lot to go on," I mused. "But I have to start somewhere."

My cell phone jangled at my waist. Oh, oh, I thought. Andrew and David have discovered I've gone. They are going to be *so* pissed.

"Where the hell are you?" Andrew demanded angrily when I answered.

"I'm almost in Downtown LA," I replied, and waited for the explosion.

"Peter...are you nuts?" He was exploding alright. "Didn't we decide we'd do this together? What are you thinking?"

"I'm sorry. After you left I had a...a vision of some kind. I don't know where it came from, but I saw Jeff." I heard Andrew's sharp intake of breath. "He was tied up," I continued, "and there was blood on his face..."

"Oh my God," Andrew moaned. "Peter, you shouldn't be doing this on your own."

"I couldn't wait. I got frantic thinking of him being in such danger. Andrew, please understand..."

"Yes, I do—but please wait for us. We'll be there soon. We're on the road now."

"Okay. I'll be at the corner of Fourth and Figueroa."

"We'll be right there in an hour. Don't move!"

Downtown LA was dark and deserted when I got there. I cruised up Fourth to the corner of Figueroa, parked, and got out. A couple of vagrants peered out of a doorway at me as I passed by.

"Spare a dollar?" one of them pleaded. I remembered Jeff had a lucky break in the Jeremy Kennedy murder case by talking to a couple of vagrants, so I stopped and pulled a five dollar bill from my pocket.

"Thanks boss," the man muttered.

"Do you know this area well?" I asked him.

"Should do...we live here," he replied.

"I'm looking for a kind of deserted warehouse type building, close to this corner."

"Nothing like that round here. All these buildings are occupied. Offices and the like. No warehouses."

"No empty buildings?"

"Uh uh."

They had lost interest in the conversation and looked away hoping I'd leave. Well, I'd struck out there. I watched as a lone police cruiser drove slowly by. Both cops turned to look at me as they passed, but the car did not stop. I walked back to the corner and stood for a moment, looking at my surroundings.

It was earily quiet, and I jumped involuntarily as I heard a voice close to my ear whisper, "*Not here*."

Without hesitation, but not knowing why, I headed back to my car and got in. I paused as I started the engine. Andrew and David would kill me if I left without them again. I called Andrew's cell. "I'm leaving Fourth and Figueroa," I told him.

"Where are you going? Wait for us."

"I can't."

"Peter, for God's sake...David, you talk to him..." I heard the phone being passed over.

"Don't worry David, I'll keep in touch."

"But where are you going?" he asked in an exasperated tone.

"I'm not sure..."

"Peter, what do you mean you're not sure? If you're not sure, you should stop and wait for us.'

"I think I'm being led somewhere."

"What? Who's with you?"

"No one...at least no one I can see..."

"Oh for pity's sake, Peter. What are you talking about?"

"There's some kind of entity with me...at least, that's what I think it is. I heard a voice. It told me Jeff wasn't near where they found Joe's car. It said, 'not here'. I think it has to be Phillip."

David groaned on the other end of the line. I knew he thought I'd finally lost it. "Peter, please wait till we get there. Nick's flying in. We have to go meet him at the airport. We can't do anything till then. You promised Eve you would be careful!"

"I'm sorry David," I said quietly. "I can't wait for you. Jeff needs me now."

"Alright, but when you find out where you've been 'led', call us immediately and let us know where you are. Here's Andrew."

"Peter..." Andrew was still angry. "You're scaring me. What's happening?"

"I'll be fine," I assured him. "I'm on the 101 going toward east LA. Oh, there's a sign for the 710 ahead."

I heard the rustle of a map as Andrew tried to locate my whereabouts. "Okay," he said. "I see that. Can you meet us somewhere near there?"

"No, I don't want to stop just yet. Listen Andrew; I can't let you and David drive into something dangerous. Go to the airport and wait for Nick and Eric. I'll let you know where I am." Before he could reply I hung up and turned off my cell phone. I imagined Andrew's frantic yelling when he realized I'd cut him off, but I couldn't willingly drag them into this. Better they wait for Nick and Eric.

I took the exit ramp just before the 710 and pulled into a parking lot in front of a row of industrial buildings. For a few moments I sat in the car, wondering just why I had made these last few maneuvers. Yet somehow it had felt right. The gray light of dawn was beginning to filter through a cloudy sky as I made my way round the first building. I stopped the car, lowered the windows, and listened. Nothing. Not a sound, save for the hum of the freeway in the distance, ever present in the neighborhoods of Los Angeles.

Getting out of the car, I walked slowly toward the first building. Cupping my hands over my eyes and peering through the green glass doors I could see what looked like a waiting room. Several expensive looking couches, a desk with computer and a few standing plants filled the area. The lettering on the door read, Cromwell & Co. Brokers. There was no sign of life beyond the doors. No night watchman, no patrolling security. Leaving the car behind, I passed on to the second, somewhat larger building. Same kind of set up, again with no sign of anyone inside. Of course, I thought, it is Saturday morning. There would probably be no one working this early, if at all.

As I rounded the corner of the third building, I drew back in surprise. There were two cars parked outside the side entrance and two men standing facing each other, deep in conversation. Cautiously I peered round the corner. Some instinct told me they should not see me so I beat a hasty path back around Building Two and approached the third building from the other side. There was a delivery bay in back to which I made my way, glancing over my shoulder to make sure no one was watching me. Unfortunately, there was no way I could be sure that I wasn't being watched from any of the windows that looked out onto every part of the park. I had to hope that the buildings were as empty as they appeared to be.

The sliding door to the delivery bay was shut tight. Too much to ask that it had been left open, of course, but there was a narrow door along-side which I tentatively pushed at. To my surprise, and some apprehension, it opened just enough for me to squeeze through.

I found myself in a large loading area. Boxes of all shapes and sizes were stacked from floor to ceiling, and in the center a black SUV. I stood absolutely still for a moment or two thinking, Okay, now what? What exactly was I doing? What craziness had I just got myself into? How could I even be sure Jeff was nearby?

And yet, something deep inside me told me I was in the right place. I could almost feel his presence—and his pain. I clenched my fists in anger as I imagined what they might have done to him, whoever they were. A sudden noise, coming from further inside the building, made me jump back behind a stack of boxes.

Voices, coming my way.

A deep rumbling and grinding sound made me almost jump out of my skin, till I realized it was the loading bay door sliding open. Were they leaving? Could I get that lucky? To have enough time to explore the rest of the building and find the room where I thought Jeff lay, bound and helpless?

No, I couldn't get that lucky.

More voices sounded from outside. Car doors slammed, and as I peeked through a space between the boxes, I saw three more men enter the bay.

Damn, the odds were getting way too steep.

They talked in low voices and try as I might, I could barely distinguish a word. I got the impression they were waiting for someone else to arrive as I eventually heard the words 'late', and 'time was precious'.

Whoever it was kept them waiting so long that I started to itch with impatience. Finally, I sat down on the concrete floor. There was nothing I could do till they moved on, or left altogether. I must have dozed off, for I was suddenly jolted by the loading bay door grinding open again. The latecomer had arrived. A tall man, with silvery blond hair was all I could see as I peered from behind the boxes. I watched as he and the others filed silently through the door that led to the main part of the building. Then, holding my breath, I slipped quietly behind them, keeping a respectable distance between them and me. As much as I wanted to find Jeff—and quickly—there was no point in giving away my presence. There were five of them, maybe more ahead, and I knew even Jeff couldn't overpower five men at once.

Three or four maybe, but not five.

The men disappeared into an elevator. The indicator light told me they had gone to level B2. I didn't want to use the elevator. Who knew where the door might open on level B2?

Quickly, I found the emergency stairs and ran down two flights. Holding my breath, I gingerly pushed open the door marked B2. A long, dimly lit corridor lay ahead of me. I could make out several unmarked doors, the first of which I found locked as I tried to push it open. The same with the second and the third. The fourth door was locked also, but as I pressed my ear to it I heard a soft groan of pain. Someone was in there! Without thinking, I threw my whole body weight against the door and almost dislocated my shoulder.

That wasn't going to work!

Grimacing with pain, I looked around for another way in. From the room above maybe? Holding my throbbing shoulder, I ran back up the stairs and found the room directly above. It was unlocked.

In almost every action movie I'd seen, it seemed that at some point, the hero, heroine or villain would use the air vents as access points. Sometimes, they were all in there together. But as I looked around for just such a possibility, I could see no way into this building's air vent system.

Okay, time to take stock of the situation. There was no longer any doubt I needed help here. As much as my instincts told me I was in the right place, I had no proof that these men were doing anything nefarious, or that Jeff and Joe were actually here. If I called the police now and they arrived in force, to find a regular business meeting going on and no sign of Joe French, they'd probably arrest me for wasting their time.

But what kind of business meeting is conducted under such clandestine circumstances, and why underground? Did they have a very ordinary explanation for this, or was I in a den of criminals and kidnappers? The phone conversation I'd had with Jeff earlier suddenly rankled in my brain.

"Satanist cult members..."

Could they be the ones who had been the cause of Jeff and Joe's disappearance? Could this be where they conducted their rituals? My blood

ran a little cold at the thought—and I began to think I was in way over my head. If they had gone as far as to kidnap the detective who had arrested some of their members, who knew what else they were capable of?

As if in answer to that question I heard a low howl of pain that froze my blood. It had come from the room below. My God, what were they doing down there? Endless possibilities spun through my head—all of them bad. No human made that kind of noise, unless some terrible pain was being inflicted on him.

I ran from the room and down the stairs to the lower level. Cautiously, I pushed the door open a smidge and peered in to the corridor. Three men, wearing long black robes, were standing outside the door I had practically broken my shoulder trying to open. They were watching what was going on in the room, from which came gasps and moans of pain.

They were torturing someone in there. Oh God, please don't let it be Jeff, I thought selfishly. The men stepped back as two others came out of the room, dragging a young man between them. With a flood of relief I saw that it was neither Jeff, nor Joe.

"Bring him."

The quiet command came from the tall silver-haired man. I watched as they dragged the unconscious man away, then I stepped out into the corridor and looked into the room. It was empty. Only a solitary chair stood in the center. There were spatters of blood on the floor near the chair and I shuddered as I imagined what they had been doing to the poor soul they had just taken away. It was definitely time to get out and get help. Whatever these people were doing, it was not a party I wanted to attend. I turned to run back up the stairs—and ran straight into one of the black robed men.

I don't know who was more surprised, him or me, but his snarl of rage on seeing me there was enough to galvanize me into a little unexpected action. Some time shortly after we got together, Jeff had shown me a few of the self-defense moves he'd learned as a cop. I was never very good at them—I'm a lover not a fighter—but luck was with me at

that precise moment. As the man reached to grab me, I brought my knee up into his groin—hard. He doubled over, gagging with pain. I picked up the chair and smashed it down onto his back. I didn't wait to see the results of my endeavors.

Oh my God, I thought as I ran like the wind up the staircase... *Did I do that*?

Strangely exhilarated, I charged through the loading bay at the top of the stairs and out into the parking lot. Never looking behind me, I kept up my lightening pace till I reached my car and, as I looked in my rear view mirror, only then did I see a couple of pursuers turn the corner and head my way.

"Too late!" I yelled, flipping them off as I gunned the engine and sped out of the industrial park at ninety miles an hour. I looked at my watch—almost ten thirty. I immediately speed-dialed Andrew.

"It's me," I shouted. "Where are you?"

"Peter! We've been out of our minds with worry. Where have you been? Are you all right?"

"Yes, but we need to get help right away. Where are you?"

"We're at the airport waiting for Nick. Their plane's just landed."

"Okay. Listen, I'm going to call the police. I stumbled onto something pretty nasty. Some guy was being tortured, and I'm pretty sure Jeff is being held there." I didn't add that I had no idea if he'd been treated the same way. That thought still hung heavily on my mind, and I had to forcefully blank it out in order to keep myself from losing it.

"God, Peter. How on earth...?"

"Never mind that now. I'll explain everything later. We have to get the cops out to that building. I'm calling Joe's precinct soon as I hang up. There's an industrial park just off the 101 before the 710. You'll find it on the map. Meet me there soon as you can."

"Don't go back there alone!" Andrew yelled.

"Don't worry, I won't. Not without the police."

"Okay, we'll be there soon as we can."

As I hung up, I spotted a patrol car ahead of me at the stoplight. I pulled over beside it and yelled at the driver, "I need help!" He indicated

I should pull over to the curb, and he followed me over. I jumped out and quickly explained the situation. "If you put a call in saying I know where Joe French is, and ask for Sergeant Lawson, I'm sure they'll send a team out to investigate."

The cop, a large blond young man with an impressive girth, looked at me for a moment. He was obviously trying to decide whether I was for real or not. Then he shrugged and went back to his car. I looked at my watch. It was almost 11am. Jeff had been missing now for almost twenty-four hours, and I felt my stomach clench with apprehension when I thought of what might have been happening to him. The police officer returned after a few moments.

"They're sending out a couple of cars to check out the building, sir."

"I'm going back there then," I said, turning to go to my car.

"Wait...you should stay clear till they've checked it out."

"Oh, I will. I just want to be there when they find my friends."

"Okay, but I'll go first. You follow my car. Understand?"

"Yes officer," I said meekly, at the same time thinking it was too bad I hadn't had him with me the first time around. Someone built like him would have made small change out of those guys. I followed his car back to the industrial park, then showed him the side entrance to the building I had just escaped from.

"Wait here," he said in a voice that brooked no argument. He disappeared inside. Of course, I had no intention of just standing idly by. I snuck in behind him and watched his large frame move cautiously toward the elevator doors.

"They were on level B," I called out.

He swung round and glared at me. I think I'd startled him a little.

"I said, wait out there...sir!" He punched the elevator button—the doors opened and he stepped inside. I waited anxiously for a moment or two, then just as I was deciding to follow him, I heard the sound of cars pulling up outside. I looked out and saw two patrol cars, their lights flashing crazily, then an amplified voice boomed, "Step away from the door, please!" Hastily, I did just that as four policemen, in various shapes and sizes descended upon me.

"I'm Peter Brandon," I told them. "The one who called for help." Looking at their decidedly unfriendly faces, I was glad they were on my side. At least, I hoped they were!

"Step aside sir," one of them barked at me. As they rushed into the building, another car, this one unmarked, pulled up. Two men in dark suits got out. They did not approach me right away, but seemed to be listening intently to someone on the phone. Then the big young cop I had flagged down came out of the building. Ignoring me, he walked over to the two men by the car. He was followed, some moments later, by the other cops who also ignored me and joined the group by the car.

Hello? Did I just become the invisible man?

Finally one of the cops broke away and walked over to me, again with the unfriendly face. "Peter Brandon?"

I nodded.

"Sergeant Lawson's over there." He indicated a tall man in a dark blue suit standing by one of the cars. "Wants to talk to you."

Lawson glared at me as I approached. "You were in this building earlier?" he asked me without so much as a perfunctory greeting.

"Yes, I was."

"And you told the police officer you saw someone being tortured here?"

"Well, I heard his cries of pain, and saw him being dragged off. I didn't actually see the torture."

"Well Mr. Brandon, there are no signs of anyone having been held in the two lower levels you described." He looked at me with a sneer. "Officer Hancock," he indicated the big blond cop I'd first spoken to, "says the janitor told him those two floors have not been in use for several months."

"Well, the janitor's a liar," I snapped. "Or blind. There were at least five or six men here less than an hour ago. I saw them—and I saw what they had done to some poor bastard. Don't tell me no one's been here. I saw them, and one of them saw me. That's probably why they took off so fast. Didn't you find traces of blood in one of the rooms?"

"We found nothing. No sign of Detective French or your friend. If hostages were being held here there would be some evidence of that, don't you think?"

"Not if they used magic," I muttered half to myself.

"What?" Lawson gaped at me.

"Jeff told me Joe had arrested members of a black magic cult. I think it was the rest of them that were here. The men wore black robes..."

"Mr. Brandon, are you telling me you think Joe...Detective French, was kidnapped by a cult?" Lawson was looking at me like I had two heads.

"Is it that so far-fetched?" I asked him. "From what I understand, they had gone as far as to threaten the Governor of California. If they're that ballsy, why would they balk at kidnapping a detective?"

Lawson's expression changed slightly. "How did you find this place anyway?" he asked.

"Instinct," I replied. I didn't think he was going to go for the other explanation, nor did I have time to go into the whole story for his benefit. Something was tugging at my mind, telling me to leave—now. "I have to go," I said.

"Go? Go where?" Lawson couldn't believe his ears.

"I have to go find Jeff," I muttered, turning to leave just as David's car pulled into the parking lot.

"Peter!" Andrew ran up and gave me a big hug. "Oh, thank goodness you're all right."

Lawson stepped back in surprise as David, Nick and Eric all gathered around me taking turns to hug me and yell at me for being so crazy. Then Nick, as always reminding me of Chris Meloni in Law and Order, held out his hand to Lawson.

"Nick Fallon, NYPD." He showed his badge to Lawson. "I'm a friend of Peter and Jeff's," he said. "You come up with anything here?"

"Nothing but a wild goose chase," Lawson said, annoyed at the sight of my reinforcements. "That's OK," I said. "Guys, we have to go." I looked back at Lawson. "I'll call you when I have some better evidence, so I don't waste your time again."

"Wait a minute," he yelled. "Where are you going?"

"I haven't a clue," I replied. "But we'll call you when we get there."

Nick put his arm round my shoulders as we walked away. His height and powerful build were reassurances I truly welcomed at that point. I could feel Lawson's eyes burning a hole in my back, so I gave him a little backward wave without looking round.

"Good to see you Nick," I said, "And you, Eric. Thanks for coming out here. I just wish this was a happier occasion."

"It will be, once we find Jeff," Nick said firmly. "What happened in there?"

I told him the whole story from the time I left downtown LA. "I'm not sure who or what guided me to this place. My guess is Phillip. I expect the guys told you I was unconscious for a while?" He nodded. "I dreamed of Phillip then, when we first met, all the way to his murder. I know I cried out to him for help..."

"And you think he guided you here?" Eric asked.

"Yes. I don't know how much spirits can do to help us. If I'd got caught in there, I don't think he could have helped me get out."

"But you were almost caught, and you did get away," Andrew prompted.

"That's true." I smiled at him. "Anyway, I feel now he's pulling me on somewhere else."

"Really?" Nick looked at me, trying to hide the doubt I knew he was feeling. "Where exactly?"

"That's just it, I don't know—but we'll find out soon enough."

"Okay..." Nick was taking control. "Eric and I will drive with you. Dave, you and Andrew follow closely. Don't let's get separated."

"Right." David and Andrew got in their car and waited for us to pull out, then followed us out on to the street.

"I'm surprised Lawson didn't try to stop us leaving."

"Nothing for him to hold you on," Nick said. "Other than a nuisance charge and he knows that'd be a waste of his time. If he has any sense he'll put a tail on us, though."

"You think?"

"I would. Even if he thinks your story has a million holes in it, he'd be stupid not to see that you are one determined guy with maybe a lucky break ahead."

"He nearly freaked when all you guys arrived," I chuckled. "He thought I was just some knucklehead, and then here you all came to support me in my hour of need. He couldn't believe it when you flashed him your badge."

"Anything yet?" Eric asked from the back seat. He had his hand on the back of Nick's neck and was caressing it gently. Nick turned to smile at him. I was glad to see that show of affection between them. Nick had many unhappy years before he met Eric and it was good to see them still so much in love. I looked at Eric through the mirror.

"Something," I said. "But it's vague."

"What does it feel like?"

"Feel like? It's hard to describe. Like a whisper inside my mind, maybe." I shook my head slightly. "Last night though, it was very clear, like he was standing next to me."

"Wow," Eric breathed. His light blue eyes met mine in the rearview mirror and he squeezed my shoulder. "I know we're going to find Jeff."

"Yes, we'll find him. I just hope we'll be in time to prevent any harm being done to him."

"We're being tailed," Nick said suddenly.

"We are?"

"Yep. Black Taurus, about three cars back." He chuckled quietly. "Well, that's good. We might just need them."

I was driving south, heading back toward Interstate 5. "I have a feeling we're going to be leaving LA," I said, then braked suddenly as some fool ran a red light in front of me. David, in the car behind was quick to react and avoided rear-ending me, but the several cars behind us ran

into each other, including the car tailing us. By the time they got out of that mess we'd be miles in front.

"They lost us," Nick said, squinting into the side view mirror. "We're on our own." He took another look. "Dave and Andrew are still with us though. So tell me, did Jeff give you any clue at all that something was wrong?"

"No," I replied. "I'm the one who had the misgivings about him going up to LA. I wanted to talk him out of it, but at the same time I didn't want to sound like a nag. I called him and he sounded fine on the phone. He did tell me about the Satanist cult that Joe had broken up, but there was no hint of trouble at that time."

"I wonder how they got to him," Nick mused. "Jeff isn't the type to go down easily. They must have taken him and his friend totally by surprise..."

"Or drugs," Eric suggested.

"Yeah, could have been..." Nick fell silent, thinking things through.

"So, how are you both?" I asked, as I headed up onto the Pomona freeway. I didn't want to think of Jeff being forcibly drugged. I needed a quick change of subject.

"We're great," Eric replied happily, a smile lighting up his face. "You know we moved in together?"

"Jeff told me—that's terrific."

"I moved into Nick's place—it's bigger. It did need a lot of TLC however..."

"Eric's done a great job of humanizing my apartment, as he called it," Nick laughed. "I'd lived there for months without even buying a rug..."

"Or an extra plate," Eric teased him. "Or mug, or—I could go on. First time I was over there we had to share the same cup of coffee!"

They smiled at each other and I felt a slow depression flow over me. I was happy for them, but their intimacy made me realize just how much I'd be losing if anything really bad had happened to Jeff.

"Anyway," Eric continued. "We made a trip to the store and got all the comfy things, plus everything from my place, so it looks more like home now." He stopped as he caught my expression in the mirror. "Gee, I'm

sorry Peter. Here I am babbling on like that, and you with so much on your mind..."

"No no. I'm really happy for you both," I assured him. "It's just that it's so difficult when I don't know what shape he's in, or if he's all alone..."

Nick gave my arm a gentle squeeze. "We have to assume that he's still OK," he said. "If he wasn't, wouldn't you feel that?"

I glanced at him in surprise. "So, you're convinced I can sense these things?"

"Hey, you proved it to me back in New York. I have to tell you when Jeff first mentioned your ability to me, I thought it was a load of crap—but after how you came through for Andrew and me, there's no doubt in my mind you have some sort of gift. I'm your number one believer!"

"Thanks for that, Nick."

I tensed suddenly, then without a word of warning to my passengers, I spun the steering wheel to the right and veered across three lanes of traffic. Nick looked at me in alarm and Eric cursed nervously under his breath.

"Getting off here, are we?" Nick asked, his eyes wide.

"Sorry," I muttered. "Yes, here. Are the guys still with us?"

Eric looked out the back window. "Yeah, but looks like David's hair has gone white, and Andrew's is standing straight up." We managed a chuckle despite my near-suicidal maneuver. "Don't do that again please," Eric begged. "I didn't fly all this way to end up as road-kill."

"We need to go inland for a bit," I said. "On the 10..."

"How do you know that?" Nick asked me.

"That's just it, I don't know. It just feels instinctive, like a map has been drawn for me in my head."

We drove for some time in silence. I knew both my companions were trying to understand just what was going on, but as they had never experienced anything like this themselves, it was hard for them to really grasp this as a reality. Sometimes I didn't understand it myself—so how could they?

We passed a sign for Redlands, then further on, Banning. A voice in my head said, 'Get off here'.

"I need to get off on the next exit," I muttered.

Neither Nick nor Eric asked why. We drove through some rural area for a while, a bit off the beaten track. Then I looked up at a big house on a rise, set back from the road we traveled.

"That house there—that's it!" I exclaimed.

Nick leaned over me to get a better look.

"Beautiful place," Eric murmured. "And look at those big wrought iron gates..."

"Don't stop or slow down," Nick said. "See that bend further on? Pull over after we've reached it. We'll wait for Dave and Andrew to catch up. Where are we anyway?"

"Darned if I know," I said, shaking my head. "Andrew's got a map in their car. We can take a look at it."

Nick nodded. "I'm thinking that if we plan on getting a look inside that house, it's got to be later, when it's dark. We can't go marching up there in broad daylight..."

"But it might be too late by then, Nick!" I protested.

He looked at me intently. "If they are Satanists, don't they usually perform their rituals on nights when there's full moon? If that's so, that's tonight. There's a full moon tonight.

"How do you know that?" Eric asked, surprised.

"My trusty twenty-five dollar watch. See?" He held up his wrist and we looked at the elaborate and decidedly unfashionable chunk of metal he wore there. "I know it's ugly. You've told me so a dozen times, Eric. But look at all it can do!"

"Never mind that now," Eric said impatiently. "You're sure about the full moon?"

"Oh yeah. See the little symbol—it's totally round. Means it's full. I have a feeling they'll consider it really important that they do, whatever it is they want to do, at that time."

"You could be right," I said. "But the waiting is going to kill me."

"Here're David and Andrew," Eric reported. "Looking a bit ragged round the edges."

I lowered my window and gave them both my most contrite look. "Sorry about that back there guys," I said. "Did I scare you?"

"Scare is not the word I'd use." David still looked pissed. "We both aged twenty years in a second!"

"Well, now we're here, so what's the plan?" Andrew wanted to know.

"Did you bring the map?" Nick asked him

"Yeah. We're on the road to Palm Springs. The closest town is Banning. We passed through it earlier." He showed Nick our position on the map.

"What say we find us a hotel in Banning to hole up in till it's dark?" Nick suggested. "I know I could use a shower, and something to eat. What do you say, Peter?"

As impatient as I was, I could see the sense of what he was saying. None of us had slept, eaten or cleaned up in a long time. If we didn't rest a while, we wouldn't be in good shape if things got nasty at the house.

"Okay," I said. "Let's check out Banning."



There was a bunch of hotels to choose from in Banning, the largest being a Holiday Inn. Any port in a storm, as they say, so without any argument we promptly checked into three rooms, fairly close together on the same floor. I was the only one without any change of clothing, so Andrew lent me a clean pair of underwear and a shirt. The shower felt oh, so good and I stood under the heavy stream of hot water for a long time trying to wash away the trauma of the day. Before I dressed, I thought I'd just lie down on the bed for a moment or two to reflect on what our options were once we got inside the grounds of the house on the hill.

Till I lay down, I hadn't realized just how exhausted I was. For a while I fought the constant temptation to just close my eyes for a moment, but I finally lost the battle and before long I fell into a deep, dream-filled sleep.

I was inside the house with the big iron gates, walking slowly down a long oak paneled hallway. Every few feet another hallway branched off to both left and right of me. I stopped and looked down each one, dismayed at the number of doors that dotted the walls. The hallways seemed to stretch into infinity and I said aloud, "I've been here before."

From somewhere in the depths of hidden rooms, came the sound of faint laughter. An unpleasant sound that made the hairs on the back of my neck prickle with discomfort, and then a voice gently called my name. I called out, "Phillip?"

"No..." the voice breathed, "...not Phillip. Someone you desire more. Look, I'm here before you..."

A human form began to emanate in front of me, slowly, like a smoky languid wraith. I stood before it, mesmerized by its appearance until it's face became clear. Then recognition hit me with a sickening blow, and with a gasp of horror I flung myself back from the apparition.

"What's the matter, Peetie? You don't look happy to see me." The face twisted into a grimace of hate. I couldn't believe my eyes. I was staring at Frank Meeks—Phillip's murderer!

"Go away," I screamed. "You're dead!"

"Yes, but I'll live on in your mind for all time," it snickered vilely. "Phillip can't protect you forever...He's dead too, you know. Just like Jeff will be soon. Poor Peetie, all alone again..."

"Shut up!" I yelled, lunging at the apparition. It cackled wildly and disappeared. I sat up in bed, my hands clutching at nothing. "Ye gods," I muttered, wiping the sweat from my forehead. "That was too real." Quickly I got up and went back into the shower, rinsing the perspiration from my body.

"Frank Meeks," I said to myself, "Of all the people to dream about at a time like this." It gave me the unsettling feeling that things were going to get very bad, very soon. As I dried myself, I looked out the hotel window and realized I must have been asleep for some time. It was almost dark. A loud knock at the door made me jump. Wrapping the towel round my waist, I opened the door slightly and peeked out. It was Andrew carrying a large tray of sandwiches and coffee.

"Room service," he said cheerfully as I stepped back to let him in.

"Where are the others?"

"They'll be here in a minute. We thought we had let you sleep long enough."

"Too long," I complained. "I had a vile dream about Frank Meeks."

"Frank Meeks! Jeez, that can't have been fun. Why, d'you suppose, after all this time?" He put the tray down on the chest of drawers and poured a cup of coffee, which he handed to me.

"I don't know. Except it seemed to me it was a portent of something really dangerous ahead of us." I paused as a wave of apprehension flooded over me. "God, Andrew. I wish I'd never involved you guys in this..."

My buddy shook his head. "Nothing you could have said would have stopped David and me from helping you. You and Jeff mean a lot to us, you know that. So don't think you could ace us out of this just because it might get a little hairy!"

"'A little hairy' might be the least of it, Andrew. These guys have got to be nuts, and people like that tend to not care too much about consequences. I have a feeling we're going to need some 'other-worldly' help to see us through this."

"And we've got that, right? Phillip's on our side." He gave me his most optimistic smile. "Go get dressed. Nick wants to have some kind of strategy in mind before we assail the fortress."

I took the coffee into the bathroom and dressed quickly. "Did you and David get any sleep?" I asked him through the open door.

"Sort of..."

"Oh, I see. Lucky you."

He looked at me sheepishly as I came back into the room. "Sorry," he said. "I know you're missing Jeff..."

"Missing him doesn't even come close to describe what I'm feeling." I sat next to him on the edge of the bed. "Andrew, I have never felt this empty and helpless before. This, *not knowing*, is killing me. When I was in that office building, I got the feeling he was close by. But now, that link is gone. Then dreaming about Frank Meeks...it's like some kind of bad portent. I'm scared, Andrew. Scared that Jeff's not going to come out of this well." I couldn't bring myself to say 'I'm terrified that he might be dead'. It would be too much to bear if I heard myself say those words.

Andrew, good friend that he is, took me in his arms and held me close. I knew he felt what I was going through. He'd been with me in an emotional crisis before, and his patience and compassion were the qualities that made me love him so much as a friend.

"Jeff is going to be fine," he said finally. "We have to keep on believing that."

"I know, I know. The gods can't be jealous again."

"What?"

"Years ago," I told him, "when Phillip and I were in Puerta Vallarta, a fortuneteller predicted more or less what actually happened later on. When she'd done, she looked at Phillip and said, 'So handsome, the gods are jealous'. I thought it was garbage at the time, but look what happened. Now I feel as though maybe they want to take Jeff from me too."

"No, you can't believe that, surely?" Andrew looked at me with concern. "Don't give up hope..."

"I won't ever give up hope. If the gods want him, they're going to have a major fight on their hands before I give him up!"

"You are speaking metaphorically, aren't you?" Andrew asked with a shaky grin.

"Absolutely," I laughed. "But if those guys in that house are Satanists, they're the ones who'll find they have a fight on their hands."



When Nick, Eric and David arrived, Andrew and I had almost demolished the plate of sandwiches between us.

"I'll order some more," I said guiltily.

Nick shook his head. "No need. We had some in the bar before we came up."

"Coffee would be good though," Eric said, pouring himself a cup. "Got to stay awake for the next few hours."

"Do we have a plan?" I asked Nick.

"Kind of. First we need to get over the wall. It shouldn't be too difficult, but we're going to need someone to stay on the outside just in case things go wrong when we're in there. We don't know the layout of the place, or if there are dogs on the grounds, or pretty much anything about the place. So, Peter and I will go over the wall while the three of you stay by the car. If anything goes wrong, we'll call you right away and you guys get the police."

"I'm going with you!" Eric exclaimed. "You're not leaving me behind. I can handle myself in a fight."

Nick gripped Eric's arm. "I know you can, Tiger. But if Peter and I get caught, you'll be able to help us from the outside."

"No way," Eric declared fiercely. "David and Andrew can stay with the car and get help if we need it. I'm going in with you—no arguments!"

"We don't want to be left out either," David said. "We all go in."

"But what if it goes haywire and we all get caught?" Nick protested. "Then who's going to bring in the cavalry?"

There was silence as everyone looked at each other for a response.

"Look," I said, "I think Eric's right. We can certainly use him with us, Nick. But I think you're right about someone staying on the outside...just in case."

"But why us?" Andrew complained.

"Because you'll give us a chance of survival if we get caught," Nick said. "We don't know how many guys are there, but we know from what Peter saw there are at least five or six. Probably more..."

"I would guess thirteen," I offered.

Nick grimaced. "Yes, of course. A coven of thirteen."

"Thirteen!" Andrew yelled. "How the hell are the three of you going to manage against thirteen?"

"I'll admit the odds are bad," Nick said, looking at me. "If we run into all thirteen at once, we'll be in trouble."

"Okay, so what's the plan?" I asked him.

"We find a way in over the wall, get into the house, find Jeff—and hopefully Joe too—then get the hell out."

We all looked at Nick in silence, hoping he was joking. He wasn't.

"That's the plan?" David asked, finally. "Shouldn't it be a bit more detailed than that?"

Nick shook his head. "Don't worry, I'll think of something once we're in there. Until we know the layout of the house and grounds it's kind of difficult to come up with something we know will work. Once we get a good look at the place from the other side of the wall, we'll have a better grasp of what our odds are. What we have to do is stick real close together."

Andrew gave me a worried look. "I don't like this..."

I gripped his arm. "We'll be OK. Let's get started. Sitting around here is driving me crazy."

David drove us to the far end of the wall that surrounded the house. After quick assurances that we would call them at the first sign of trouble so that they could inform the police, they gave us each a boost and moments later we were inside the grounds.

"Look," Eric whispered, pointing at the main door where a solitary figure stood, smoking a cigarette.

"Let's go round the back," Nick said. "See if we can find a way in there."

We followed him, keeping low among the trees and bushes that flanked the perimeter. We would be out in the open when we ran across the lawn to the house, so I could see the sense of taking the back approach. One at a time we ran in a crouching position to the house without being detected. Nick scouted around for a way in, then beckoned Eric and I over to what looked like a basement window. Stripping off his bomber jacket, he wadded it against his elbow then punched in one of the panes of glass. I held my breath waiting for some shout of alarm—but none came. Nick felt along the window frame, then with a satisfied grunt, he pulled it open.

"I'll go first," he said. "See where this leads. Wait here till I come back. Don't move!"

"We won't," I said. "Just hurry..."

I was beginning to feel every hair on my body rise. Sometimes, when this happened I could swear I heard my skin crackle with electricity. It usually heralded trouble of some kind—and this was no exception. Moments after Nick had disappeared through the window, Eric suddenly grabbed my arm. "Oh no," he breathed.

I looked round and saw we were surrounded by four men, one of whom was pointing a gun at us.

"Just what are you guys doing?" The one with the gun smiled viciously at us as the others grabbed us in vice-like grips.

"We heard there was a party here," I said with a nonchalance I didn't feel. "We just wanted to gatecrash."

"Don't get smart," the gunman hissed. "Who else is with you?"

"No one," Eric lied. "We were just about to try and get in through that window."

"Yeah, I guess it was kind of a dumb idea." I gave them my most winning smile. "We won't do it again, I promise."

"Hey, just a minute!" One of the men grabbed me by my chin and shone his flashlight on me. "You're the one I caught snooping around yesterday."

"Actually, you didn't catch me," I smart-mouthed. "I laid you out and got away, is how I remember it."

He slapped me hard on the face. "Right!" he sneered. "And you're going to be sorry for that."

"Take them inside," the gunman barked. "Let the Master deal with them."

They marched us round to the front entrance and shoved us through the doorway into a cavernous entry hall. The floors and walls were inlaid with marble, and a gigantic crystal chandelier hung from a ceiling that must have soared upwards at least forty feet. There were some truly exquisite pieces of art on display, which my artist's eye caught immediately. Whoever lives here has got to be loaded, I thought, casting a good look around the place.

"Keep moving." The one with the gun pushed us toward an ornately carved door. Eric and I were roughly pushed into an immense room filled with expensive furnishings and priceless antiques. A group of men clothed in black robes turned to face us as we entered. It was then that I saw, above the mantle of the huge fireplace that dominated the far wall, a truly hideous portrait of Satan himself. At least, I presumed that's what it was. Painted on a black canvas, the pale and snarling visage with

its glaring red eyes and protruding tongue was one of the worst works I had ever seen.

"Good God," I said, before I could stop myself. "Who the hell is responsible for that monstrosity?"

"Quiet!" The gunman gave me a punch to the chest to emphasize his order. I winced and staggered back from the blow.

"Thomas, Thomas. Be kind to our unexpected guests."

The reprimand came from a member of the group who stepped forward. His black robe was decorated with gold embroidered symbols. He was tall and silver haired, with a patrician face that would have been handsome, but for a weak chin and loose lower lip. His voice was faintly accented. I guessed him to be French, and as he continued to talk I knew I was right.

"Gentlemen, what brings you into our midst this evening?" He looked at us with haughty indifference as if we were no more than a passing nuisance.

"Like we told your heavies here," Eric said. "We're looking for the party. But if we're not wanted, we'll be happy to leave."

The man laughed lightly. "Oh, I'm afraid we can't allow you to leave. You see you have violated a sacred ritual. Your unwanted and uninvited presence has angered our Lord. I'm afraid that you will not be allowed to leave—ever."

"Well, actually that might cause you a problem," I said. "Other people know we're here. If we don't get in touch with them shortly they're going to call the police, and..."

"Do you mean...these other people?" He interrupted me, gesturing toward the door. I looked round and my heart sank as Andrew and David were dragged into the room, both looking very much the worse for wear. They had obviously put up a fight and had been roughed up a bit. Andrew's shirt had been practically torn off him.

"It doesn't look like they will be much help to you now, does it?" The man sneered at us with such contempt, that I ached to put my fist right in the middle of his face.

"Sorry Peter," David mumbled through a swollen lip. "They took us completely by surprise."

"What have you done with Jeff?" I demanded, knowing now that there was no longer any need for pretence. "And Joe French. Where are they?"

"Ah! So you are the rescue party, eh? Not very effective are you?" He laughed again. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Pierre Lefevre, the leader of this loyal band, and servant of the great Beelzebub."

"Beelzebub?" I chuckled. "What is this? A bad Hammer movie?" This got me another slap in the face, this time from Lefevre himself.

"Silence," he hissed. "You will not defile his name."

"You're all loony toons!" Eric yelled, struggling to free himself from the grip of the two men who held him. A blow to the back of his head sent him to his knees.

Okay, I thought, we'd better cut out the wise cracks. These guys might be nuts, but they were a dangerous kind of nuts—and we were making them mad.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to be disrespectful. Can you just tell me if Jeff is all right?"

Lefevre looked at me, a smirk etched on his face. "Why all this interest in this one man, eh? Is he your brother? No, I think not. Then what can he mean to you? Your lover perhaps? Ah yes, that's it. The man Stevens is your lover. How perfect! Tell me, would you die for this man?"

He looked straight into my eyes as he said those words, and I knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was deadly serious. A chill touched the skin at the nape of my neck, but I did not drop my eyes from his gaze.

"Yes," I said quietly. "Yes, I would die for him."

"Peter," Andrew murmured behind me. "Be careful..."

"Well..." Lefevre smiled wickedly at me. "You may yet get the chance to show us all just how much you care for him." He turned his back on me to face the ghastly portrait above the fireplace. "Oh Lord Beelzebub," he cried. "You will indeed be sated tonight. We bring you four more young bodies to add to your strength. Soon, you will be made whole

again, Strong enough to break free from the chains that have bound you for these thousands of years!"

Jesus, I thought, these guys are totally whacko. I looked round at my three friends who were watching the goings on with incredulous expressions. How the hell were we going to get out of this? Our only hope at that moment was the fact that Nick was still somewhere in the house, undetected—or so I hoped. I just prayed that he had not walked into a trap like the rest of us. He is an experienced cop I told myself, used to dealing with all kinds of psychos and nutcases. But then, so were Jeff and Joe...and look where that had got them. My thoughts were interrupted by the French madman, who whirled round to face us again with a dramatic sweep of his black and gold cape.

"Prepare them for the ritual," he ordered the men who held us. "The time draws near."

Prepare them? What did that mean? Prepare them had a bad sound to it. I didn't want to be prepared and I tried to break free from the two men who held me prisoner. Eric followed my lead, swinging round and head-butting the man who held him. A general melee ensued as David and Andrew joined in and soon the room was full of struggling bodies. We put up a good fight but there were just too many of them, and soon we were pinned to the ground by sheer force of numbers.

Thomas, the one with the gun screamed, "I'm gonna shoot the next one of you who tries that again!"

We were pulled to our feet and hustled into another room filled with flickering candles. They herded us into a circle that had been painted on the wooden floor. Terrible Thomas trained his weapon on us the entire time.

"I would advise you to never attempt that again, gentlemen," Lefevre said. "Thomas will have no compunction in shooting you should you try to leave the circle." One of his lackeys approached us with some white clothing. "Remove your shirts please and put these on."

"Are you kidding?" Eric threw him a belligerent stare.

"I assure you I am not. These are the robes required for the ceremony in which you will participate."

"Do as he says," I whispered. "We need to stall for time. Go slow." I began to unbutton my shirt pretending I was having a tough time with the buttons. Eric, having a New York minute, started to yell the theme from "The Stripper", while he slowly peeled his shirt off.

"Silence!" Lefevre roared, and there was an angry muttering from the rest of the group. "You will have to be taught a lesson, young man. You will not desecrate this solemn ritual with blasphemy."

"Me blaspheme?" Eric flung his shirt out of the circle. "You're the bastards worshipping the Devil. That's the real blasphemy!"

"Eric, for God's sake—stop," Andrew pleaded. "Don't piss him off any more than he already is."

"Take him," Levfevre said quietly and Thomas leaped forward, dragging Eric from the circle.

"On your knees," Thomas growled. "Kneel before the Master."

"Like hell..." Eric began, before he was forced to kneel by two other men. Lefevre grabbed a handful of Eric's hair, then delivered a punishing blow to the side of his head. With a disdainful hiss he released his grasp on Eric's hair who slumped over, and lay still.

I started forward, but Thomas lifted his gun and snarled at me, "Don't even think of moving!"

"Let us help him, at least," I begged.

"He is beyond your help, I'm afraid." Lefevre adjusted his robe carefully as he spoke. "He will no longer be a part of our ceremony. He is unworthy. He will merely be disposed of. You three however, will go on to give your life forces to our Lord. This fool will die an ignoble death, but you will have the honor of bringing back our Lord to his truly powerful self."

"Are you mad?" I shouted at him. "You have to be certifiable. You think you can kill all of us and no one is going to notice?"

"Oh, I'm sure many people will notice your disappearance...But tell me, who knows you are here tonight? Who is going to connect your disappearance to this house? The answer is, no one. They will not look for you here, just as they have not looked here for Mr. Stevens and the ever so clever Detective French. Yes, they are here and you will soon be reunited. Does that news gladden your heart? If so, what a shame, for believe me it will not be a pleasant reunion."

"What kind of monster are you?" David yelled. "What do you think you'll gain from killing all of us?"

"More than you could ever dream of," Lefevre replied, an insane gleam in his eye. He turned as two cloaked and hooded men entered the room. "Take care of this garbage," he told them, indicating Eric's still inert form. "Then join us in the sacrificial chamber. The time for our Lord's return draws near." He then indicated the three of us. "Bring them..."

As the others forced us out of the circle toward a door at the far end of the room, I watched with horror as the two cloaked men dragged Eric in the opposite direction. Oh my God, I thought. How did we ever get into this mess?

*Nick...*where the hell are you?



We were pushed into yet another room—this one straight out of a nightmare. The walls and ceiling were painted in black and covered in pagan symbols that meant absolutely nothing to me. In the middle of the room stood a stone plinth and, in the middle of that, a sort of altar covered with a red cloth.

"Peter," Andrew whispered. "Isn't that Jeff's friend over there?"

Joe French, wearing a similar white robe to the ones we had been forced to wear, sat tied to a chair, his head bowed. Next to him, also bound to a chair, was the young man I had seen being dragged away the night before. He looked terrified. There was no sign of Jeff.

"Where's Jeff?" I asked.

For a moment Lefevre looked nonplussed, then he barked at one of his followers, "Bring the other one here, immediately."

While the man scurried off to do his master's bidding, Lefevre drew himself up and glared at us. "Behold the Lord's sacrifice!" he boomed with an overdose of melodrama.

"Oh, give me a break," I muttered under my breath. This guy was seriously getting on my nerves. "Just what is it you think you're doing here?" I asked him. "If you have any ideas about killing Detective French, you better reconsider. Do you really think the police won't guess that this is in retaliation for his busting up your pathetic little coven?"

Come on, Nick! I can't stall him forever.

Lefevre looked at me with a haughty expression. "The police are fools. The ones they arrested were the loyal followers of our Lord. The few sacrificed themselves for the good of the many." He gestured toward Joe. "This man thought he had finished us, but he has now found out to his cost, that we are very much still here. Tonight, he will pay the ultimate price for his folly."

"I still say you'll all be caught eventually," I snickered. "Then even old Beelzebubby won't be able to keep you out of jail."

Lefevre stiffened and turned a baleful glare on me. "You will be the first to meet our Lord. Your tongue will finally be silenced." He waved toward the dais. "Take him to the altar. It is time. Gather round, brethren—and witness the rebirth of our Lord."

The two men holding me started to drag me toward the dais, and then all hell broke loose as the man Lefevre had sent to get Jeff burst into the room.

"He's gone!" he yelled. "The cell is empty!"

There was surge of movement behind me. I was pushed and shoved all over the place as I struggled to free myself. I looked behind me and saw three or four of the black robed figures hit the ground and stay there. Then I realized what was happening. Nick and Eric were in the room, laying about them like crazy men. Black robes were flying everywhere as panic set in and the cultists tried to escape. David and Andrew had their captors on the ground and then, suddenly I was free. The two men holding me were grabbed by their hoods by a cloaked assailant—someone I immediately recognized.

"Jeff!"

I watched with some satisfaction as he brought the two men's heads together with a loud crack, then I leapt into his arms.

"You're safe!" I cried.

He held me in a crushing embrace, his face buried in my neck. "Oh God, Peter...I am so sorry." The touch of his lips against my ear sent shivers of ecstasy through me. And then—reality.

"Stand away from him..." Lefevre was only a few inches from us, brandishing the gun that had fallen from Thomas's hand in the melee. A

silence descended on the room as the six of us stood facing him. "You will not destroy what I have strived for this night..." he hissed at us.

Jeff pushed me behind him. "Lefevre, it's over. The police are on their way. They know everything. Better you don't add murder to your charges."

"He's right," Nick stepped forward. "We called them before we took care of your buddies. They'll be here any second now."

"You will not succeed!" Lefevre screamed, totally demented.

"Oh, cut the bullshit," I said, standing at Jeff's side. "It's over, Mary. Give it up."

He pointed the gun right at me and pulled the trigger. There was a resounding click as the gun failed to fire, then before Lefevre could get over his surprise that I was not lying dead on the floor, Jeff reached over and pulled it from his hand. Nick walked over and grabbed Lefevre's arm.

"That's it, Mr. Le—what ever your name is. You're through."

"Peter," Andrew gasped. "You could have been killed!"

"No, I couldn't have," I replied, smiling at Jeff. "One thing I learned, living with a private detective, is when a gun's safety is on—or off."

"True," Jeff grinned, hugging me close. "I spotted it right way, and old sharp-eye here obviously did too."

"Will someone get over here and untie me? You guys can have your love-in later, if you don't mind."

"Jeez Joe, I'm sorry," Jeff exclaimed, rushing over to where Joe and the young man sat, still tied to their seats. He quickly untied them both and Joe stood, rubbing his wrists ruefully.

"I'm getting too old for this malarkey, I can tell you," he grumbled. He looked toward the door as several police officers walked in, a couple of black robes among them. "About time you guys showed up...you can clear up this mess in here. Read them their rights and take 'em all in. This one," he indicated Lefevre, who stood blinking in amazement at his reversal of fortune. "This one is mine. He gets a personal escort to jail from me." He put his hand on the young man's shoulder. "Okay Marty,

it's all over—you can stop shaking. It was close, but you won't be the sacrificial lamb tonight. Just try and stay out of trouble in future."

Marty nodded dumbly, then cringed as Lefevre screeched at him. "Martin, you will never escape the Lord's revenge. Traitors like you are always punished for their treachery. You betrayed us Martin, but you will never be free of us!"

"That's what you think," Joe said, laughing. "By the time you guys get out, Marty will be an old man—and you'll all be too feeble to care.

We watched as two stalwart officers of the law marched Lefevre off in handcuffs. I looked round at my friends and blew a big sigh of relief. "Thank God that's over. Let's get the hell out of here. I need a drink!"



High on adrenalin, we picked up our belongings from the hotel, and even though it was almost one in the morning, we decided to drive back to Laguna. Jeff, looking none the worse for wear apart from a cut over his left eye which I had hastily found a band-aid for, handed me his cell phone.

"Better call Eve," he said. "She's probably climbing walls by this time." "Right," I muttered, punching in the numbers. "Mom! It's me and we're all fine..."

"Peter...!" she interrupted. "I've been out of my mind with worry. Where are you? What happened? Is Jeff with you?"

"We're on our way home...Jeff's fine."

"Oh Peter, I don't know if I'm happy or angry."

"Let's go with happy," I teased her.

"Don't get cute with me, young man..." I held the phone close to Jeff's ear so he could hear her. "When I think of what could have happened to all of you. The police were no help, couldn't tell me a thing..."

Jeff took the phone from me. "Eve, it's Jeff," he said in that warm, soothing voice of his. "Yes, yes I'm fine...Your son was the hero of the hour—with some help from our friends here...I know, Eve...but what can you do? He is stubborn...uh huh..." He smiled at me and rolled his eyes as my mother vented in his ear. "Look Eve, we'll be another hour

and a half or so. Why don't you get some sleep, and we'll give you the whole story in the morning, OK? Good, we'll see you in the morning then. Bye." He closed his phone, winked at me and chuckled. "Oh boy, you are in a lot of trouble."

"Huh," I huffed. "Stubborn—me?"

Behind us, in the back seat, Nick and Eric laughed quietly.

* *

"There's no place like home," Jeff said, as we switched on the lights and flung ourselves down on chairs and sofa.

We had talked ourselves silly on the drive back, catching up with everything that had happened since Jeff and Joe had been abducted. As David and Andrew had driven their own car back, they had to be filled in on the details, so Jeff related the story again as I poured us all some serious libations.

Apparently, someone working in the restaurant must have been part of the coven, and had laced Jeff and Joe's coffee with a drug that had knocked them both out as they were walking back to Joe's car.

"Next thing I knew," Jeff said, "We were both tied and locked up in some basement room in God-knows-where. Joe recognized Lefevre right away, and then we had to listen to him harangue Joe for hours about how he had interrupted the Lord's arrival on earth and how we would be punished and blah, blah, blah. This went on forever, then they brought poor Marty in. He was the one who gave Joe all the information that led to the original arrests. They beat him up pretty badly, then they slapped us around for a while, then left taking Marty with them."

He looked at me and smiled. "Then I guess Peter threw the wrench in the works for them when he showed up, snooping around—and almost getting caught. Next thing we knew we were being hustled out, thrown into the back of some big van and taken to Lefevre's house."

"Yeah, they knew the place would be swarming with police as soon as Peter got away," Nick said.

"Right," Jeff nodded. "The plan was always to take us there—that's where the sacrifices were to take place. Well, you saw that room..."

I shuddered, as I thought of what might have happened. "I still can't believe those guys were for real. I mean, it was like something straight out of a bad horror movie."

"Believe me, they were serious," Nick said. "When I got separated from you guys, I bumped into one of the 'chosen', and after I'd roughed him up a little he blabbed about what they were going to do to Jeff and Joe. So I squeezed him a little more and he led me to them."

"You were the last person I expected to see coming through that door," Jeff laughed. "God, the expression on my face must have been hilarious."

"It was," Nick chuckled. "If I'd been the Queen of England, your jaw wouldn't have dropped any further."

"So we put our little plan together right there."

"Which was?" Andrew asked.

"Well, we knew they were going to come get us for the ritual at any moment, so Nick put on the guy's black robe, then went prowling."

"I found the sacrificial chamber..." Nick picked up the story. "I figured this was where it was all going to happen, then I heard voices, so I peeked in through the door and saw you guys standing in that circle, and Eric doing his crazy routine..." He smiled at his partner and ruffled his hair, "Something he will do penance for later..."

"I think my poor bruised face is penance enough, thank you," Eric said, rubbing his jaw. Besides, I thought you liked that routine..."

"And then?" David asked, impatiently.

"Then, I knew things were going to get pretty ugly, so I went back and got Jeff."

"He arrived just as two more bozos came to take us to the chamber," Jeff said. "We made short work of them, then I put on one of their robes. We took Joe and Marty to the chamber, tied them up, then we walked into the room where you were and dragged Eric out."

"I really thought I'd had it," Eric said. "When Nick pulled back the hood covering his face, I just laughed and laughed."

"Yeah, I've been meaning to talk to you about that..." Nick grinned at him.

"Well, I mean—it was just total relief."

"I'll bet," Andrew said. "So that's when you three came barging in and laid them all out."

"More or less," Jeff said. "We knew we didn't have much time, but they were all so intent on seeing Peter get his, that they didn't even notice us till we'd taken at least three or four of them out."

"So what was it all about?" David asked. "I mean, what did they think they were doing with all that Beelzebub crap."

"Beelzebubby!" Andrew laughed. "God, I couldn't believe it when you called it that, Peter. Old Lefevre looked like the top of his head was going to explode!"

I grinned at him. "Definitely one of my more inspired and creative thoughts."

"According to Joe, the group had been formed by Lefevre about a year ago," Jeff explained. "He claimed he'd found some old tome with a secret incantation to bring back the Devil as ruler of the world. Why anyone would want to do that is kind of beyond me..."

"Beyond most sane people," Nick murmured.

"Of course, Lefevre is hardly working with a full deck," Jeff continued. "He's definitely out there...But anyway, he managed to convince some high rollers that they would have many earthly rewards if they helped him raise Satan from his prison..."

"Jeez, what bullshit." David growled. "And people actually believed him?"

Yep," Jeff said. "Lots of them apparently, in the beginning. He had a much larger following till recently. After the arrests, quite a few decided they'd better disassociate themselves with Lefevre—so what you saw there, was all that was left of them."

"Thirteen, that's all they needed," I said.

"Lucky thirteen," Andrew mused. "For us, but not for them."

"Luck had nothing to do with it," I said.

"That's true," Jeff agreed quietly. "If it wasn't for Peter's premonition, Ioe and I would never have made it out of there alive."

"And if it hadn't been for Phillip," I added, "I would never have found the place you were held in."

He smiled at me. "Nice to know he's still looking out for us."

"Well," I said, getting to my feet. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm pretty well done. I should show Eric and Nick their room, and we should all get some sleep."

"Right," David said. "Come on Andrew. Let's go home to our nice, boring, normal routine life."

"What do you mean boring?" Andrew huffed. "If I'm not enough excitement for you..."

"Yeah, yeah, you are," David laughed, grabbing him by the arm. "Let's go!"

"We'll see you guys tomorrow," I said. "We owe Nick and Eric a big dinner, so you're invited too."

"Great...see you then."

After they left, I led Nick and Eric upstairs to the guestroom.

"I can't thank you enough for everything you've done," I told them both, sincerely. "Lord only knows what would have happened if you hadn't been there."

"You know Peter..." Nick grinned at me. "I get the impression you're a pretty resourceful guy. Somehow I think it would have come out all right."

"Especially with Phillip guiding you through it," Eric added. "I bet he wouldn't let anything bad happen to you and Jeff."

"No, I guess you're right," I said. "He worked too hard to bring us together in the first place."

"Hey you guys, enough gossiping for one night," Jeff told us from the doorway. "Let's save the rest for tomorrow. Eve is going to want to hear all the gory details, you know."

We hugged them goodnight, then went to our room. As soon as he closed the door, Jeff took me in his arms and held me tightly against him. "If I ever doubt you again, you have my permission to slap me hard. I should have listened to you yesterday, and been very much more on my guard."

I kissed his bristly cheek. "But how could you possibly know they had someone working for them in the restaurant?"

"I couldn't, of course. But maybe I'd have suggested I meet Joe another day."

"But it's just as well you were with Joe. If you hadn't been involved, maybe he wouldn't have got out OK."

We held each other for a long moment, silently contemplating the past events and how they could have just as easily turned out for the worst.

"I need a shower," Jeff said finally. "It's very nice of you not to complain about my lack of hygiene, but I'm way overdue."

"You smell good to me. Just having you back, here in my arms, is all I need right now." I unbuttoned his shirt and ran my hands over the warm smooth skin of his back.

"Mmm," he murmured. "Do you know how many times I thought of you when I was lying tied up in that room? The thought of never seeing you again was worse than what I imagined they were going to do to me."

He kissed me fiercely then, and together we fell back on to the bed. Showering was forgotten as I clung to his powerful body and felt the hardness of his erection against mine.

"I love you," he whispered.

I felt a surge of happiness that no words could express. "I love you—more than my life," I told him.

And I meant it.



Next morning, I awoke to the sound of the shower running. As I lay there listening, knowing that it was Jeff in there, home safe and sound, I thought back to that moment when Phillip had come to me and made me remember all that had brought me to this place in my life. Some of those memories had been extremely painful—so painful that I had tried to block them from my mind until they had been forced upon me two nights ago. Now, it seemed that reliving all of that had somehow given me more closure than before.

Despite my happiness with Jeff, there had been times when the realization of Phillip's death was still like a raw nerve. No matter how I analyzed it all, it just seemed so unfair that he had been taken so early in his life. There had been so much more for him to do. For us to do, together. All that promise snapped off, before it had a chance to really be fulfilled.

But strangely, now that he had come to me again, whether in my dreams or on some parallel plane—it felt easier. Easier in the sense that I could perhaps finally come to terms with his death, knowing that he still existed somewhere. He had endowed me with some knowledge, some way of knowing when things were out of kilter—a sort of early warning system, I suppose. It had helped Jeff and me on numerous occasions, saving us from some really nasty situations—and he had come through for us once again.

Instinctively, I knew he always would.

The touch of warm lips on mine, made me open my eyes to the wonderful sight of a naked Jeff leaning over me, his skin fresh and damp from his shower, his uncombed hair falling over his brow in chestnut waves. We smiled into each other's eyes.

"Good morning," he whispered.

I wrapped my arms around him and held him tightly to me, feeling a million emotions course through me as his lips took mine in an all-consuming kiss. We clung together for a long time, silently consummating our need for each other. No words were necessary at that moment. Sometimes they get in the way of how one truly feels. It was enough to have him in my arms, and to feel that the love we had for one another could somehow make us invincible. Silly, I know, but that's how it feels sometimes.

I gently touched the fresh band-aid he'd put over the cut on his forehead.

"How is it?' I asked.

He grinned at me. "I'll live."

The sounds of our guests stirring somewhere in the house brought us back to reality. With one more smile and kiss we untangled ourselves, and while Jeff pulled on some shorts and a tee, I had a quick shower before running down to the kitchen to start some breakfast for us all.

Nick and Eric were outside on the patio talking with my mother.

"Morning," I greeted them.

Mom looked at me with a hard to read expression. She had obviously been grilling the guys on what had happened last night, and I hoped the version they had given her was the least lurid they could come up with.

"Good morning, dear." She hugged me, holding me for a little longer than just a regular good morning hug. Jeff joined us at that moment and she made a big fuss of him, getting me off the hook for the moment.

"I'm so relieved you're all back safe and sound," she said finally, wiping a tear from her eye. "I can't tell you how worried I was till I got your phone call last night." She looked at Nick and Eric and smiled. "And to think you flew all the way from New York for this. What wonderful friends you are."

I chuckled at the 'aw shucks' expressions on both their faces. Nick actually blushed!

"Well, Key West would have been plain boring in comparison," Eric laughed. "Besides, now we've got to meet you, Mrs. Brandon."

"Please call me Eve," she said, then smiled up at Jeff as he put his arm around her.

"Peter's the luckiest guy in the world to have this lady as his mother," he said, giving her cheek a gentle kiss.

"And to have all of you as his friends," Mom added. "I don't know if I totally approve of the risks you all took, David and Andrew too, but I'm just glad to see you all safe."

"Coffee anyone?" I asked glibly, to change the subject.

"Love some," Nick said.

"Let's go inside then. I'll whip up some eggs."

"Excellent." Eric put his arm round my shoulders as we walked into the kitchen. "Your mom's great," he whispered, "but I think she's really mad at you."

"I know, I'll hear all about it later when we're alone. You can count on that!"

We talked non-stop over breakfast, with my mother asking a million and one questions. We were interrupted by the phone ringing. It was Joe French for Jeff. Now here was the real shocker. I watched Jeff's expression change from a smile to one of incredulity, as he listened to what Joe was saying.

All we could here of the conversation, of course, was Jeff's "Are you serious?" "Holy shit!" and stuff like that.

We were on tenterhooks by the time he got off the phone and sat down again at the table. He looked at me, then his gaze swept round to each one of us.

"What?" I almost yelled.

"Lefevre got away," he announced to a stunned group.

"You've got to be kidding," Nick gasped.

"I wish I was," Jeff replied grimly. "His cell was empty this morning when Joe went down there. The door was wide open and no one saw or heard anything!"

"Oh my God," Eric breathed. "But how?"

"Magic," I said.

"What do you mean, Peter?" Mom asked me.

"That's what Lefevre uses," I replied. "Some kind of magic. He had to have used it to get away from the warehouse so quickly—and now this..."

"Peter," Jeff was looking at me, a really serious expression on his face. "I know I just got through saying I would never doubt you again..."

"And that I could slap you if you did," I reminded him, with a smile.

"That too," he acknowledged, ignoring Eric's giggle. "But honey, *magic*? The guys a charlatan, a con man."

"He might also be an illusionist—or a hypnotist, Jeff."

"Huh?"

"It would explain how he got all those guys to do his bidding. He could have had them under some kind of mass hypnosis..."

"And you're saying he used hypnosis to get out of jail?" Nick asked.

"Right. It's been done before. Not like this of course, but mass hypnosis is a fact."

"I always figured it was a hoax," Jeff said. "You know, people planted in the audience just pretending to be hypnotized."

"I'm sure there's a lot of that, but mass hypnosis has been scientifically proven to work." I looked at him earnestly. "I did feel that the man had some kind of power."

"Definitely the power to sway those guys he had working for him," Nick said. "Peter may just have something here, Jeff."

"Looks like I'm going to deserve that slap," he said, grinning at me.

"Oh dear." We all stared at my mother who had gone pale.

"What is it, Eve?" Eric asked.

"I was just thinking, if he's escaped, he might just come looking for all of you. After all, you're the ones who ruined everything for him." "Not a chance," Jeff said, a shade too quickly. "He'll be headed the other way, for sure. As far away as he can get if he's got any sense."

"I hope you're right, dear. Thanks for trying to put my mind at ease." She smiled at him. "However, after what you've told me about him, I'd say he doesn't have much sense!"

We were silent for a moment, then Eric said, "Well, there's safety in numbers anyway."

"Uh, Eve..."

Jeff was silenced by an angry look from my mother. "Jeff, you are *not* going to get rid of me. I am not being packed off to Martha's or Fred's or anyone else's while all of you start looking for that madman again. If he comes here, he'll have to deal with me too!"

"You can see where I get it, can't you?" I laughed.

Jeff glared at me. "This isn't funny. If Lefevre really wants to find us, he can—easily. You are nothing if not high profile in this town. Eve would be safer..." Again he was interrupted by my mother.

"No chance," she said. "Jeff, I love you dearly and I know you are just being concerned for me, but I think I'll be just fine with all of you right here. I mean, four men to protect me. Who else can be that lucky?"

"Better give up Jeff," Nick chuckled. "Looks like the lady's mind is made up."

"But Peter has me worried with this hypnosis thing," Jeff said. "If the guy's capable of influencing people's minds, he might try to turn us against one another—and then what?"

"Well, he's going to have to get to us first," I said, then turned to answer the phone as it shrilled by me.

"Hi Peter, it's Andrew."

"Hey there, what's up?"

"Just wondered what you guys were doing this morning."

"Haven't quite decided yet. You and David coming over?"

"If that's OK."

"Of course it is. Oh, by the way, be careful on your way over. Lefevre escaped from jail."

"You're kidding! How?"

"No one knows, but there just might be a chance he'll come looking for us, seeing as how we were the ones who blew his little plan sky-high last night."

"Right. Okay, we'll keep our eyes open. See you in a few."

I put the phone down. "Andrew," I explained. "They'll be over shortly."

"Okay," Jeff said. "If you don't mind, I'm going to give Joe French a call and talk to him about your hypnosis theory. When Dave and Andrew get here we should take the guys out and show them Laguna."

"Good idea," I agreed. "Mom, you'll be coming with us. You have to go where your bodyguards go!"



It wasn't long before Andrew and David arrived, and after we'd sat around and yakked some more, I ran upstairs and told Jeff we were ready to go. He was still on the phone with Joe, deep in conversation, but when he saw me standing there, he cupped his hand over the phone and mouthed, "Be right down." I left him to it and went to make a quick stop in the bathroom, before going back downstairs.

Now here's the thing...I knew before I got to the bottom step, something was wrong. A wave of nausea overtook me and I reeled against the wall, taking deep gulps of air to steady myself. I had broken out in a sweat, and I knew, I *knew*, something bad had happened.

"Jeff!" I yelled at the top of my voice, as I ran into the kitchen.

It was empty.

"Jeff!" I yelled again and heard the thundering of his footsteps as he flew down the stairs.

"What's wrong?"

"They're gone. They're all gone!"

He ran out into the backyard, looking desperately around him. Panicked, I joined him and together we ran over to my mother's apartment.

"Mom!" I yelled as we dashed from room to room.

Nothing.

"Oh my God, Jeff. He's been here—he's *taken* them. He's taken Mom!"

"Wait, wait!" Jeff grabbed my arms and shook me, none too gently. "How could he have? Nick and Eric were here...Dave and Andrew too—all with Eve. He can't be that strong..."

"Then where are they? Jeff, we have to find them!" Almost blindly I ran from the house, Jeff in hot pursuit.

"I'll drive." He steered me toward his Porsche and pushed me in. We roared out onto the street and down the hill toward the Coast Highway.

"Where the hell are we going?"

"North," I said, staring straight ahead.

He didn't argue, just drove. "They can't have had much of a head start," he said. "Are you getting anything?"

"Just keep going," I answered tersely, all the while praying that my intuition was right. I kept hearing a voice—it had to be Phillip. He wouldn't desert us now; not after all we'd just been through.

"I think I know what happened."

"Go on," Jeff said, his hands flexing on the steering wheel.

"Lefevre got to Andrew and David somehow. He's using them; trying to get us to come to him."

"You mean, this is a trap?"

"It's meant to be."

"But how can he know we could find him?" Jeff looked at me, puzzled.

"That I'm not sure of," I replied, thinking hard. "Unless...he's tapped into the fact that Phillip is helping us. Maybe he's capable of channeling—you know, like that guy on TV—as well as hypnosis."

"God," Jeff muttered. "We need help..."

"We've got help," I replied with confidence. "Phillip will help us."

"I hope so, babe. How d'you suppose Lefevre's managing all this?"

"Could be transference of power, using either Andrew or David, or both of them maybe, as conduits. He might be able to influence a person's will through them. His power would have to be very strong though, to do this." "Nick and Eric wouldn't have taken kindly to being pushed around..."

"No, it would have been very subtle I think. Some kind of mental suggestion, rather than Andrew or David pulling a gun on them and forcing them out of the house."

"D'you think it could harm them in any way?"

"It shouldn't, unless..."

"What unless?"

"Unless Lefevre abuses his power in some way...but I don't want to think about that."

"What do you mean exactly?" Jeff persisted.

"Well...let's say he gets truly pissed off at us, and depending on just how strong his powers are of course, he could exert some kind of shock to their nervous systems that might possibly cause some damage."

"Damn! I'm calling Joe. We need some kind of back up."

"Wait Jeff," I said, putting my hand on his arm. "If the cops come swarming in, he might very well hurt Mom and our friends out of sheer spite."

Jeff grimaced as he mulled that point over. "You might be right. Truth is, we don't really know what we're up against yet." He looked at me with concern. "Are you getting anything right now?"

"No, but we're definitely heading in the right direction."

"We'll be coming into Huntington Beach soon."

"Right." We were both quiet for a time; each of us lost in our own thoughts. Silently, I reached out to Phillip, probing my subconscious for some sign that he was still with us. The words, 'Almost there', formed in my mind. "Almost there," I said aloud.

"You're sure?"

'Next exit'...

"Yep, next exit," I replied with supreme confidence.

"You got it." Jeff steered the car into the exit lane.

'Turn left'...

"Turn left."

We were heading down to the beach, and we followed the road till we came to a dead end in a public parking lot. We got out of the car and looked around. There were a few other cars in the lot and some people out on the sand. Some sunbathers, some wading in the shallow waves. A few guys were playing volleyball. It looked very Californian ordinary—and then, a tiny sinister sensation poked at the back of my mind.

Lefevre! He was trying to control me.

I grabbed Jeff's arm. "Are you okay?"

"Uh-huh. Why do you ask?"

"I felt something...in my head, like he was trying to get in."

"I can't be hypnotized," he said.

"How do you know? This guy's good..."

"Won't work. A professional hypnotist tried once, back when I was on the force. He told me I had to be immune."

"Let's hope he was right," I said. "He's definitely quite close, Jeff."

"You going to be all right?"

"Yeah." I scanned the beach and the row of houses ahead of us.

"Let's check those out," Jeff said, nodding in the direction of the houses. We walked toward the houses, acting as nonchalantly as possible, giving each property the once over.

I reached out again for Phillip, praying that he could somehow block Lefevre's attempt to control my mind. He had taken us this far; he had done so much for us in the last couple of days. I could not see him relinquishing his connection with me now.

"Phillip," I murmured, then jumped slightly as Jeff gripped my arm.

"Look...Isn't that Andrew's car?"

"Yes," I said, feeling a surge of excitement. "We've found them Jeff..."

"Careful, careful..." he muttered, turning me around and making me retrace our steps. "We can't just go marching up to the door and demanding he hands everyone over. My guess is he's armed, and this time you can bet he won't forget the safety catch."

"So what do we do?"

"We wait."

* *

We waited till dusk fell and one or two lights started to come on in the houses nearby. The one, outside which Andrew's car was parked, remained in darkness. Jeff frowned, and tapped his teeth with his forefinger as he thought over our first move.

"I'd like to have seen a light there, so we'd know just where in the house they might be," he said. "But let's not waste any more time...let's check it out."

We moved cautiously toward the perimeter wall, making sure none of the neighbors saw us. That's all we'd need—a 911 call to the police, getting us arrested. What the heck would we tell them?

Officer...a madman has my mother and friends locked up in this house. How do you know that, sir?

My psychic intuition...

Right...that would go over really well!

"Give me a boost," Jeff whispered as we reached the back of the house. He scrambled up on top of the wall, then looked back down at me. "There's a light on in a real low window in back...could be a basement. Here, give me your hand."

With his help I climbed up, then we both jumped down into the grounds.

"Stay low in case someone's keeping watch."

I nodded and followed him as he approached the house. Twice in two days, I thought, climbing walls and breaking into houses.

Who knew?

I watched as he peered through the dimly lit window. "All I can see are some steps going down somewhere...can't make out where though. We need to get in." He looked around, then pointed to a set of French doors. "That's the easiest spot, right there. Come on."

"Uh oh," I whispered, as the door opened at his touch. "D'you think we're expected?"

"Looks that way. Well, let's not disappoint them."

We stepped into the darkened room and paused, listening for a moment for any sound.

"Good evening, gentlemen!"

I practically jumped out of my skin as the voice boomed through the room.

"Amplified," Jeff said, his voice calm. "There's no one actually in here."

"Scared the crap out of me," I muttered, with a rising anger. "What a jerk!"

"Come in, come in," the voice boomed again. "Join us downstairs, if you don't mind."

We walked through the room into the hall outside. "This must be the door to the basement." Jeff pushed it open. A flight of steps was revealed before us, the ones we'd seen through the window.

"Come on down! Ha ha!"

I gritted my teeth, furious that Lefevre should regard all this as some kind of a joke. He had my mother hostage there, and that was no laughing matter as far as I was concerned.

Jeff put his hand on my shoulder as we descended the steps. "Don't be surprised if they act out of character. He may have all of them under his control."

Ahead of us, a door suddenly yawned open and Thomas stood there, gun in hand, grinning at us. "The Master is waiting for you guys." He waved the gun at us. "Get a move on."

"Nice to see you too," Jeff said, amiably. "Know how to use that thing?"

"Don't tempt me," Thomas snickered. "You'll be first on my list." Nice guy.

We walked past him into a large windowless room, in the center of which stood Lefevre, surrounded by a ring of chairs where Mom, Nick, Eric, David and Andrew were all seated. Their heads hung down on to their chests, their hands were clasped neatly in front of them as if in prayer. No one looked up as we entered.

"Mom!" I yelled. She did not stir. "What have you done to her?" I glared at Lefevre angrily. "If you've done anything to harm her mind, I'll..."

"You'll do nothing, nothing at all." Lefevere gave a theatrical gesture. "You must have failed to notice that I am in complete control here. Your mother and friends answer only to me now—as you will in a moment."

"I don't think so..." Jeff stopped in mid-sentence as Lefevere's fastened his eyes on him. Jeff's shoulders slumped and he seemed to suddenly go limp.

"No!" I protested, starting forward "You won't do this, you bastard."

"So you think you can stop me?" Lefevre laughed. "I think not. Not even your dead friend can help you here."

So he did know about Phillip! Damn him, I thought, at the same time mentally calling Phillip's name. I knew that now he was the only one who could help us. My fledgling psychic powers were nothing compared to this man's. I would be mental putty in his hands.

"What is it you want?" I asked him. "If it's me you want revenge on, let my mother and my friends go. I'll stay..."

Lefevre snickered. "Don't be a fool. No one leaves here. You and your friends must pay for your bungling attempts to stop me." He pulled himself up into a flagrant pose of arrogance. "See what I have wrought!"

From somewhere in the dark corner of the room a shape began to emerge...a wispy ethereal thing that writhed and coiled itself before taking the shape of a human being. I almost screamed when I saw what it had become. The thing of my nightmares unfolded itself before me, its wicked eyes gleaming, its mouth pulled into a mirthless smirk.

Frank Meeks!

"God," I gasped, my mouth going dry with fear. "Get it away from me!"

"You've really got him this time, boss..." The voice behind me belonged to Thomas, Lefevre's henchman. I turned to see him gloating at my obvious discomfort. "He's shaking like a leaf...going to piss hisself."

"Quiet, Thomas," Lefevre said smoothly. "Let this confrontation play itself out. I'm quite curious to know what young Mr. Brandon will do."

There wasn't much I could do. I didn't have the power to rid the room of this apparition, but instinctively, I knew it couldn't really hurt me. After all, it wasn't *real*. It was a product of Lefevre's hypnotic powers, nothing more.

At the same time, I began to wonder if it could have been Lefevre that had sent the vision of Frank Meeks to me, while I slept in the hotel room. There was no doubt he had some serious power. But now, as I started to understand that, and armed with that bit of reasoning, I stepped forward and faced the madman.

"You have to understand something, Lefevre," I said, hoping I sounded a deal more confident than I felt, "I don't happen to believe in the devil, or any of the spirits you might conjure up. The only evil in here, is you."

"What you believe is of little consequence to me," Lefevre sneered. With a contemptuous wave of his hand he dissolved Meeks' apparition. "It's what you *have* that I want. I know you have a 'familiar'—and I know it to be extremely powerful. You will persuade it to become mine. Do this, and I will release your mother and your friends. Deny me it, and you will all suffer. Surely, you would not want your lovely mother to be a brain dead vegetable for the rest of her life?"

"Bastard," I yelled. "You must be crazy...I don't know what the hell you're talking about..."

"Oh dear," he sighed. "I see a little demonstration is in order."

He took a step toward where Nick and Eric sat, and touched Nick lightly on the forehead. Nick immediately stood up, faced Eric, then with great deliberation, struck him hard across the face.

"My God," I gasped. "What are you doing?"

Lefevre smirked. "I'm merely showing you the kind of control I have over these people. It could get much worse, I can assure you."

He paused and looked at me, then at my mother, a wicked gleam in his eyes, making sure I caught the full import of his words. Then he touched Nick again who sat down as if nothing had happened. "But I don't have any idea what you want, or how to give it to you."

"Thomas," Lefevre snapped. "Bring Mr. Brandon's lover over here." He regarded me with a malicious sneer. "Let us see how long it takes for you to comply as you watch Thomas's skill, as a persuader."

"No, no wait..." I stammered, but Thomas was dragging Jeff by the arm to where we stood.

"Kneel!" Lefevere commanded him, and I watched with dismay as Jeff obeyed, sinking to his knees without protest.

"Wait," I said again. "Please tell me what it is you think I have. If you're talking about Phillip, you must know I have no control over any of our communications. I don't even pretend to understand how it happens. There's no way I could offer him to you..."

"Fool..." Lefevre interrupted. "You have an immense gift that you are wasting for want of discipline and control. You don't know what kind of power you could have if you put your mind to it. That's why I must have it. I will use it to achieve my greatest ambitions."

God, I thought, this man is really nuts...but truly dangerous. So filled with the desire to control other people's minds that he would go to any lengths to accomplish his goal. I most definitely needed Phillip's help—and right now!

"Thomas," Lefevre was saying, "Show him your skill with a knife."

I blanched as Thomas pulled a wickedly thin knife from his belt and placed the blade on Jeff's forehead.

"He will slice the skin from your friend's face, piece by piece, until you decide to cooperate."

"No, please don't do that," I begged, looking at Jeff's composed expression. *He really doesn't know what's happening*, was the thought that raced through my mind. "*Please*," I pleaded. "Don't hurt him. If I could tell you how to communicate with Phillip I would, but..."

"Proceed Thomas," Lefevre said, his voice cold and detached.

With a desperate motion, I swung at Thomas's head. "Leave him alone, you bastard!"

Thomas ducked out of the way, but the sneer that showed briefly on his face, changed to one of surprise as Jeff's hand shot out and gripped his wrist, twisting the knife away and forcing Thomas to his knees. He howled with pain, and I flinched as I saw the blade pierce his thigh. Jeff then delivered a mighty punch to Thomas's jaw, and I whooped with glee as he dropped like a wet sack.

"Didn't I tell you I couldn't be hypnotized?" Jeff smirked at me and I wanted to leap on him right there and then, but Lefevre was screaming at the top of his voice.

"You will all pay for this!" He was fairly foaming at the mouth as he grabbed my mother and pulled her to her feet. "Stand back," he yelled as Jeff and I started forward to protect her. "You've seen what I can do, and now it's too late to bargain. Give me your 'familiar' or I will destroy your mother's mind. She will be lost to you forever, I'm warning you!"

I grabbed Jeff's arm to restrain him. Inside my head, I heard an urgent whisper. A great calmness settled on me, and I knew now what I had to do. I faced the enraged madman and looked him squarely in the eye.

"Okay Lefevre, you win. I will give you Phillip, if that's what you really want. He's here—take him."

"Peter..." Jeff grabbed my arm as he murmured, "...what's happening?"

For a moment it seemed as if all sensations and sounds were sucked out of the air. The silence was palpable. Lefevre looked about him expectantly as what sounded like a deep sigh seemed to come from every corner of the room.

"Yes!" Lefevre shouted. He released my mother, who would have fallen if Jeff had not sprung forward and caught her in his arms.

"Yes..." Lefevere shouted again. "I can feel you!"

He stepped back, away from us, his arms raised, hands reaching up as though in exultation. The room seemed to come alive with a strange energy that swirled around Lefevre like a whirlwind. It felt as if the air around us was vibrating with an unseen power—a power that Lefevre was trying to drink in. His eyes were closed in seeming ecstasy, his body stretched and arched almost as though he were trying to levitate himself. But then, as we watched, the look of elation on his face turned to one of

apprehension, then to one of horror. His hands flew to his head and he staggered back, his mouth opened in a silent scream of agony.

"Noooo!" he screamed. "You can't do this..." His eyes blazed with madness as they fixed themselves on me. "You *tricked* me!"

For a moment it seemed he would, with some supreme effort, recover—but then he was driven to his knees by a force we could not see. He screamed again, then slid forward on his face and lay very still.

Neither Jeff nor I moved. Our eyes were riveted on the man who lay before us. As I stood there, transfixed, I felt an almost imperceptible touch on my cheek.

"Phillip...?" But even as I uttered his name I could feel his presence leave, with a sighing whisper.

Jeff and I looked at each other in silent amazement for a moment, and then we were suddenly aware that our friends were slowly stirring, looking around themselves in bewilderment.

"Where the hell are we?" Nick was the first to ask.

"Ow! My face really hurts," Eric whined. "Who hit me this time?"

"Mom?" I took her arm. "Are you all right?" She nodded slowly, but still clung to Jeff for support.

"How did we get here?" Andrew asked, as he and David shakily got to their feet.

"Lots of time for explanations later," Jeff said. "We need to call the police and get these guys taken care of." He looked at Lefevre's inert form. "Not that he'll be going anywhere for a while.

Nick knelt down and checked Lefevre's pulse. "He's alive. What happened to him?"

"Phillip happened to him," I replied.

We looked down at him as he struggled to sit up, moaning and shaking his head as if to clear it. "Where am I?" he asked, gazing up at us. "And—who are you people?"



So there's the story, with just a little more to add. After the police arrived at Lefevre's hideout and carted him and Thomas off to jail again, we all returned home, pretty worn out by the day's events.

Eric, now nursing two bruises on his face, persuaded Nick that they really needed to stay a couple of extra days in California to make up for the time they'd lost due to Lefevre kidnapping them. We hadn't had the heart to tell him, or Nick, how he'd got that second bruise. Some things are better left a mystery.

A good night's sleep was what we all needed, but despite our exhaustion, too much had happened for us not to want to rehash our strange adventure. My mom, in particular, was still finding it hard to believe that what had happened—had happened to her.

"Nothing could have prepared me for meeting someone like that maniac," she told me as we put together a small snack for our friends. "And I still don't know how he did it. One moment we were all enjoying good conversation here in the kitchen, and the next thing I wake up in that house, with Jeff holding me up and that madman screaming at the top of his voice." She shuddered at the memory. "I hope he's put away for a long time."

"I don't think we have to worry about him again, Mom." The tone in my voice was confident with good reason. I knew what had happened to him. Phillip had taken away whatever psychic powers Lefevre had once possessed. He was now an empty shell—psychically speaking. He was no longer a danger to any of us—and once again, I had Phillip to thank for that. I knew I could never prove any of what I felt had happened, but I did know that my friends believed me—and that's all that mattered, really.

Lefevre had possessed a potent power for sure. He'd demonstrated that several times over and in quite spectacular fashion. Walking out of jail under the very nose of the law was no mean feat. Too bad he decided to use his power for nefarious ends. He could probably have made a fortune in his own Las Vegas show! In the end, though, his arrogance did him in. There's just no reasoning with some people. They always feel that somehow they're above reproach, that they cannot be stopped—but ultimately, even the cleverest of them gets his—or hers.

My mother had not quite forgiven me for sticking my neck out once again, but she knew there wasn't much point in remonstrating with me. She knows me too well, and besides, I believe she secretly enjoyed being on the front line with us.

The papers had a field day with the story, and once more Jeff and I were center stage. One newspaper had the nerve to run the story under the headline:

'GAY HARDY BOYS DO IT AGAIN!'

We had a good laugh over that one.

Nick and Eric did stay for the rest of the week and enjoyed a hardearned vacation savoring the delights of Laguna Beach. The two New Yorkers looked pretty tanned and fit before they left. On their last day with us, we invited a few of our friends who lived close by, over for a barbecue—Fred, Rod and 'A', Emily and Jerry, Rob and Maggie (with respective offspring), Gloria, Emily's cousin and her husband, Johnny, and of course, Andrew and David.

It was a high-energy affair with so much to be talked about. Gloria, looking stunning in a bright yellow, figure hugging dress, couldn't get enough of the story and kept asking, "So what happened then...?" anytime there was a pause in the conversation. Emily couldn't quite believe this had all happened the day she'd been over for lunch. Both she and Gloria hung on Jeff's every word as he recounted the story for them.

Rod and 'A', always the charmers, had Nick and Eric totally entranced by their cultured British accents and lively conversation. The party was a great success—new friendships were forged, older ones made stronger. Now Rod and 'A' had two more friends to look up in New York, although Eric intimated to me that he was going to do his darnedest to convince Nick that California was the place to live.

"But Jeff..." Gloria just wouldn't let the story go. "What's going to happen to Lefevre now?"

"Well, that's the crazy thing." He looked at Johnny, Gloria's lawyer husband, and grinned. "It's going to take a slew of attorneys to work it out. The man has absolutely no memory of what happened. Everything has been blotted out. He said he'd never seen any of us before. Didn't even know his sidekick, Thomas nor my friend, Joe French, the detective who arrested him the first time around. Of course, there are plenty witnesses to what he did, but the poor sucker looked dumbstruck when the police told him what he was being charged with."

"What about some physical evidence?" Johnny asked.

"Ah, that's really interesting," Jeff replied. "A search of his house turned up letters, memos and documents all telling of this incredible scam he'd perpetrated on dozens of people over the years."

"You mean he was just another con merchant?"

"Something like that, but he really did have the power to hypnotize. He used it to convince those suckers who paid out thousands of dollars for something they thought he could provide."

"Which was what?"

"Power, omnipotence, immortality—you name it, he promised it. Of course, he couldn't deliver, so once he'd scammed them for enough he simply made them forget he'd ever existed."

"Then, he couldn't *really* have brought that ghastly demon up from hell," Emily exclaimed with relief.

"Not in a million years," I laughed.

"But," Jeff said, "He could create the illusion of it that would fool his followers sufficiently. As far as we know, he'd never gone as far as actually trying to use human sacrifice before."

"He must have really been blowing a gasket to think he'd get away with that," Johnny remarked.

"Well, let's face it, he almost did. His big mistake was wasting time with all those theatrics." Jeff grinned at us. "He just couldn't resist putting on a show. If he'd taken Joe, Marty and me out right away, he might have gotten away with the whole thing."

I went cold at the thought, and once more silently thanked Phillip for his intervention.

Gloria looked up at me. "So, you think Phillip did this to him?"

I nodded. "Lefevre had us up against the wall, but threatening my mother—that was his next big mistake. I'm pretty sure Phillip was going to lay him out somehow just to get Jeff and me out of harm's way, but when Lefevre threatened brain damage on Mom, well he must have just exploded. He was crazy about Mom you see..."

Emily touched my mother's arm and smiled at her. "How incredible," she whispered.

"Yes." My mother blinked back her tears. "Phillip was an incredible human being. I feel so much more secure knowing he's looking after us all...Our guardian angel."

Fred squeezed her shoulder gently and they smiled at each other. I still had high hopes of something wonderful happening there.

The next day, after we had seen Nick and Eric off at the airport, Jeff and I drove down to the beach and went for a long walk along our favorite stretch of shore. So much had happened in the last few days, that a quiet moment together was very much in order. I slipped my hand into his as we strolled quietly together by the water's edge.

"I was thinking..."

"Oh, oh. I'm in trouble now," Jeff chuckled.

"This is serious," I reprimanded him.

"Then I'm really in trouble!"

I squeezed his hand hard eliciting a fake "Ow!" from him.

"Will you listen, or do I have to inflict more pain upon you?"

"I'll listen...please don't hurt me again!" he whimpered.

We let our laughter pass. "Okay," I said, "I was thinking we should invite your mother here for a week or so."

"Really?" He looked at me with surprise.

"Yes, really. I think it would do her a lot of good to see us in our home, meet Mom and our friends. Let her see you're happy here..." I paused. "You are happy aren't you?"

"Blissfully," he grinned at me.

"Well then. What do you think?"

"I think...that you are one swell fella!"

"Be serious..."

"I am being serious. You are the best, Peter. After what you put up with for that week...and now you want her here? I hope you don't regret it."

"So you think she'll come?"

"I think so. I'd really like her to meet Eve. And let's face it, Rod and 'A' would give her something to talk about for the rest of her life."

"She might just have the time of her life."

"She just might," he agreed.

We had reached an outcrop of rock that sheltered us from the eyes of passers-by. There, he took me in his arms and smiled into my eyes. "I repeat," he whispered. "You are the best, Peter."

I could have argued with him, but as his lips closed over mine and I felt the tip of his tongue gently probe between my teeth, there was really nothing I wanted to say. We stood with our arms wrapped tightly around each other, our bodies pressed together so closely, we could hear the thunder of each other's hearts above the crashing of the waves against the rocks.

We kissed again, gently at first, then with a rising urgency fired by a need so great, it threatened to consume us in its passion. My body trembled in his arms. I felt as though I wanted to crawl inside him—there just wasn't enough closeness that these physical bodies would allow.

"Jeff, Jeff," I breathed into his ear when at last he freed my lips from his. "I love you, so very, very much."

Never had I spoken truer words. I had loved him for close to three years—ever since the day he'd come into my life. Yet now, somehow that love seemed even more intrinsically precious than before. I had been faced with the possibility of losing him forever. Something I knew I could not endure.

Phillip knew that too. That's why he'd intervened—to save me the heartbreak of a life alone again. His presence in that room when Lefevre and I were face to face had been almost overpowering in its strength. Whatever he had become, it was a force for good, of that I was sure. In life, Phillip would never have hurt a fly—and now, in his present form, his powers would be used only to help us. I tightened my arms around Jeff as these thoughts coursed through my mind.

He kissed my neck and murmured, "You're thinking of Phillip."

"Yes, I am...and wishing there was a way to thank him for what he's done. For keeping you safe and for being there for us when we really needed help against that madman."

"I think he knows how grateful we are—and always will be."

"Does it bother you in anyway that I was thinking of him?"

He laughed lightly. "No, 'cause I was thinking of him too." He paused, then said, "I was wishing that I could have known him when he was alive. I think we would have been friends."

"Yes, you would have been good friends."

The sound of shouting and laughter from the other side of the rocks burst upon us, and we turned to see a group of young surfers rounding the corner. We acknowledged their yells of "Hi guys," then walked on toward the steps that would take us back up onto the road above.

"I wonder where that would have left me," I said, with a sly grin as we climbed the steps.

He gave me a wary look. "What do you mean?"

"Well, if you had met us years ago..."

"Wait...The implications there are a little bizarre, to say the least."

"True, but what food for fantasy," I laughed.

He pretended to look shocked. "Peter Brandon...you really are too much."

"Better that, than not enough, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, I would, you rascal." He stopped as we reached the top step. Turning to me he framed my face in his big hands and kissed me hard on the mouth. Ignoring the gasps of shock from a group of matronly ladies having their afternoon stroll, he kissed me again. Then he turned to them and said, "I love this guy!"

"H...how *nice*," one of the ladies managed to stutter, before they all staggered off in a flurry of chiffon prints.

He smiled into my eyes. "Okay, let's go home, kiddo. There's something I have to show you."

There was not an argument in the world that I would have given him at that moment.

New from J. P. Bowie



And now for something different...

A tale of courage and daring set after the 1745 Scottish rebellion against the King of England.

After the Jacobean rebellion was finally ended at the battle of Culloden in 1746, the English government began a vicious campaign of punishment and humiliation on the Scottish people. Many hundreds were rounded up and put to death. The country was rife with treason and despair. The people were forbidden to wear their Clan's tartan or speak Gaelic, their native tongue. Random thievery and murder by the English soldiers and their Campbell allies were common place. Not surprisingly, many Scots opted to leave their homeland and head for the comparative safety of the Continent or the New World.

Such was the decision of Jamie Macdonald, a young Scotsman still mourning the loss of his father and two brothers in the massacre at Culloden field. After despairing of their family ever being reunited, Jamie and his mother set off on a dangerous journey to find a better life in the colonies.

But 'the best laid plans of mice and men aft gang agley'—to quote Robert Burns, and Jamie finds himself press-ganged into service on a pirate ship commanded by a ruthless Spanish captain—a man with a past as dark as any on the wrong side of the law, but with an allure that Jamie cannot resist.

When he finally reaches the New World, Jamie is a changed man—one whose innocence has been replaced with a keen sense of self-preservation and a determination to survive—no matter what. Fighting for survival in the wilderness, he seeks his destiny as his life becomes irrevocably entwined with a Choctaw warrior who had dreamed of his coming.

Together, they fight the elements and the enemies that seek to destroy them. The final battle will determine who will die and who will survive...

