

# Walking the Dog

by Bingo

*Note: This is a story for adult readers.*

## Chapter One

I often thought, while I was in high school, that one day, perhaps in graduate school, maybe later, I'd write a paper titled, "Regional Differences in Social Customs: A special case study." Of course I never would, couldn't in fact. Such a paper would never be published and if it were, would irretrievably damage any professional standing I wished to have. Plus I'd be in trouble at home.

Such thoughts – career, scholarly papers, and more – occupied my mind during those odd moments every teenager has in between boredom and frenzy. Other thoughts occupied my mind also. I was in love, my sweetheart was a member of one of the Families in town and therefore special, and the next few weeks would see substantial, perhaps insurmountable changes in our lives. Tracie would be eighteen on Saturday.

Tracie's family was great to me. Tracie and I spent a lot of time together, and they often left us entirely alone for hours at a time.

Tracie's mother, who I always thought of as Mom, was named Barbara. Sometimes friends called her Barbie which was okay with her. Everyone got the joke. Mom was blonde, well-endowed and at forty-one still very good looking. Tracie looked a lot like her mother but didn't have the same figure. Slender, almost boyish, Tracie wore her hair short, unlike her mother's which was straight and long to the middle of her back. Tracie's dad was Mike, but I always called him Mr. Johnston. Mr. Johnston was my English teacher in high school, well-liked but a disciplinarian. He was forty-three, six foot one, led an active life so his face was tanned and had lines at the outside corners of his eyes. If he wanted to, I bet Mr. Johnston could have had his pick of any of the women in town his age and quite a few of the girls in school. There was something about him that made women get that look when they saw him.

Tracie was their oldest child; she had a younger sister, Trish, fifteen and a menace. Mike, the little brother, was dark-haired and favored his father more than his mother. Mike was ten and a pain in the ass at times. If you have a younger brother you know what I mean.

The Johnston home was in the best section of town. The Johnstons weren't ostentatious; Mr. Johnston drove a Ford, not a Lexus. But inside the house the real wood paneling gave a warm feel. There was a library, small, but a room devoted to books alone none the less. Upstairs were five bedrooms; another, a guest room was downstairs off the kitchen. Sometimes on the weekends the Johnstons let me stay there. And not a word was said if Tracie slipped down and joined me in bed.

Tonight, Tracie and I were in the recreation room. The huge plasma TV was on, some movie Tracie chose, but we were otherwise occupied. The rest of the family was in the dining room playing Scrabble. The Johnstons were Scrabble fiends. Tracie had the best vocabulary of anyone I ever knew.

While the movie flickered around us, the TV set was that big, with sound almost muted, Tracie and I were on the couch with a blanket over our laps (and not because the room was cold).

Tracie was smart, just about the smartest person I'd ever met. I was going to college but I had to work at it, to keep my grades up, to do well on the SAT's (I'm a year younger than Tracie) and keep focused. Tracie was always on the Dean's List, did so well on her SAT's I'm not even going to give the score, you wouldn't believe it. Colleges were clamoring to get her to go to their school. And she didn't even work hard at it.

So you're wondering how a junior like me got a smart and beautiful senior girlfriend? I wished I knew. Okay, I had an inkling. But still. I was incredibly lucky.

The one thing we never talked much about was the decision Tracie had to make on her eighteenth birthday or much about plans afterward except in very broad terms. So what did we talk about? School, siblings, the book we were both reading (don't laugh - Finnegan's Wake), and, ummm, sex.

At this point I'll just say we had a very good sex life for teenagers. Incentive (we were madly in love), opportunity (the Johnstons weren't ogres), and motive (if I need to explain the motive you need to be reading something else, something like . . . oh I don't know).

Tracie had unzipped my pants (under the blanket) and I hers and our fingers were very busy as we cuddled and kissed. Tracie was an expert in drawing pleasure out. We could go for hours, cresting that wave, until finally she'd deliver the masterstroke with her lips, quickly and efficiently. Mom was a cleanliness freak and it would be embarrassing to explain a splotch on the throw.

We were kissing; my eyes were shut. I was trying (and succeeding) to give Tracie as much pleasure as she gave me. We reeked of sex. My whole body was doing that, I've been having great sex for hours, little shimmy – blurry vision, fast heart rate, whole body moving in and out of other dimensions, a little shaky.

A wet pussy feels like nothing else in the world. That in and of itself should tell one it is very special. Tracie's was magic magnified. I was in heaven, three fingers as deep as they could go and spread as wide as they could be. My thumb hovered over her clit. So close it was touching the surface atoms of that joyous little lump. Any minute Tracie's clit would decide that she and my thumb should be more intimately familiar.

That's when Mr. Johnston gave a knock to the doorframe and said, "Jas, it's time to walk the dog."

Tracie held me tight. "We need three minutes, Dad."

I heard him walk off, took my hand from Tracie's cunt and leaned back. Tracie was under the blanket in nothing flat and I was filling her eager mouth.

It's okay to say eager. Tracie was accomplished in so many ways. Always eager to please in any manner possible. Sometimes, afterwards, she'd analyze what we did so she could do better. I'm not sure I helped much in those discussion in my post-orgasmic daze but it only got better. I was a ridiculously lucky seventeen-year-old.

When the lights were done flashing and I could breathe again, I touched Tracie's head, opened my eyes and watched her tuck me back in and zip me up.

"I love you," I said.

Tracie sat up, grinned at me so her lips lifted and eyes danced and said, "I love you too, Jas."

We kissed and I got up to walk the dog.

Walking the dog was something that boyfriends of daughters and sons of Families did. It was a custom that had its purposes as you'll see. And it suited us. If I didn't walk the dog, I don't think

Tracie would ever get her homework done or chores done around the house. Not that she had to do much.

Tracie stood, used the remote to turn off the TV, faced me and her dark violet eyes held mine. "I'll see you later," she said.

"You'll be here?"

"Of course I'll be here, you nitwit. Now go." She fluttered her fingers at me.

I met Mr. Johnston in the entryway where my bookbag was. He handed me a sheet of paper; I stuffed it in my pocket.

The paper had the itinerary. Walking the dog wasn't a casual affair. Out, does its chores, back in. No indeed. Mr. Johnston's itineraries were often quite long with detailed instructions. I'd check it out on the porch.

I put my bookbag on, took the leash from Mr. Johnston's fingers. He never said anything one way or the other. He expected me to do a good job. Tracie would never pick a fool for a boyfriend.

Mrs. Johnston, Mom, waited by the door wearing her plush red robe and black high heels. We hardly ever spoke while I walked her. I was too young, for one reason. For another, what would she say?

I led her out onto the porch, took the itinerary from my pocket and looked at the first item.

23 Maple was a block away. I'd been there before plenty of times. Monday night was poker night.

Mom heeled well. This is sounding strange as I write it. Barbie heeled well. It was a cool spring night but not as cool as a week ago. Not too cold for the bathrobe Barbie wore. In the summer she'd be naked. So I suppose. I never paid much attention to the Families until last fall. That's when I first met Tracie and my best friend, Frank, got a new girlfriend, Lori, who looked like she was going to become Family. Lori was sixteen but already had made her decision. Not officially of course. That happened when you were eighteen. Lori lived as if the decision were already made.

The porch light was on at 23 Maple. I knocked on the door. I knew from experience the doorbell didn't work.

When he opened the door the first thing I noticed was all the cigarette smoke. He got a big grin on his face, turned and said to the others at the table in the middle of the room, "She's here, boys."

Mom, umm, Barbie left her bathrobe by the door as I unclipped her leash. She walked slowly to the table and whatshisname slapped me on the back. "Why don't you get yourself a beer, Jasper."

One of them rose from the table and stepped to where Barbie stood a few feet away. He put his hands on her shoulders, looked at her face for a moment and smiled. I could see that smile over her shoulder and could see the smiles on the faces of the men at the table. Whatshisname beside me said, "Go get yourself a beer, boy."

Barbie knelt and I could hear a zipper as I walked past.

In the kitchen I dumped my bookbag on the table and sat. The men were all grunting in unison in the other room. It sounded like an asthmatic giant with constipation.

## Chapter Two

There are rules for everything. Some are spoken; some are unspoken but known by everyone just the same. Our town was no different. I'm not sure if what I'm describing demonstrates a regional variation or a micro variation within a region. I'm guessing the major distinction and what set home, which was normal to me and peculiar to outsiders, apart was the Families.

It's easier to explain some of the rules than to relate the history of the Families, their primitive origin and evolution over more than century to what they are now.

A basic rule is that Mom was off limits to me just as much as I was off limits to her. I was too young. Once I was eighteen, and if I had no ties with Tracie, then Barbie would be available for my use like the other heads of Families, female and male, would be.

It's because of Mom's choice that Tracie is a member of a Family. It's because of Barbara Johnston that her Family has the house they do and opportunities available to every Family. Excellent healthcare. College for the kids. A privileged lifestyle and prestige in the community. Mr. Johnston didn't make enough as a high school teacher to obtain all these things.

Other rules were associated with the Day of Decision and for some later on the Day of Dissolution. Barbara Johnston could decide to no longer be a head of a Family. The Johnstons would move to a more modest home. The kids could still go to college but the family would have to pay for it. Mr. Johnston's insurance premiums would go up dramatically.

There's lots of other stuff but I'm sure you aren't here to have me recite small town Levitticus. Just be aware that while I walked Barbie to the addresses on the itinerary, we never touched except inadvertently. She never spoke to me but I could tell by the way she smiled at me she appreciated my efforts. There'd be fresh homemade cookies hot from the oven when Tracie and I went to her home after school.

Mr. Johnston was also appreciative. Some boys walking the dog played pranks, made rude comments or did (or tried to do) the forbidden. And others tried to weasel out of the chore.

It was a chore. Mom and I got back to the Johnston's at three a.m. My homework was done, I'd read beyond where Tracie and

I'd agreed in Finnegan's Wake and made notes in the margins of my copy for discussion. Three a.m. was about average. There was a night we got home at eleven and Tracie was still awake. That was a special night, much like the special nights on weekends and holidays when I stayed in the guest room to be woken by Tracie in the morning.

I unclipped Mom's leash, folded it over several times and handed it to her. Mom glowed. That's the only way to describe her. Every line had left her face. Her eyes were bright and moist, lips open and red and swollen in the way lipstick attempts to mimic. Mom's hair was tangled and her bathrobe was barely closed. She gave me a nod, opened the door and looked back at me over her shoulder.

"I'll see Tracie in the morning."

She smiled and went in shutting the door after her. The porch light remained on for a couple of minutes. I left when it went off.

I lived about a mile and a half from the Johnstons. Just my father and me, mom died four years ago. That's one of the reasons Mrs. Johnston is so special to me. She's not like my mom at all, but she's a mom, mother to the girl I love. She treats me with humor and dignity.

Kids who walk the dog receive dispensation in school. The adults cut them slack because everyone knows what walking the dog entails. It's hard work.

You're smiling. Just imagine what it would be like to walk someone like Barbie or Tracie. It's summer. It's still light outside (not that it matters) and you're having a casual stroll. Mr. Crane has taken a short break while mowing, the two of them, Mr. Crane and the Family head, are working up a sweat, and some out-of-town bozo drives by, stops, and thinks just because he has a dick he can too.

No way. Unhunh. Verboten. No no no.

It's the job of the walker to, calmly and patiently (it usually takes several tries), tell the out-of-towner to get lost. That's a rule. A big one. Because of diseases and stuff. Because who knows, there are a lot of crazies out there.

Another rule was that I reported to Marge, by phone, and told her who and when. Recordkeeping is important in case there is an accident. People can be such dumbasses and as far as it only involves just them, then fine and dandy. But if someone is a

dumbass, knowing who and when is vital. So far there hasn't been a major problem.

A mile and a half at three a.m. was lonely. Almost everyone was asleep. The houses were dark. No cars on the roads. It was quiet. My footsteps sounded unusually loud.

It was easy to think about stuff at three a.m. Usually I was thinking of Tracie. Partially because walking the dog can be awfully . . . distracting. I have to be there, or close by. So I'm seeing and hearing and I'm seventeen, a healthy male with urges and desires, just like everyone else. (Tracie said more than anyone else but she was a cute liar.)

If I hadn't promised Tracie to save myself for her I'd be wanking off in the bushes or at home when I got there. It gets that bad.

My best friend Frank's girl, Lori, is sort of how I met Tracie. What made me think of that was I was close to Lori's house. It was on this street, a couple of homes down.

I've known Frank since forever. He and Lori had been steadies since last summer. They knew each other before then. Hell just about everyone, who wanted to, knew Lori. She took Frank's virginity then mine on the same night and we weren't the first.

It's funny. Girls like Lori and guys who can be with girls like Lori, it's funny how they eventually end up together and sticking. Frank had every intention to stick and I knew Lori felt the same. If Lori made the decision she looked (and intended) to be making, then Lori would become a head of a Family – it's not always (but usually is) hereditary.

Another sidetrack. I'm blatantly heterosexual. That's my bias. But you should know guys can be Family heads. And don't make assumptions. Mr. Johnston was gay. He loved kids, wanted a family, and had one without the usual obligations. He was a perfect father.

Lori's lights were out. Her bedroom was in front at the left. She was either in or out and it wouldn't matter anyway because I was saving myself for Tracie. I'm pretty monogamous. There are no obligations on Tracie's part, that's just the way it was for her too right now.

There was no reason to wait at the stoplight. A block more and then an alley. My father and I lived in an apartment over his garage. He made his living repairing cars and did a good job too. The only problem was the exhaust fumes during the day. I was in

school or over at Tracie's so that hadn't been a concern since last fall.

My father snores. I shut the front door quietly, made my way through the dark to my room and shut the bedroom door. The light on, I undressed, left the room to go to the bathroom, came back and set my alarm to seven.

I turned out the light and usually I'm out like the light but tonight I was thinking about how I met Tracie. Might as well be honest. It was because I was horny.

It was a home game but I can't remember with whom. I was under the bleachers with Frank and Lori and a zillion other guys – okay, maybe eight. Frank and I had done Lori first (first time that night for me that is), he from the back, me in her throat. Lori was accomplished. We both took a while and when I was done I stepped back, holding my pants partway up, a bit wobbly. I'm not so good on my feet, I get dizzy.

Someone tapped me on my shoulder; I turned away from Lori and the next two. Somebody I didn't know well said, "A girl was asking about you."

I pulled up my pants and fastened them. "Who?"

"Tracie Johnston."

Everyone knew Tracie Johnston. She was Family. I must have looked unusually stupid because he said, "You know. Barbara Johnston's daughter. Her father's a teacher."

I gave a nod. Still looking dumb no doubt. Mr. Johnston taught English. I had him this year.

"She's behind the concession stand, waiting." He looked away from me, moved closer to the action around Lori.

I told Frank I'd see him later and walked around the back of the stands to an aisle. The concession stand was always crowded. I worked patiently through everyone in the press by the stand and went between the tree and the board wall of the stand to the back. It was a narrow squeeze. The tree offered shade from the sun's heat in early fall and late spring and would never be cut.

There was no one there. I sat on a bench, almost in the dark, the crowd was screaming but that was a different world than here.

A door opened at the back of the stand and a person stood bathed in light. They shut the door and came toward me, wiping their hands on their apron. Her face wasn't entirely in shadow and I could see a smile.

"Jasper," she said.

I stood. "Everybody calls me Jas."

"Jas." She was so close I could smell her. Hot dogs, relish and something else.

"Jas," she said. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

I shook my head.

"Want to try me?"

I nodded once, then not sure that was enough, nodded twice more.

She smiled again. "I have to get back. After the game? Here?"

"Sure," I said. I immediately kicked myself for being too nonchalant. "With bells on." Where did that come from?

She stood in the doorway. "What do you like?"

I stood there with my mouth open.

"Coke or Pepsi? I'll save a drink for you."

"Water," I said.

"Water it is." She looked at me for a moment and shut the door.

I sat back on the bench and didn't move for two hours. Tracie Johnston liked me. Tracie Johnston who was Family and a senior liked me.

I found out afterwards she'd seen me with Lori earlier. And Tracie had thought I had a cute ass.

## Chapter Three

"Jas-purr."

I felt her tongue tickle my ear. "Wha . . ."

"Jas, you need to get up."

I tried to stir but she was lying on my back. I'd overslept again. "I'm awake, Tracie."

She rolled off me and I opened my eyes. My head hurt. "What time is it?"

"Seven thirty."

"Shit." I sat up, took a moment to steady myself, and swung my feet off the bed.

"What time did you and mom get in last night?"

"About three." I pulled my clothes on in a daze. Tracie watched me from the bed, grinning.

"Don't you two need to be in school?" my father asked from the other room.

"We're going in just a minute, Dad." I sat on the bed and put on my sneakers. "Can you get me something to eat from the kitchen, Tracie?"

She slid off the bed, stroking my back as she passed.

I grabbed my bookbag and followed her into the kitchenette. Except for the bedroom and bathroom the apartment was one big open space. My father slept on one of the couches, usually falling asleep while watching TV.

I drank a cup of juice. Tracie handed me a sandwich and we left. My head still hurt.

I was a block away and I couldn't remember telling my father goodbye. Tracie held one hand while I ate the peanut butter sandwich. The school was only two blocks from home so we'd make it with a little time to spare.

"Jas, I was kinda hoping you'd be awake this morning."

"Me, too, Tracie." I seconded that in my mind.

"At lunch time then?"

"It's a date."

"I missed you after you left, Jas. It was lonely."

"You win at Scrabble?"

"Of course."

"What movie were we watching?"

"Sense and Sensibility."

"Oh."

She pulled me into a shop doorway, pushed me against a glass panel and kissed me. She licked her lips afterward. "I didn't get any breakfast."

"Sorry."

She pulled me back onto the sidewalk. "Toothbrush is in the side pocket of my pack." She stopped while I got it.

"Thanks." I watched her face while I brushed my teeth. A school bus passed us with a roar. I stuffed the toothbrush back into the pocket; we resumed walking. "Otherwise okay?"

"Your hair."

We did this almost every day. I walked the dog in the evening. She walked the walker in the morning. It's hard to explain how comforting this pattern was to me, and I believe it was the same for Tracie.

In the morning Tracie and Mr. Johnston had to get Trish and Mike ready for school while Mom slept. I was tired; Mom was exhausted. I know you can't imagine it, but Mike and Trish actually were quiet in the morning, no fighting, no complaining. They were on their best behavior. Tracie could have gotten a ride to school with Mr. Johnston but he dropped her off at my place so she could help get me ready.

"Dad wants to talk to you for a minute this evening."

Ooops, what have I done? was my immediate thought.

"You're okay, Jas. He just wants to talk for a minute."

"Okay."

"And I asked and it's okay for you to spend the weekend. I'll bring you breakfast in bed Saturday morning."

"But it's your birthday."

"You can give me my present afterwards." She pulled me close, kissed me in front of the school and most of my classmates. "Did you call Marge?"

"From the Master's. That was our last stop."

"At lunch?"

"At lunch." We kissed; she squeezed my hand and let go. I watched her walk into the huge front door of the school. Frank punched my arm. He always does that. It started when puberty set in.

"Hiya," Frank said.

"Hi," Lori said.

Frank and Lori were attached, literally, like Siamese twins. It would take a knife to cut those two apart. Frank was six feet easily, skinny with a huge Adam's apple (always with a razor nick on it). Lori was five two, roundish. Not fat. Her face was round, she had a pageboy, wore loose clothes and she had a few extra pounds.

No one ever complained about those extra pounds. She felt nice and vibrant and alive.

Lori never said much, she just watched with unblinking eyes.

"Are you coming to the game Friday?" Frank asked. He'd asked this every day for a week now.

"I have to walk the dog Friday. I don't think we'll be at the gym but you never know."

"Lori wanted to know," Frank said.

The bell rang. "We'd better go in," I said. Frank hit my arm again and walked off.

Frank was a lucky guy and he knew it. I'm not quite sure he knew how lucky. I think that was something he'd slowly learn. He wasn't stupid.

In the beginning, going out with Tracie, walking the dog, everything was a cinch. But after months of it, I had problems keeping awake in class. The teachers all knew I was walking the dog and made allowances. Mrs. Allen sent me to the school nurse. Mrs. Allen was my second period Algebra teacher. She was nice with a good sense of humor.

Miss Snead, the nurse, had me take a nap. Rick, who walked Mrs. Cooper, was snoring away in the bed next to mine. I told Miss Snead to wake me for lunchtime and I was pretty sure she'd do it so I didn't have any problem relaxing. As for Rick's snores, they'd never bothered me that much before, they didn't now.

Miss Snead, who's extremely pretty, woke me and stayed bent over me until I was fully awake. If I wasn't hung up on Tracie it would have been really easy to form a crush on Miss Snead. Of

course without Tracie I wouldn't be walking Mrs. Johnston and needing naps during school.

"What time is it?"

"Lunch is ten minutes."

"Thanks." I realized it was quiet – I couldn't hear Rick snoring.

Miss Snead backed away from the bed.

Ever notice how people look at you when you're connected to something or someone big? A hero or celebrity gets that look all the time. The people associated to them get a little of that look.

Everyone knew Tracie and I were going steady. That I walked Mrs. Johnston. They wanted to think all kinds of things, but personal stuff about Families just wasn't talked about. That Mr. Johnston taught in the school wasn't that much of a big deal. He was a member of a Family by marriage only. I, for some reason, was a little closer to what? The inner core?

Some people abused how people felt. It would be easy to do. That's why Tracie, in a very nice way, asked me, very politely, to watch myself. Which I did.

"Thanks, Miss Snead."

It took only a minute to get dressed and ready to go. When I got to the front of the cafeteria I saw Tracie and Lori talking. Tracie said something more to Lori and walked towards me, a big smile on her face.

Tracie was all I saw. She took my hand and we headed off to the field behind the school. I felt a punch on my arm, "Hey," I said not very loudly and I followed Circe to my doom. I couldn't wait.

Tracie could have had any guy in town. Under eighteen of course. Why she picked me I'll never know. I'm not complaining, but honestly it's not because of looks or because I'm really smart.

We had a spot, if it wasn't raining, across the field in a gully shaded by trees. If it was raining, there was a spot under the eaves, behind the dumpster. That's back of the kitchen. I was always sure we'd be seen. I hated it when it rained.

Tracie took a space blanket out of her bookbag, her magic satchel filled with wonders, and spread it on the ground. We'd pretty much killed the grass in that spot. The space blanket was her idea. I think she liked it because it was shiny and for the sound it made.

She always beat me when it came to undressing. She beat me on just about everything. There was one thing I could do, she couldn't, and she kissed me, held me close and hiccuped while I did it.

Having your girl hiccup while you fuck her is great.

We kissed for as long as we could, drew back and waited. "I'm cured," Tracie said.

The second time was slow. I was patient and took time to feel every bit of her. Every morsel, rib, hair, every atom of skin I could touch.

Tracie becomes rigid while she climaxes. She stiffens. Not always. No two times have ever been exactly the same. But this time she stiffened. Her eyes were half shut, her head thrown back so her chin was in my face. I licked her neck and she rocked.

We couldn't speak afterwards. I held her, touched her forehead and kissed her repeatedly.

"Ahem," a voice said above us.

Tracie's eyes opened and I turned to look.

Trish, Tracie's younger sister, stood above us. Trish was one of those nuisance ninth graders who if they didn't watch out would never make tenth. "That was very interesting to watch," Trish said. "Do you think you could do it again? Perhaps with a little more finesse, Mr. Sloan?"

## Chapter Four

Mom did have cookies ready for Tracie and me when we got to the Johnstons after school. The three of us sat in the kitchen and had just-from-the-oven chocolate chip cookies and hot chocolate. Not the healthiest food in the world but delicious none the less.

After a few minutes, Mom, noticing my drowsy state said to Tracie, "You'd better take him upstairs before he falls asleep."

I wasn't going to argue. Upstairs was Tracie's room. I grabbed a couple of cookies before Tracie pulled me away from the table and up the carpeted stairs.

My father and I live simply. There was TV in the evenings for him. I worked on the computer or watched the tube if something decent was on. I read in my room or went out and did stuff with Frank.

After Tracie my life had shifted dramatically into a whole other sphere. The Johnstons lived well. Tracie had her own phone, computer, TV and stereo. She could have a cellphone if she wanted one – she wasn't interested. Her bedroom was huge. Half of our apartment probably could have fit in it.

Tracie wasn't terribly into girlie stuff but the room did have stuffed animals, ruffled curtains and pastel colors. You won't believe how comfortable her bed was, and how comfortable it felt to be in her room.

Tracie locked her door for privacy. She helped me undress, get under the covers and then fed me bits of cookies while we talked.

What did we talk about? Sex. School. Sex. The upcoming weekend (birthday party plans). Sex, in this case Lori and Frank and did I miss not being with Lori. No. What she planned to do tonight: help her mother with dinner, (are you sure that's really true, I think Lori misses you), what movie we should watch, my talk with Mr. Johnston, Scrabble, and I can't remember what else. I fell asleep.

"Jasper."

I smiled and gave a little moan.

"I bet you have a monster boner."

I realized at that point, as Trish was preparing to dive under the sheet, who it was. "No," I said. I was too sleepy to be authoritative.

"You do!" She squealed with delight and grabbed me.

I tried to roll into a ball, bat her hand away, and do too many other things at the same time to do any of them right. I held her wrist, tried to push her away.

She leaned close to me, "Kiss me, you fool. You know you love me." She made a face and waited. She still held my cock in a grip of steel. I was doomed.

She kissed my closed lips, backed away laughing, let go of my cock and got off the bed. She turned to me, smiled in a way that was terribly fascinating, and said, "Next week when I ask you to be my steady, think twice before saying no."

I stared at her as she left. She was pretty but not at all like her sister who was mature and poised. I'd never say yes to Trish. Not in a million years.

I dressed, remade Tracie's bed and went downstairs. I secretly had hoped that Tracie would wake me, was disappointed in a small way that she hadn't.

She was on the phone downstairs. She covered the mouthpiece and said, "Lori."

"I'll be in the kitchen."

Tracie said, "Thanks," and returned to her call.

Mom was sitting by the table in the kitchen reading a paperback. She put it face down, "I love lurid mysteries, don't you? Dinner is in the oven. I think Mike wanted to talk to you."

I started to ask. "In the library," she said picking up her book.

Mom's a beautiful woman. It's because of her poise and I'm sure Tracie got it from her mother. The other kids, Trish and Mike, were definitely not poised. They were catastrophes happening (usually very loudly) or just about to happen.

Mom spoke slowly; she had a fascinating voice, a husky quality that drew immediate attention. She moved well, with an economy and grace. Tracie didn't have Mom's voice but she moved gracefully - like a dancer or actress. Every motion precise and fluid.

"Come in, Jasper," Mr. Johnston said from the desk. He was grading papers; mine was there too. He was free with the red pen but fair and if you paid attention you actually learned something.

He was one of the hard teachers in school but not an ogre. He was even known to laugh in class. About once a semester.

I sat in the chair by the desk and waited. I could see he was grading Sally Crenshaw's paper. Sally was okay. Not overly bright but friendly. I'd actually had a crush on Sally when I was fifteen.

Mr. Johnston turned the paper over and looked up. "How are you holding up? You knew I was a walker myself, didn't you?"

I shook my head. It was hard imagining Mr. Johnston as anything other than adult and schoolteacher.

"Donald was my steady. Before your time." Tracie brought in a tray with drinks, wine for him, juice for me. She gave me a wink before she left.

Mr. Johnston handed me the juice, leaned back in his chair and watched me.

"Thank you, sir."

A smile appeared briefly. He leaned forward. "Any chance you'll decide when you're eighteen?"

"No, sir."

"That's too bad." That smile again. "My friends were so hoping."

I'd been in the room for three minutes and he had me blushing more brightly than a stoplight. "Sorry, sir."

He laughed, sat back in his chair. "You've become a part of this family over the past six months. We all like you, not that we're surprised. We knew Tracie would choose well. But she did better than well."

I was blushing again.

"So I'm going to tell you something that Barb, Tracie, Trish and Mike know but no one else. Barbara and I are getting a divorce. Not right away. This summer. The kids are old enough, but the real reason is that Donald is ready to stop fooling around and settle down. We've always been in love, now we're ready for each other."

I didn't know what to say.

"I know Tracie and you have made plans, not too detailed, and that you two have feelings for each other. Tracie and I haven't talked. I haven't asked her the question about her decision I just asked you.

"Traditionally, if she decides not to, your role as walker ends. Trish will find someone and in a few more years Mike will also. But

I'm not going to be here and Barbara has no plans to remarry, though that may change. No plans that she's told me. In the interval, no matter what Tracie decides, could I ask you to continue to walk Barbara?" He watched, fingers steeped by his chin, unblinking.

If Tracie said no, her plans were to go to college. I'd go to college and if everything worked out, we'd come back here and get married and raise a family of our own. Family with a small "f." If Tracie said yes, something we never really talked about, she'd leave the Johnstons, be set up in her own home and receive, shall we call them, suitors? Since I was seventeen, because of the rule of eighteen, I could have nothing to do with her sexually and was ineligible unless she decided to wait a year.

If I said no, I don't think Mr. Johnston would be upset or angry. Just disappointed. If I said yes, it would be a huge, open-ended commitment. But I'd be close to Tracie and that's what mattered most. "Yes, sir. I'll continue."

"It may be for a year, until you're eighteen. No longer than that."

"I'll continue to walk," and here I was confused for a moment, "Mrs. Johnston."

"Thank you." He looked relieved. He picked up the wineglass and took a sip. "Thank you very much." He let out a breath. "Thank you," said more softly.

After a minute, he said, "Well, Barbara is outdoing herself for dinner tonight." He checked his watch. "I think it'll be served in a half hour."

"Thank you, sir." I rose.

"Why don't you call me Mike. Except in school of course." He gave that smile.

"Mike." It felt funny to say.

"I'm sure there's something Tracie and you can find to do for a half hour." That smile. "Some important literary discussion."

I grinned back at him and left. I looked back in the library as I went out the door and he was sitting in his chair, head back, a smile on his face, his hand on the wineglass.

Tracie grabbed me when I passed the recreation room. "What did you do to my sister? She's in hysterics upstairs. Saying your name over and over and giggling."

"She woke me." I shrugged my shoulders.

Tracie eyed me for a moment and then pulled me into the recreation room. "We have a few minutes."

"Your father said half an hour."

"He's a pessimist."

"In here?"

Tracie shut the door. "Can you keep quiet?"

"Tracie, I think everyone knows."

"Can you keep quiet?"

"Sure."

She fell to her knees. "Not a peep now." Her fingers wrestled with my pants.

I undid my belt and pants, dropped them and pushed my shorts down.

Tracie studied me. "It is not small," and looked up at me. "Trish said you were built small."

"How would she know?"

"That's what I thought. I just wanted to check to be sure."

I grew hard in her mouth and, yes, I was as quiet as I could manage to be.

## Chapter Five

After school Wednesday, Tracie took me with her to visit her grandmother. Mrs. Stevens was a former Family head, now retired. She lived close to the Johnstons in a small house, more a cottage.

I'd been with Tracie once before to visit Mrs. Stevens, months ago, shortly after we started going together. The house was filled with mementoes of her world travels. A story went with each item and she regaled us for hours. Normally that would be boring but Mrs. Stevens was pretty outrageous and it was easy to envisage the consternation she caused half the passengers on board a cruise ship and delight for the other half. Never a dull moment was her motto.

Today Mrs. Stevens was sitting in her living room surrounded by garden catalogs, three cats and a sleepy mixed-breed dog she called Princess. Princess was a neutered male with gray around the muzzle. He seemed perfectly happy with his lot in life.

Tracie went into the kitchen to make tea; I sat on a chair close to, but not too close to the sofa where Mrs. Stevens sat.

"She treating you right, boy?" Mrs. Stevens grinned at me. "You'll have to tell me your name again. I don't bother trying to remember until the third date."

"Jasper."

"You look familiar."

"I'm told I look like my father." She looked at me quizzically. I said, "Jerry Sloan."

She smiled. "Jerry! How's the old geezer doing?"

"He's okay."

"Didn't he marry . . ."

"Mom died a few years ago."

"Sorry, son." She cleared a place for the tray. "Thank you, dear."

Tracie sat across from me, held her teacup up and winked.

"Jerry's welcome to pay me a visit any time he wants. Tell him that." Mrs. Stevens turned to Tracie. "The boy tells me you've been stingy with your favors, so he and I will be going to the bedroom for a quickie." Mrs. Stevens turned to me. "Tracie can come along,

too, can't she? You don't mind a threesome?" Mrs. Stevens crossed her legs, showing them off.

I looked at Tracie who winked again.

"Grandmother, I don't think he's interested in girls anymore."

"Is that a fact?" Mrs. Stevens turned to me. "What are you planning to do when she becomes a woman?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Look for another young one, I guess."

"You told me you don't like girls." Tracie scowled and sipped her tea.

"Seriously?" Mrs. Stevens turned to Tracie. "All kidding aside. Do you know what you want?"

Tracie shrugged.

Mrs. Stevens looked at me. "You're what?"

"Seventeen."

"My walker," Mrs. Stevens sat back on the couch, "your mother's steady, was seventeen. Not very smart but a good kid. Innocent." She saw my eyes wander. "Tell me if I'm boring you. He was left high and dry. Your mother." Mrs. Stevens paused turning to Tracie. "She was never one for close relationships. I wouldn't call her relationship with your father close. Not like Wally and me. Standoffish and I never could figure out why. Other girls her age weren't."

Mrs. Stevens turned to me. "You never knew Wally. I wish you could have met him. Life's fluid, son, with ripples, waves and eddies. You might think you're stuck and then the current will tug you free and you're in for a wild time. Don't ever give up hope." She winked at me. "Finished your tea yet?"

She stood; Princess woke up, looked startled for a moment and then laid his head back down. "Come on son. We're going to have a good time."

"Grandma!" I think Tracie was really shocked but it was hard to tell. She and her grandmother played around a lot – skits and set pieces.

Mrs. Stevens held out her hand to me. Tracie shrugged. I rose and let her grandmother lead me. "I'm seventeen, Mrs. Stevens."

"So you told me."

Tracie stood.

"Go and run a bath for us, dear." She tugged my hand. "Come on, bashful."

"I don't think we should, Mrs. Stevens."

"That's why I'm doing the thinking for you." She shut the bedroom door behind her and faced me. "Strip."

"Mrs. Stevens."

"Strip."

"I don't think . . ."

"Strip."

I gave up. The curtains were open, a cat napped on the bed cover, next to the pillows. I unbuttoned my shirt.

"Know what you'll decide?"

I nodded. "I'm going to college."

"A waste of time. All of it off."

It felt strange. Mrs. Stevens was gray haired, wrinkled and in her sixties. I lowered my shorts.

"Turn around."

I did a slow turn.

"You'll do."

She took a robe off a hook on the door, tossed it to me. "Put it on."

I held the robe. It was flimsy and see through. A woman's robe.

"Put it on."

I put it on. The fabric was soft and light.

"I think you should change your mind about college. I'm assuming your equipment is working or my granddaughter wouldn't be passing the time of day with you. Do you like walking my daughter?"

I nodded.

She took my hand, led me out of the bedroom, into the living room. "Is the bath ready?" she shouted.

"Yes, grandma." Tracie stood by the bathroom door. It was hard to tell from her look what she was thinking.

Mrs. Stevens pulled me into the bathroom, shut the door. "Trish is the smart one. You know that, don't you?"

I shook my head.

"Get in the tub. Take that silly robe off first. Tracie's smart, but not smart like Trish. Trish knows what she wants already and she's fifteen. Going on thirty. Get in."

I stood in the water.

"Relax. Lie in the water. I want to watch you. I haven't watched a man in the tub since Wally." She sat on the seat. "Trish is looking for a steady already. She's like that slut," Mrs. Stevens looked at me and smiled. "What's her name?"

I hadn't the slightest.

"Your friend Frank's girlfriend. Surprised? They come over sometimes and visit me. Relax. So Trish is raring to go. Tracie isn't quite sure, probably never will be, like her mother in a lot of ways. Am I ugly?"

I stared at her, started to sit up.

"Relax. Age doesn't make a woman ugly, son. Remember that. It will come in useful one of these days. I wish someone had told me. What do you think of Lori?"

"She's nice."

"She's nice," Mrs. Steven's minced her shoulders. "No wonder Tracie chose you to be her steady. Lori isn't nice. She's fantastic. She's exceptional. She's a delight to be with. I can talk to Lori. Or with Trish. Tracie's not so easy. Splash. Go ahead, splash the water."

Mrs. Stevens began to moan, gave a gasp, whispered, "You stop splashing son, I'll climb in there with you and we'll do it for real." She grinned, screamed, "Oh God. Oh. Like that. Oh God." She laughed. "You could have overdone the splashing, damn the floor and walls."

I lay back in the tub and watched Mrs. Stevens. She smiled down at me. "Just like Wally except he had a cock two feet long. You shouldn't do whatever anyone tells you, boy. With me, it's okay. Relax. I'll watch you for a few more minutes and then I'll send in Tracie to finish the job." She sat back and shut her eyes. "You don't know what it's like to be alone. Come visit me. Maybe I'll even begin knowing your name. Tell Jerry to come visit. He knows my bite is worse than my bark." She laughed, opened her eyes, and watched me. "I'm a crazy old fool. You change your mind, come on by and I'll get you started out right." She slapped her knees, stood and left the bathroom.

Tracie came in and shut the door. "What did grandmother say?"

"Just stuff. She misses her husband."

Tracie looked at me for a second, took off her clothes.

Tracie was beautiful. Each day I learned how beautiful.

"Make some space for me."

I slid up to a sitting position, pushed back to leave room.

Tracie climbed into the tub, sat slowly, testing the water with her butt. "Grandmother said you need to be scrubbed."

"I'm okay."

"Sure? Want to?"

"Not really. Is that okay?"

"It's kind of creepy here."

"I like it."

"So does Trish. Like it here. I don't always trust grandmother."

I didn't know what that meant but kept my mouth shut. I took Tracie's hands, leaned back against the cool porcelain and watched her. She leaned forward, her spine against the spigot.

## Chapter Six

Wednesday was a hard night. Tracie and I didn't leave Mrs. Steven's until after six, had dinner and few minutes alone afterwards. Too few minutes.

Tracie was nervous about Saturday though she tried not to show it. But I could tell she was nervous which made me nervous.

Imagine knowing that at a certain time, traditionally seven p.m., on Tracie's birthday, both our lives would change. Neither of us could say whether the change, in and of itself, was good, regardless of what the change entailed. We could pretend, attach certain values to outcomes, different values to other outcomes. But we wouldn't know until years later what the whole thing meant and if the choice was the right one.

Being in the here and now wasn't possible either. We were both torn apart by a host of other obligations – school, family, friends. Most of the time, the here and now was a feeling of inexpressible absence.

And I had to admit I'd never really thought that Tracie would say yes. Daily the possibility of what I saw as an irrevocable rift was looming larger. But, I'd remind myself, Tracie isn't like that kind of person. Not like Lori, was she?

Then it was time to walk Mrs. Johnston and it seemed Tracie's mother and I had to go everywhere – the itinerary was a mile long.

Mom always was self-possessed but I think she too was becoming absorbed into the tension of the event. I could never tell what she thought, not by her words at least. She seemed elsewhere.

Walking the dog meant I saw a lot and the dance Barbie did each night with her various partners was predictable until recently.

And now the problem is how to describe distraction. When a woman orgasms she is thrown into a moment where she has no defenses. Her face is as it really is. Barbie's glowed. Tracie's became childlike. Barbie looked like she was in the throes of a holy ecstasy, not sexual at all. Tracie could break out giggling.

Lori? Lori showed intense concentration like she was solving some complex puzzle. The solution pleased her. She glimpsed what it was, could see it dimly, but pressed, she couldn't precisely

explain what she saw. That didn't matter. Her whole spirit was shouting (or about to shout) Eureka!

The past week Barbie's face was closed, the glow was almost gone. Barbie looked determined, not ecstatic.

I felt like a drudge, my bookbag was heavy and useless, I'd finished my homework hours ago and Finnegan's Wake was beyond my capabilities. And the week's calculus, hours spent with Tracie, hours not spent with Tracie, was deadly. I was spending more time with Tracie's mother tonight than I could reasonably expect to spend with Tracie before 12:01 a.m. Saturday morning. I could spend the night Friday in the Johnston's guest room but I might not be back from walking Barbie until close to dawn.

Of course I'd also be there Saturday night and traditionally the head of a Family didn't walk on the day a child of theirs reached eighteen. Traditionally the night before was sort of a communal party, where the head of the Family, and possibly several others, entertained the town. I'd be there, but not as a participant.

We eventually were down to three stops. One was to a place I'd never been to before, the other two were fairly predictable – the all-night laundromat at Langston and the last stop was down at Fairfield Avenue, a block from Langston, where the community theater was. A cast party. At least the locations were close together and perhaps someone would give us a ride back to the Johnstons afterwards.

I knocked on the door at the first place, in the suburbs; the porch light was on.

House calls are always iffy. In a group situation there's emotional wash but it is predictable and generally unified. Oners have a reason to call and that reason can be anything. Literally anything.

I could tell the guy was sad when he opened the door and I saw his face. Sad, a little frightened, nervous though there was no reason to be.

We went in, I unleashed Barbie, and he offered drinks. Barbie was thirsty so we both had water. It's best for Family to stay away from alcohol, absolutely necessary as a walker.

He drank his glass of wine quickly; the bottle was on the coffee table. His hands shook as he got his cigarette and lit it. He took a puff, realized we were watching him, said, "Would you like one?" He pushed the cigarettes and lighter across the table. His leg was

jumping and he could barely keep his fingers still, using two hands to hold his cigarette. "What do I do?" he asked.

Barbie normally doesn't say a word. Some Family heads are different. I couldn't imagine Barbie's mother, Mrs. Stevens, keeping her mouth shut for five minutes.

"Whatever you want," I said. Barbie nodded, reached out and touched his hand.

He took a puff, stubbed out his cigarette. He stared at the ashtray a moment longer, looked up and I was surprised. I could see he was angry. He turned at Barbie and was about to speak when she said, "Where is your bedroom?"

I looked at Barbie. She was relaxed in her seat, hands open in her lap, legs together, robe closed. Her hair was a mess but she didn't look bad. She looked like she'd been driving with the window open.

He looked down, pushed the ashtray an inch, stood, not looking at us, and walked away.

Barbie rose and followed him. She motioned me remain; I sat back in my seat.

Usually when Barbie is called there is a party. The parties aren't loud with stuff being smashed or anything. Just a lot of excited people. Kind of like Lori under the bleachers during a game. Barbie isn't the main event.

"I can't do it," he said from down a hall. Emphatic and lost, he'd given up all hope. I could hear him crying, Barbie's voice, not her words.

The way he cried, all his soul was in his voice and lost. Barbie could call if she needed help but still. Barbie wasn't going to be hurt by him. He was beyond hurting anyone. I was afraid his sorrow would swallow us all. There was nothing I could do. Nothing.

He stopped crying and I could hear them talk. They talked for half an hour almost. It was quiet and Barbie came into the room. She was naked, without her shoes. She knelt by my seat. "I'm staying the night. Call Marge and have her make arrangements for the rest of tonight and call Mike and tell him I'll be late." She watched me. "Then go home. Everything's okay here. His wife died and he's alone. Okay?"

"Call Marge and call Mike. I think that guy in the laundromat can manage to wash his clothes one week without some . . ."

"I'll be coming to school in the morning at nine or so. I'll be walking tomorrow. I meant to tell you earlier." She smiled, did a little shrug. "Okay?"

"Sure." I exhaled. "I'll make the calls and go on home."

Barbie stood, looked at me for a moment, no grin on her face, but I could tell she wasn't pissed at me, turned to go back. She stopped. "You don't need a night cap, Jas."

"I know that."

"Good."

She left.

I put the wine in the refrigerator, made the calls. The phone's usually in the kitchen. I'm always having to report in and sometimes there's no one to show me. I'm good at finding the bathroom too.

I turned out the lights, left the front door unlocked, there's not a lot of crime in our town, took a moment on the doorstep orienting myself. I figured out the shortest way home.

I wondered how brave I would be if I married Tracie, we raised a family, and somehow she died without me. Which is the way it usually is. Mrs. Stevens lost Wally, this guy his wife though he was younger. I wondered if they had kids and if so where the kids were. Having busy lives, no doubt, of their own.

Mr. Johnston worked out the itinerary so it was a circuit that ended close to home. We were on foot; it didn't make sense darting here, darting there, darting back to close to here.

I walked to Langston, turned and walked past the theater on Fairfield. I could hear the party upstairs and wished I could have gone. There probably would have been somebody my age, too young, and we could have talked while those who weren't too young either did or didn't do what Barbie came to do. Usually adults didn't talk with walkers at events, which was a shame.

Would the party be a bust if no one showed up at all? Probably not. Parties that depended solely upon Barbie's presence weren't that common for reasons I assume are obvious.

I didn't look at my watch, I'd see the clock at home soon enough. Walking during the day would mean I'd not get a nap, but I would get to see Tracie. Not at lunch, though. The calculus was terribly skewed and not in my favor.

I climbed into bed, too horny to be tired and too tired to be horny, an exasperating state. On top of everything the image in my mind was of Barbie kneeling and looking at me. She was slightly lower in position, almost like a suppliant. Tracie was there too. It wasn't entirely Barbie on her knees, but it wasn't nearly enough Tracie.

I didn't see the note to call Lori until morning, on the floor where it had fallen off the bed. I was in a rush for school and wondering why the hell Lori wanted me to call. Tracie pulled me out of the apartment before I had a chance to talk to father, only say goodbye and be off.

My eyes were open but I was about as much human as those Greek ships. They have eyes too but they're made of wood.

## Chapter Seven

Mom took me to the coffee shop from school. Larry's was in its second generation as a place to eat, drink coffee and socialize. Larry's had its regulars, the Saturday coffee and New York Times bunch, weekday contractors and retirees with too much time on their hands. If anyone needed to know what was happening in our town, Larry's was the place to find out or to meet people.

I know it's hard to imagine coffee shop romances but they happen. Larry's was where my father met my mother, my real mom. He'd have lunch, taking a break from his repair shop, and mom worked here.

Walking Mom, Barbie, during the day wasn't unusual, just not that common. I walked her a lot during the day around holidays, Christmas season being the biggest so far.

Barbie was always on. If she was out and about she was available. Grocery shopping, the garden center, the hardware store or bank. But walking her during the day meant she expected or wanted more than a casual encounter. My presence at Larry's with Mom leashed indicated one thing to the people in the coffee shop.

Mom had coffee; I had eggs and toast with orange juice. She wore a red skirt with a white blouse. She carried a nondescript purse which looked like a canvas bag. I'd end up with the purse and perhaps her clothes and I knew it was silly but carrying a purse made me feel funny.

"Mike told me you're willing to walk me after my daughter's birthday and your obligation is over. Thank you."

I had a mouthful of food and couldn't really politely say anything. I waved my hand in a way I hoped was meaningful. Mom and I never talked much.

"I suggested to Tracie, like my mother suggested to me, that her steady before her decision be someone she didn't love." Mom paused and my heart was sinking. "Whether she followed my advice doesn't matter. She does love you and we all like you immensely. Thank you."

My heart was beating again. It meant a lot to Family heads that their first born would follow in their footsteps. "Thank you, Mrs. Johnston." I didn't think it was wise or proper to discuss my

feelings for Tracie with her mother. Mrs. Johnston should be able to guess them.

"Sheryl and Donald will be joining me tomorrow night. Mike told you about Donald, didn't he? Mike's a great father but not being able to be with Donald has made his life less than ideal."

I nodded. Sheryl was Mrs. Cooper. That meant Rick would be there tomorrow night. I'd have someone I could talk to.

Two men came to our table and joined us. It's a small town, about 4,000 people, but I'm not good with names. Not like I am with faces.

"Give us a minute, gentlemen." Mom smiled at me. "You're spending the weekend with us, aren't you?"

I gave another nod.

"Good. When we're done today we'll go home and take a nap before going out tonight. Tracie took you to my mother's yesterday."

That wasn't a question. "Yes, Mrs. Johnston."

"And I understand she was . . ." One of the guys was grinning at me.

"I like Mrs. Stevens. We talked a little about Wally."

"My father. Yes."

Whether Mr. Stevens was her biological father was a moot point. Mrs. Johnston was a Family member because of her mother, not her father. Gay and lesbian Families were a bit looser. The children may not have a biological parent within the Family and it didn't really matter. Tracie, Trish and Mike could all be adopted and they'd still be Family.

Mrs. Johnston exhaled, pushed her cup away, said, "We'll talk some more later, Jas." She turned to the man next to her, "I'm ready." She gave him her Barbie smile.

"Can we do it here?" the man next to me asked.

I shook my head. "I'll have to check first. I don't know everyone."

"That's okay, Jas. We'll go outside. Shall we?" It took a second for the man next to her to realize he should move. She put her purse on the table, waited for me to unleash her, stood after him and fiddled with the buttons on her blouse as she walked with the man to the back door to the alley. In a minute one or two others would follow.

"Finish you meal, kid," the one next to me said as he left the table. "I'll keep an eye on things." He didn't bother looking back to see what I did.

Since I didn't know everyone, I'd have to check. Checking meant asking a person to show me their hand. At eighteen each citizen had a small tattoo placed on the web between their ring and little fingers. Generally on the right hand. If that wasn't possible then the left and if that weren't possible I knew them anyway.

Dawn, the waitress, sat across from me in Mrs. Johnston's place. "Hi, Jasper. How's Jerry?"

"Okay. Busy as usual."

"I haven't seen him for a while so I was asking. Could you tell him? There's no reason for him to be a stranger."

Dawn was one of my mom's oldest friends, married a couple of times, nothing stuck. When mom died my dad did stuff but he didn't have much interest in anything. Especially not dating. I think he thought he was too old.

I was going to stick my neck out. "I don't think he'll come by because of mom."

Dawn nodded, lit a cigarette.

"I've been with the Johnstons a lot the last few months."

Dawn nodded, blowing smoke into the aisle. She wasn't looking at me.

"And I don't think he's paying much attention to what he eats." I took a breath and plunged. "If you took him a meal or something, to the shop, I think he'd appreciate it."

Dawn gave a sideways look at me, nodded, thinking, not smiling. "I can do that."

"Just a second," I said getting up. They'd been leaving by the back door in ones and twos and a couple of men I didn't know were rising from their seats. "Excuse me," I said to them. I tried to be extra polite. "Before you go out that door I need to see your hands, please."

They looked at me blankly. If they were townspeople they would have held up their hands without my asking. I saw Larry's cook go around the counter and lock the back door.

"Sorry," I said. "You weren't invited."

"What's going on?" the guy on the right said. He wore a flannel shirt and jeans but his clothes were brand new and his shoes looked

like they were right out of the box. His partner was the same with stainless wire rim glasses and a haircut like you'd never get at the barbershop two doors down.

Dawn came up to me. "Do you think Jerry would like chicken?" She winked at me.

"He loves chicken, dumplings, anything homecooked."

We heard Jim, one of the town cops, shout from the doorway, "Does anyone in here own a tan Mercedes, license RL 409?"

The man on the right was about to say something to me, the man with the glasses walked around us. "I do, officer. Is there a problem?"

"There's been an accident."

"Shit," the man still facing me said. The two went out after Jim.

"Thanks, Dawn," I said. "I better go out back."

"Thank you, Jasper. You think today would be okay?"

I smiled at her. "Today would be great."

I grabbed Mrs. Johnston's purse, left by the back door which was unlocked again and found them down a little ways still in the alley. I got a sheet of paper from my bookbag and a pen and took names from those whose names I didn't know.

I know it sounds strange, me like a cub reporter in an old movie at a crime scene getting all the facts. But it wasn't like that at all.

We were behind the barbershop, Barbie was busy and I knew, by sight at least, everyone so it was okay. I just went around, got names, and then waited and watched outside the very loose circle.

I didn't watch Barbie. It felt strange and made me awkward to watch Barbie for all the reasons you can imagine. I was her daughter's steady. I was her daughter's steady and I was her daughter's steady just about gives them all. Of course there were nuances. Barbie was Mom and if Barbie was Mom then that made it feel incestuous, though it wasn't of course, to think of her in ways beyond the pale.

Okay. You're wondering what I saw. Seven men and two women plus Barbie. It was a bit tangled and fast (and slow too at the same time if you know what I mean) but most everyone just stood and talked.

Once it started it would go on until Mom was ready to stop. Then it would stop, just like that. She was the boss and while it didn't seem like she was the one in control she was.

I picked up her blouse and laid it on my bookbag. Barbie was on her skirt, at least partway. And here it's all a jumble of bits and pieces. A breast moving, a rapidly thrusting bare butt, a leg, Barbie's, in the air flinging, not kicking. A strand of hair across Barbie's wet face. The bare ass, cunt visible, of the woman bending to kiss Barbie.

And sounds, liquid slaps, a long moan that went on for an hour at least. Followed by another and another.

It was dark when we got back to the Johnston's house.

## Chapter Eight

My calculus was falling completely apart. I walked Mrs. Johnston yesterday, had a quick dinner, a moment (a fraction of a second, we didn't even kiss) with Tracie, and walked the dog almost all night. Mom seemed determined to kill me.

A few minutes, literally, of sleep, Tracie woke me up which I'll get back to, went to school where Mrs. Johnston, notice the lack of familiarity, I was a little sore at her, was to pick me up for my duties as walker. Tonight we were going to the special party, after dinner. Tracie wasn't home and I wouldn't see her until the morning if I was still amongst the living.

The party was to be held at the old high school gym. The old high school was now a community center with night classes for a variety of crafts and where meetings were held, and, on weekend, where flea markets were set up in the gym. Which meant the party had to be done and the gym picked up by seven for the flea marketers.

There was my one consolation. The possibility of a few hours sleep before Tracie's birthday party at five. Another grand affair, dinner, town officials present because Mom was a celebrity, the announcement and following celebration, quiet or grand depending on the nature of Tracie's decision.

Tonight I was busted wide open. This morning Tracie had told me, after propelling me out the door and down the steps from the apartment, that she was going to the game tonight with Frank and Lori. Not as a spectator or a worker in the snackstand. Tracie was going to be below the bleachers like Lori. Exactly like Lori and used like Lori. It was idiotic.

"I want to see, Jas. I have to know before I decide tomorrow. You know?"

"I don't know. I thought you were going to college like me."

"Yes," she said. "That's one choice."

"You never said there was more than one choice."

"There's always been more than one choice, Jas. You need to brush your teeth." She turned around so I could get my toothbrush out of her pack.

While I brushed my teeth I tried to think about what to say. There was nothing to say. Absolutely nothing. Not that I felt good about it. Either way I lost her for a year. Either way, if we came back after college and married or she started a Family on her own, fourth generation, we'd not be together after I was eighteen. I could call Marge and Tracie would become by. We could be friends, we could even marry and our kids could be Family.

But I wanted to be jealous of my time with her. Evenings, weekends, go to bed together, wake up together. If she were a Family head that would be impossible. We could marry, could have kids, could spend a lot of time together, but I'd have to share her with the whole town and I didn't think I could do that.

I handed Tracie the toothbrush. "Why couldn't you do this earlier so I could be with you now?" That was a dumb question. I was walking her mother.

Tracie began to speak, I said, "Don't say it. I don't want to know. I've never asked and am not going to. Okay? I . . ."

Tracie kissed me, pushed me against the wall and ground her mouth against mine. A school bus passed and the kids yelled and cheered us.

She let me breathe and I asked, "Can't we skip school today? Can't we . . ."

"Mom is picking you at nine. Remember?"

I shook my head. No one had said anything.

She pulled me from the wall and led me to school. "I'm sure she told you, Jas. You forgot."

"Again? Today?"

"If it's too much responsibility, Jas, we can break up. I'll find someone else. Shouldn't be that hard for me to find another steady. You'll still be invited to the party." Delivered without looking at me.

"You don't need to look for anyone else, Tracie. I love you. You know that. I was just hoping we'd . . ."

"There's Lori." Tracie turned to me, we kissed but she was distracted. Tracie walked off to Lori and they went into the school together.

Frank hit my arm and I almost socked him back. "Hey," he said.

"You'll be watching out for Tracie tonight, won't you?"

"Of course." He hit me again and walked off.

Frank and I used to do everything together. As kids we were spending the night either at my house or his. We dated the same girls, went out to movies where either he or I and our date would buy two tickets, go in and open the exit by the screen and let the other two in. No one said anything since everyone knew our families were okay but not well off. It was just a movie and most of the seats were empty anyway. That was our rationalization and it was pretty close to the fact.

Things were different once he and Lori started going together. Lori took up a lot of his time. Not that I wasn't invited to tag along, and I did, but she came between us or maybe we were already starting to go our own ways. Frank wasn't college bound. He wanted to build houses, stick by stick using his own two hands.

I walked around the side of the school to the parking lot. I was skipping school today. I cut across the field and went to the Johnstons. I hoped Mom would let me crash till nine. If not, I'd sleep in the car.

When you're tired you don't think straight. It's a little like being drunk. You think you're doing fine but if you were able to step outside of yourself you'd see how wavy that straight line is. Or maybe you said or did something that made perfect sense but you were stupid or something in retrospect.

I knew I wasn't thinking straight. What was off was the calculus – how many times Tracie and I'd have a chance to do it before she turned eighteen. All my plans were dust.

Mom answered the door, didn't say a word, except she'd wake me when it was time to go.

"Earlier," I said. "I'm going to need coffee."

"Okay, earlier." She followed me to the guest room. "Do you need a back rub?"

"Thanks but I need sleep, Mrs. Johnston." That didn't come out right.

"I'll wake you with coffee." She left me.

Mom isn't a person who exudes emotion. She's warm but aloof. As Barbie she was a whole lot warmer but she still had a reserve. Tracie was like her mother in a lot of ways. I felt close to Tracie but there was no emotional drama. There weren't crises about what to wear, imagined slights, or did I really love her. And I was pretty much the same way. I think it happened when mom died. I closed

part of myself off, withdrew a little, held back – none of those words describes it precisely. That may be one of the reasons Frank and I weren't that close anymore but I don't think so. I think we both changed. We both liked each other but I wasn't planning to hang out with Lori and Frank much next week.

I had no idea what I'd do next week. Carry on. Walk the dog. Hi to Tracie but not much else. I was on the eve of my death and I was taking it pretty well. I was too busy to do anything else.

Mom woke me with coffee and breakfast rolls. She left me while I ate and prepared herself to get ready. I'd seen Mom in every posture possible but in her home she was modest. We stepped in and out of different worlds together.

The event this morning was a birthday party of a twenty-year employee at one of the two factories in town. That went on until two and then Barbie and I hung out downtown. We got back to her home at six. Mr. Johnston had dinner ready. Tracie had already left to go to Lori's, we were leaving at seven to go to the party and I was feeling a sense of panic.

Mom gave him a look and Mike left the table. She watched me for a moment and then said, "Did you know that your father was one of my steadies?"

I hadn't known. Dad didn't talk much about his youth.

"He was. Not the last one before my decision. I think he was the penultimate one. My last steady wasn't my favorite or the longest by far. Did you want coffee?"

"Please."

She got up from the table, she wore her red robe but was barefooted, and went into the kitchen. "My mother was terribly impressed with your father, she's never been impressed with too many people. She was less impressed with the one who followed but that didn't matter. I was going to be free of her, off on my own; it's hard to describe now or even remember all the reasons. I'm warming this morning's coffee in the microwave. Is that okay?"

"That'll be great."

"Twenty-two years later. It's hard to believe. Now Tracie will need to decide. For some of us it's an easy decision. For others it isn't." The microwave dinged. "And it isn't easy for their lovers, steadies or not." She set the coffee before me. "We have five minutes, you can take the cup with you. There'll be refreshments, including coffee."

She sat next to me, and gave me a smile. "I shouldn't do this but you're old enough. If you want me, after tomorrow, as who ever I am when you walk me, you can have me. It must be here, and it must be when Mike and the children aren't here. And you must tell no one." Her eyes held mine for a moment and then she dropped them. "Thank you, Jasper." She raised her eyes. "I should have thanked your father years ago."

## Chapter Nine

The old high school was named after Emmanuel Goff, the man who before the Civil War created the institution of the Families and used his wealth to create an endowment to support them. His reasons for doing this had become a part of the local mythology about the Families and the town he helped create.

Goff was a former slave who settled here; the town was a stop on the underground railroad. He was intelligent, hard working, and had the gift for making money and investing it well. He bought land. He dabbled with social movements, was briefly associated with the Owenites, and had a desire to leave a lasting legacy.

The old high school was build around 1920, I'm sure there was a plaque somewhere telling when, of native stone. The building was single storied and rambling, and I think the only reason the town had a new high school was because they had money to build it and thought all these windows were a nuisance to clean and conducive to wool gathering by teachers and students alike. The old school had a dreamy quality.

All of this prelude is to cover up the fact I was in a foul mood, angry, pissed, bad company for those who wanted to talk and cranky because of all the coffee I'd drunk today. And I couldn't sit still because I had to pee again but had to wait until I was relieved. I was watching the entrance and was happy to be away from the gym.

Things I wondered about? Because I was wondering. I wondered how Tracie was doing. There was a whole embroliogo of emotions and thoughts, wild swings of opinion and memory of our kiss this morning. I knew she still loved me. I hoped she still loved me tomorrow at this time. Which placed an obligation on me to love her, no matter what. And to forgive her mother for the offer that had been made a few hours ago, a faux pas of monumental proportions that couldn't be forgotten or forgiven.

Mom and I now had a new relationship because of her words, an unnatural one, one I was thrust into willy-nilly and there was no way out again. I was stuck now wondering if she really meant it, was she just being nice? What if we did, would it matter? But I couldn't, I wasn't eighteen yet and, besides, the mother of Tracie would always (always and forever?) be forbidden territory.

It was close to midnight and more people were leaving than coming. For some reason, I guess because Mom, Donald and Mrs. Cooper were all about the same age, the music chosen was classic rock circa 1980 when they were teenagers. Very young teenagers.

"Want me to take a turn?" Rick asked behind me.

"Could you? I'm about to burst."

"You should see what they're doing in there." Rick sat on the stool. "They have the lights low, people are talking, eating, you should grab a bite, and fucking."

"I'll get something. Want me to bring something for you?"

"A cola. No. Mountain Dew." Rick smiled at the couple who passed us. "It's a mess in there, clothes everywhere. The question is, will we end up with leftover clothes when this is all over? Or no clothes and a lot of naked people? I don't think people are leaving wearing the same thing they arrived in." Rick gave a grin.

Rick was a math major who saw the world in numbers. I was sure he was working out probabilities in his mind as we spoke. Plus a complicated analysis of the motions people took in the gym. People clustered in non-random groupings.

The music was least loud in the restroom. That was a relief. A walk outdoors was my dream and desire but tonight wasn't about my dreams and desires.

I went in the gym and Rick was right, it was a lot darker. Lisa, who was Donald's walker, was over by the food table talking to two women. Lisa was a lesbian who'd volunteered to walk Donald. They made a good pair but I always wondered what she thought about what she saw.

For some reason I craved carbohydrates. I stacked a paper plate high with dark homemade bread someone had brought, cheese and chips. I found two almost cold cans of Mountain Dew for Rick and me. I dumped a case of cans into the icy water for later.

I thought I should check on Barbie before leaving, so I put my plate and Dews down in a corner out of the way. Lisa saw me and walked over.

"How are you holding out?" she asked.

"Worse than I expected."

"It'll be all over tomorrow."

"Not for me. I'm staying on as Mrs. Johnston's walker."

Lisa gave a nod. Her eyes stared past my shoulder. "I'd better go."

She went toward two newcomers who looked lost in the dark room.

Lisa is a strikingly beautiful girl if you like punk/goth fashion. Tall, wearing boots of course, black jeans and shirt. Her dyed red hair was cut short and done in fakey little curls which sounds worse than it looked. The piercings that were visible were on her brow, nostril and lip. I never asked her about the rest of her tattoos. Last year she'd shaved her head and that had been tattooed with something dark and spikey. She was seventeen like me, but her birthday was next winter. Mine was in the early spring.

The three Family heads were the centers of attention but other groupings had formed. Parties like this gave people a chance to blow off steam, experiment, or do what they loved doing but didn't love enough to decide back when they were eighteen.

Barbie was okay, tired but not so tired to need a break. It was easy to tell. She wasn't vocal, wasn't enthusiastic but she was right there in the middle of her own world having a good time.

I took the plate and Dews to the entrance and Rick and saw Lisa there too. "I just have two drinks. Want one?"

"That stuff stinks," Lisa said.

Rick popped the top and drank. "Caffeine," he said, drawing out the word with a smile.

I sat on the floor and began eating. The bread and cheese was great. My mood was vastly improved. "Where's Cindy?" I asked. Cindy was Mrs. Cooper's daughter.

"The game. Where else?" Rick said.

"Bunch of fascists," Lisa muttered with a smile.

"She's in the band."

"I know that. A bunch of goose stepping fascists." Lisa reached out her hand. "Let me have a drink of that."

"You can have mine," I said.

"His is okay. I just want a sip." She took a drink, passed the can back. She said to me, "That's not vegan, you know."

"I'm too tired to rise to the bait." I lifted a piece of cheese from the plate and bit off a corner.

Lisa turned to Rick and held out her hand. "Another." She took a drink, passed the can back. "So, when this is all over, you two want to do a threesome?"

Rick choked on his Dew. I went on eating.

"With you?" Rick asked.

"Hey, come on," Lisa said. "It was an honest invitation. You needn't be disparaging."

"I wasn't being whatever. You mean it?"

Lisa kicked my knee. "You asleep down there?"

I shook my head, swallowed a mouth full of chips. "I sorta promised Tracie."

"We'll sorta not tell her if that's what's bothering you. That's right, isn't it, Rick? Another please."

"Sure you don't want some chips. Chips are vegan aren't they?"

"Vegan enough." Lisa squatted next to me, held up the can for Rick to take. She grabbed a handful of chips. "These aren't too bad."

"A bit soggy."

"It's moist and humid back in the gym. I think they have the air conditioning turned off."

"You mean it's not just me?" Rick said.

"You're always moist and humid, Rick." Lisa asked me, "Can I have a drink?"

I passed her the can. "Keep it. I'm jittery enough already."

"Well?" she asked

"Well what?" I watched her take the last of my chips.

"The threesome. Remember?"

"I'd better pass." I raised my eyes. "Can I take a rain check?"

She stared at me for a moment, said, "I think so. This is a whim, a spur of the moment thing. I'm not sure it'll ever happen again."

"What about me?" Rick asked. "I didn't say no."

"I'll think about it." Lisa stood. "Don't get your hopes up." She turned and walked away.

I grinned at Rick who was watching Lisa. "Hey," I shouted. "Lisa. You and Rick go off and whatever. I'll watch the door."

She stopped and was silent. She turned slowly. "You won't tell anyone I did it with?" She saved her hand toward us.

"Not a word to anyone."

"I have a reputation to keep up."

"Not a word," Rick said.

She smiled at us. "Well come on." Rick jumped off the stool. "You have to pretend you're a girl."

"I think I can do that." Rick brushed the seat of his jeans.

"I'll keep my eyes shut." Lisa turned and walked on.

I climbed onto the stool, watched them go into a room and close the door. Good for them, I thought. Too bad you're such a coward. I'm not, I said, and the two sides faced off.

Lisa knew how nervous I was with the birthday tomorrow. I knew she didn't want me to feel alone but I had promised Tracie. Everything would disappear at seven tomorrow. The promises, the relationship, everything, and I was too tired to wonder what would take their place.

Instead, I wondered why dad never told me he'd been one of Mrs. Johnston's steadies.

The next crowd would be a little after two when the bars closed. I wished I'd brought a book.

## Chapter Ten

After a long hard (only because I was so tired) night a letter from Tracie lay on the pillow of the Johnston's guest room. Tracie's letter was an anticlimax and I had to admit I was expecting something like this.

The letter said:

"Jasper,

"This isn't easy for me, but I think it's better that you know sooner than later that you are no longer my steady.

"Writing this I realize that this won't be easy for you either. All I can say is I'm sorry and I hope we can still be friends eventually.

"Right now I'm expecting you at my party, though you won't be sitting beside me. I'm expecting you to respect my desire for no contact whatsoever with you. I don't want to talk to you, touch you, have anything to do with you. There is nothing you can say or do that will make me change my mind.

"I also expect and hope that you'll treat my mother with respect. My decision is mine alone. She had no part in it. And I expect you to honor your friendship with Frank.

"I'll always remember the past six months, Jas. I'll remember my feelings for you and how much I enjoyed being with you. There'll be others for both of us but our time together was special for me. Thank you, Jas.

"Tracie"

My hand shook when I set the letter down. I undressed, climbed under the covers and read the letter again before turning out the light.

The curtains were drawn so the sun wouldn't keep me awake. Tracie's fond farewell didn't keep me awake either. I felt raw and dead when I went to sleep. I knew it would only be worse when I woke.

I'm not sure what woke me. Maybe I felt the bed shift under weight. Maybe she touched me. At first I thought it was Tracie and the joy I felt, the thrill, died when I remembered the letter.

Next I thought it was Mrs. Johnston and that was just too strange. Lying still, I kept my eyes closed and prayed she wouldn't touch me.

I think I blamed Mom for everything; for my having no time with Tracie, especially these last few days; for having something to do with my being dumped. For being Mom, for being Family, for not being normal, whatever that was.

I fell back asleep and when I woke again I thought I'd been dreaming until I felt the hand on my back. "Tracie?"

"Tracie's upstairs with Frank, screwing his ass off."

"Trish?"

"Who else were you expecting?"

"I don't feel like doing anything."

"Um, let me see. Does that mean what it sounded like it meant, Jasper?"

"Let me sleep. Please."

"Time to get up. It's four. Aren't you just thrilled?"

"I don't feel like talking either."

"Mother thought I might be able to help."

"You're not helping, Trish."

"I told her she was crazy. But she insisted, so here I am, her dutiful daughter. Want a back rub?"

"Could you go, please?"

"I'm being dutiful to mother, not you. So sorry. Nope."

She touched my back, softly, drew large circles with her finger. "I'm guessing you're not in the mood, hunh?"

"You guess right."

"That's okay. I'm happy just doing this."

"What you're doing is pissing me off."

"What I'm trying to do is take your mind off my good-for-nothing sister."

I sat, my feet on the floor. I was thirsty and my bladder was full to the breaking point. I stood, taking the letter from the bedstand, and carried it to my bookbag. I folded the letter carefully, put it in a side pocket, and walked into the guest bedroom.

I started the shower as hot as possible, slowly turning it colder as I washed and rinsed. I half expected Trish to try to join me and I half wished she did. I felt like hitting something. She'd do.

Being so angry while feeling so desolate inside was so bizarre. I've never hit anyone except as a kid playing. Now I could break

something, could feel my hands squeeze, the muscles in my arms tense as I slowly broke whatever I held in two. A stick, an arm, I didn't visualize that precisely. I didn't want to be in this house and I didn't want to be in my head.

I walked into the bedroom toweling my hair. Trish was still there, in the bed, looking up at me, the covers up to her shoulders. I wasn't angry with Trish. I tossed the towel on the bed and put on my clothes. I'd worn them twenty-four hours but they were all I had.

I sat on the bed as I buttoned my shirt. Trish touched my back. "Don't do that," I said. I was motionless waiting for her to stop.

Trish didn't say anything. Eventually her hand left me. I finished buttoning my shirt, got up and picked up my bookbag. I wanted to go but I was afraid to leave the room. I didn't want to run into anybody so I sat on the bed.

"I'll be oldest in the Family, Jas. How do you think that feels? I'll be needing to find a steady. You're my first choice but I'll understand if you say no." She didn't give me a chance to say no. "You're seventeen, I'm fifteen, so it could only be for a year. Maybe it would be better to find someone closer to my age.

"Tracie was always figuring out stuff like that. She'd talk to mother because Mike didn't want to hear it. Tracie had a whole program figured out. So and so for a month or two, then another so and so. She always went for younger boys, never one who was even the slightest bit older. I don't think she could stand being left behind."

I left the bookbag on the bed, rose to my feet and looked down at Trish.

"Think about it, Jas. A year with me then you'll be able to do whoever you wanted. With whoever was as old or older than you. I'm pretty sure I know what I want. You'd have to find others for me, or set me up, or make me generally available. You'll get to dress me and undress me as you wish. I won't be like Tracie. I want you to walk me, Jas."

Trish looked so much like her sister, I wanted to kiss her, touch her face, curl up by her side. My wanting had nothing to do with desire; it was habit.

"A year'll pass and there'll be other steadies. I'll be here, as a Family head when you return after college. We could marry if you want. Or you can just use me whenever you want; just like you can use me now. Whatever you want to do. You can share me tonight

at the party. We'll have our own celebration. There'll be other kids here, walkers and Family. Whatever you want."

"I want you to stop pestering me."

She grinned at me. "I'm not that easy to get rid of." She sat up in bed and stretched her arms, watching my face.

I turned away from the sight of her breasts and went into the bathroom to see if there was a toothbrush. Mine was by the sink along with a tube of toothpaste. "Why don't you get me something to eat and some orange juice instead of talking my head off."

"Yes, o master." Trish stood in the doorway, naked and looking older than fifteen, while I brushed my teeth. I watched her face in the mirror. It was hard to tell what she was thinking. When I looked up after rinsing the toothbrush she was gone.

I sat on the bed, opened the side pocket for the bookbag and took out Tracie's letter. I was reading it when Trish entered with a tray. "Put some clothes on," I said, not looking up.

"Yes, o master." She sat on the bed next to me.

"I mean it. It's almost five." She didn't stir. I folded the letter and put it back in the pocket.

"Mother says I need to get the room ready for later tonight."

"Why don't you do that?"

"You're sitting on the bed, Jasper. Done with this?" She put her hand on the bookbag.

I looked at her. Her face was dead serious.

"I was going to put it up in my room."

"Put some clothes on while you're at it. I'll make the bed."

"You will? Thanks. Mother wanted to know how you're doing."

"Tell her I don't know yet."

"And you'll make the bed?"

"I'll make the bed."

"Sure you don't want a quick fuck?"

"Furthest thing from the mind now. I'm not going to be anybody's steady for a while, Trish. Find someone else."

"I can wait." She stood, lifted the bookbag. "Umph. What do you have in here?"

"Get some clothes on."

"Not till you tell me I have nice tits." She twisted from side to side to show me, the bookbag hanging from her fingers.

"Please get dressed."

"Yes, o master."

"That's cute, Trish." She turned to look at me from the door. "But you say that one more time and I'm leaving. I'll go home and never come back."

Her face fell. "Sorry." She left the door open. I could see Mrs. Johnston who paused for a second as she walked past. She looked nervous.

Okay, I was human again and wasn't going to hurt anyone. The next few hours wouldn't be easy but I could deal. I hoped nothing I said or a look on my face would give me away.

## Chapter Eleven

The mayor wasn't a professional speaker and his going on was making everybody fidget. I'd never been to a Family Decision Day before which is one reason I decided to stay. The other, of course, was to see Tracie.

Before today my only exposure to this event was in our small town newspaper in a carefully coded and short article. The Families and their affairs were our secret; we didn't broadcast them to the wide world.

Frank sat next to Tracie and had a huge shit-eating grin on his face. Tracie looked nervous. Her eyes never rested on me. Mrs. Johnston looked tired and she smiled a lot but the smile wasn't manic like Frank's. Mr. Johnston didn't sit at the main table, he was off to the side with Donald. I couldn't see their hands but I thought they were holding them under the table. Trish sat next to Mrs. Johnston, dressed thank goodness, with little Mike next to her. Little Mike looked like he wanted all the speechifying to be over and the birthday party to begin.

Other Families were in the room, Mrs. Cooper's, Miss Arnold's, Mrs. Burl's and Mr. Jewett's, the town council, police chief and informal head of the informal chamber of commerce, along with guests, walkers, and me. Somewhere between fifty and seventy-five people attended.

Lisa moved across the room and sat next to me. "Looks like I'm out of a job."

I nodded, not glancing at her.

"I've decided I'm bisexual. Can you imagine that?"

I smiled and relaxed. "Rick was that good."

"He's okay. I mean it. It wasn't traumatic or anything."

"Not like this party."

"It'll liven up in a few minutes. Tracie's new meat. Even if she doesn't decide to, she's going to be popular tonight."

"I can't imagine doing it with old people."

"She's older than you and there didn't seem to be a problem, Jasper."

"A year older."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Still," Lisa touched my wrist, "you never know. You need to keep your mind open."

"I'm happy the way it is."

"What are your feelings about doing it with bisexuals? Hypothetically of course. We wouldn't actually do it or anything so stupid or foolish."

"That's good. I'm pretty open to red-haired bisexuals but not tonight."

"This is all hypothetical, Jasper. I'm only testing the waters right now. I'm trying to imagine you without any clothes on." She pressed her temples with her fingers. "Not as nauseating as I thought it might be. I might even enjoy it. Hypothetically, of course. Naked. With no clothes on."

"The two usually go together. Naked and no clothes."

Lisa clapped enthusiastically. "The old fart is finished finally." She touched my wrist. "Favorite ice cream flavor?"

"Vanilla."

She made a face. "Vanilla. Would you be willing to experiment? Try chocolate, strawberry or a little bondage?"

"Shush," I said.

Tracie stood, looked across the room. Her fingers were fiddling with something on the table. "Today is my eighteenth birthday and I must decide to stay in a Family or leave." She paused; her eyes momentarily rested on me, moved on. "My decision is yes." She sat down to applause, jumped up. "I forgot. I'm nervous as all get out as you can tell. There's food out by the pool. After I've eaten I'll be able to celebrate. Ummm. Oh. Frank here is my walker." She smiled across the room. "Have a good time and at eight or so the birthday girl will be in the guest room." She paused. "There are so many people I want to thank tonight. Some, I know I'll have to thank later." She looked at me, gave a slight nod. "Thank you." She sat down blushing and leaned to say something to her mother.

"That was short and sweet. Brave girl," Lisa said. "Do you want me to get you anything?"

I shook my head.

"Vanilla ice cream, right?" She grinned at me. "Don't you want to see if the birthday girl gets her wish?"

"I'm going to sit here for a while."

"I'll be back, Jasper. Don't run away. I find myself strangely attracted to you. Are you a closet bisexual by chance?" She didn't wait for my answer.

Mrs. Stevens sat next to me. "I need help getting my garden ready. I'll pay. My daughter said you'll do a good job."

"I'm walking her, Mrs. Stevens."

"I know that. After school next week. You're not afraid of a little work, are you?"

I smiled and shook my head. "No, Mrs. Stevens."

"Then you'll do it?"

I nodded. "I was planning to come over and visit anyway."

"Then all this subterfuge was wasted. A shame. Still, it'll be nice to see you and finally get to know your name. And the garden does need work, pitiful thing."

"Thanks, Mrs. Stevens."

"The girls call me Connie."

"Maybe in a bit, Mrs. Stevens."

"That's fair. Who's that interesting young woman who was sitting next to you?"

"That's Lisa."

"Maybe Lisa should come too. Is she good in bed?" Mrs. Stevens raised her eyebrows and waited.

"I don't know."

"Good Lord, then you'd better bring her along with you."

"I'll ask her."

"How are you doing?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Next week I expect an honest answer, son." Mrs. Stevens rose slowly. "The eighteen rule is a bit too hard and fast to my thinking. As you well know." She winked at me and walked off toward the sliding glass doors to the outside.

I could watch the party out the window to my left. Clusters of people ate a variety of foods, from the catered dinner to just ice cream and cake. It was too cool outside to swim otherwise the pool would be full of noisy people. Mrs. Johnston came in for something and sat next to me.

Neither of us said anything for a minute; I didn't look at her. "Jasper, if you decide not to continue walking me, that's perfectly all right. It's up to you." She paused and I wasn't sure if she had anything else to say. I turned to her. "Tracie did the best she could. It's never easy on the steady."

"I'll walk you, Mrs. Johnston. With pleasure."

She smiled. "The other thing I mentioned yesterday still stands, no matter what. With pleasure."

"I don't think I'd better do that, Mrs. Johnston. You understand?"

"I do. The offer's still there." She rose. "I need more silverware."

"Need help?"

She studied me for a moment. "No, I can do it."

Mr. Johnston and Donald came in holding hands and walked past me toward the stairs. Mr. Johnston gave me a wicked grin.

Everybody called Donald by his first name rather than Mr. Diembowski because that's how he preferred it. Of all the various Families he and Mrs. Cooper were the least formal.

Lori joined me for a moment. "I'm going to leave before things get too wild. As you know, I'm looking for a steady. And as I know, you feel like crap now so if you want we can talk next week sometime. If you just want a quickie, don't hesitate."

Lori looked like hell, rings under her eyes and her voice was dull and without inflection. "Next week is fine. I'd love a quickie but I feel like all four tires are flat."

"So that's my problem. Four flat tires." Lori stood, watching out the window. "You know, Tracie talked you up a whole lot. You don't need to rush into anything out of desperation."

I stood and held her. "I've always liked you, Lori. If I choose you, it won't be out of desperation."

"Throw some gravel on the window if you feel the urge." She pushed away from me. "I'd better go. That felt good, Jasper. Thanks."

Lisa was waiting with two plates. She joined me on the couch and handed me a plate. "There's vanilla, we'll save the whips for later. You doing okay?"

"I'm okay."

"Yeah. Right. And I'm a flaming heterosexual. Tracie is liking being the center of attention. I understand you're walking Mrs. Johnston. Need any help?"

"I don't think so."

"Don't be bashful, just ask." She took a bite and ate, watching me. "My understanding is you're spending the night here."

"Who told you that?"

"Trish. With obvious glee and a twinkle in her eye."

I grinned.

"So I'm wondering. It's between twinkles, Lori and me. Any more? Just so I know if I have a fighting chance."

"It's going to be no one for a while."

"That's okay. As the only other closet bisexual it's not like I have a lot of choice out there."

"That's hard to believe."

"Flatterer." She winked at me. "Do you want to eat first and then talk? Just eat? Or do you want me to go away and leave you in peace?"

"This is okay?" I took a bite of cake.

"You're so romantic. Whoa. The rush is on."

Tracie passed us with several members of the town council in tow.

"I wonder where Frank is?" Lisa said. "I never figured Mrs. Sylvere was into this kind of thing."

"You'd be surprised."

"Decide yet?"

"Stay awhile. I might need your help getting my bookbag from Trish's room."

Three more passed us en route to the guest room.

"Where's Frank? He's not going to last long if he doesn't pay attention to his responsibilities." Lisa poked me with her elbow. "You know. I think you're going to have to do the bookbag thing yourself. There's no way I'm going to get between a horny fifteen-year-old girl and the object of her affections. That's you, Jasper."

"Twinkles."

"If the name fits."

"Were you ever like that?"

"I'm always like that, Jasper. Try me out at least."

"Not tonight."

"Saving yourself for twinkles."

"No, I'm just tired."

"I give passable backrubs."

"I already turned down one offer today." Tracie was starting to get loud in the guest room. "I'm going outside."

"I'll join you."

## Chapter Twelve

There was a knock on the door and Mr. Johnston said from the hall, "Trish, you have twenty minutes to get ready for church."

"Okay, father."

She snuggled a little closer to me. "See. I can be a good girl if I try hard enough."

"Thank you for trying," I said. I kept still as she crawled over me to get out of bed.

"You can watch if you want. I mean if you're a voyeur or something."

I turned on my side and saw her grab a towel. My bookbag lay on the floor next to the door. That's as far as it ever got last night. She wrapped the towel around her torso and left the room.

Mrs. Johnston stood in the doorway. "I'll be needing you to walk me tonight. We'll have dinner first. I can pick you up at six thirty at your house or here." She waited, no real emotion registering on her face. Mrs. Johnston could be coldly efficient at times.

It was a toss up. I needed to go home anyway to change but I didn't want to sit around and watch TV with Dad. "Here, if that's okay."

"I'll leave the key on the dining room table." Mom gave a tight smile and left.

Trish was back a few minutes later, dropped the towel on the floor and did a slow spin for me. "Not bad, hunh?"

"You're very mature for a fifteen-year-old."

"I don't know why I bother." She turned and opened a drawer, looked over her shoulder at me. "Do you want me to go to church with panties on or without."

"Why don't you surprise everyone and wear panties."

She stuck her tongue out at me; dug what she needed out of the drawer and dressed.

She turned and asked, "Zip my dress for me?"

I sat up, the sheet over my lap, and zipped the dress.

Trish turned to me. "You'll find I'm not a virgin, a disappointment for sure for you but I couldn't help myself." She

eyed the ceiling and did a little sway. Her eyes dropped and held mine. "Last night was my first time sleeping with a man. Other than a major disappointment in one department . . ."

"Ready?" Mr. Johnston asked from the door.

"As soon as I finish my little speech." Mr. Johnston waited. "Well!" She turned back to me. "Other than a disappointment in one department, it was fantastic and I'll treasure the memory for ever and ever."

"We have to go now, Trish."

She stamped her foot, lunged at me, kissed my cheek and left.

My first thought was, Tracie has a crazy sister. Of course Tracie was out of the equation now for me. It was going to take some getting used to.

I spent just a few minutes at home, checked on Dad who didn't have much to say as usual and walked back to the Johnstons. They came back from church without Tracie. I figured if Tracie were around I wouldn't have been invited to stay. I had lunch and a nap in the guest room.

The sheets still smelled of her and a zillion others.

I found a book to read, later, in the library that Mr. Johnston said I could borrow. He was grading papers but was in a good mood. I wonder if Donald had spent the night.

I sat out by the pool and Trish joined me until Mom hustled her away. I liked Trish but wasn't ready for a constant nympho companion.

At six-thirty Mom and I left the house. She drove, didn't speak. I looked out the window. We went out of town for dinner, I guess so we wouldn't be bothered. Mom was dressed in black: black sandals, jeans, blouse and lightweight jacket with a colorful printed design that looked oriental. Mom wore her dog collar but it wasn't obvious what it was.

The restaurant was dimly lit, subdued in tone though people at the tables were talking and enjoying themselves. Mom and I, other than our ages, went well together as the most underdressed couple. Nobody paid any attention.

"How are you doing, Jasper?" The dim lighting, candles, and perhaps the way she was dressed made Mom look younger. She was relaxed and smiling now.

"Okay, Mrs. Johnston."

"You'll call me Barbara one of these days." She paused. "It's all right to not be okay, Jasper."

"One of these days you'll be calling me Jas, Mrs. Johnston."

She grinned. "In fact, I think we'd all be a little more comfortable with signs of outrage, angst or soap opera melodrama."

"You'd be happier if I asked you where Tracie was."

"She's out of town for a few days." She laid her fork down. "I don't want to eat too much beforehand. We won't be out very late tonight."

"Not like last week." I raised my eyes and smiled.

"Not at all like last week." She took a drink from her wineglass. "Where shall I start?" She watched me. "Okay. Did you know some of your relatives were Goffs?"

This was new. Dad hadn't said anything. "No. Not recent?"

"Several generations back. You know we live in a multiracial community. And you know we have a lot less," a pause, "friction than most communities in the area. Black and white together, even today, are still frowned upon elsewhere."

I'd taken American history last year. "Slavery and stuff."

"And stuff. What do you think the purpose of the Families is?"

"Keep everybody happy? Less frustration?"

"That's part of it. There is less frustration. One of my functions is to fix things, to make things better. It started as an idea shared by your ancestor and others. It's evolved since then. The rule of eighteen for instance."

I wasn't sure I want to hear explanations of why Tracie and I couldn't be together. I looked across the room.

"Without the rule of eighteen, girls like Trish would be going out," she smiled and paused, "with men almost twice her age. Which wouldn't be fair to her. Or them. But mostly her. If we . . . I don't know how to put this. In the past there was a problem. Since the rule of eighteen there's been less of a problem, or rather a new problem. We think Tracie and you are mature enough to deal with the problem as adults."

"Even if we can't see each other. It's crazy." My voice was rising. "Mrs. Johnston, it's crazy."

"It's not perfect. No rule is. It was better for Tracie to have a younger steady. Especially since she didn't know how she'd

decide. If she decided yes, there needed to be a clean break. Do you know how many couples like the Conners there have been over the years? Most are like Mike and me, a matter of convenience. And while I love Mike, I don't love him." She looked down.

"So everything was planned?" My voice was becoming shrill.

Mom looked up. "Not at all. You'll find, over the next few months, this will be explained to you. Your options, recommendations from collective past experience. I'm jumping the gun somewhat. For Tracie's sake and yours. You're a walker, a good one, and that's rare. You weren't told in advance that you'd be eligible for a scholarship because it's best you don't know that beforehand. You know now. Congratulations. So you can go to college, do what you want. Or not, if you choose, We know you've been approached by three women to be their steadies and I can make suggestions but the decision is yours. Something to remember is that Lisa, like Tracie, will be eighteen before you. Lori and Trish, like you, will be too young when you reach eighteen. Your decision will affect them all, yourself, their families, like ripples in a lake. No thank you," she said to the waiter. "Did you want a dessert, Jasper? No? A cup of coffee for me please." She looked at me and said to the waiter. "Two cups of coffee, please."

"I don't feel like deciding anything now."

"If Trish becomes a pest and you need help handling her, let Mike or me know. Your father was my steady, like you, until the last moment. He became bitter afterwards."

"I can see why."

"That was a hurdle we couldn't overcome. Fortunately or unfortunately – it's impossible to tell. He's never said anything?"

"Not a word."

"I'm glad he's not angry any more. You're welcome to spend the night at my home this week. Trish's room or the guest room. I can't guarantee Trish won't try to join you in the guest room. You'd be welcome anyway but I understand a romance is blooming and you might feel more comfortable away from cupids, flowers and schmaltzy music."

Dad hadn't said a thing. "How do you know all this?"

"My mother is very nosy. She knows a lot of people in town, including Dawn's mother, Lori's and Lisa's grandmothers; the network is quite extensive. I understand you'll be helping her garden."

"That was the ploy, yes."

"She and I don't agree on many things. But she's very effective and if you can come up with a reasonable alternative to the rule of eighteen, try it out on her. How are you really?"

"I'm not going to hurt anyone." I watched the waiter at the next table for a moment, turned my eyes to hers. "I think."

She smiled at me. "It's okay to be angry. It's okay to be frustrated. And it's okay to go on a binge. I'm sure Lori will join you wholeheartedly. A couple more bits. Tracie is in her probationary period for the first year. She can leave any time she wishes and attend college, like she told me you two discussed. She can come back, resume her role as head of a Family, or choose not to. She'll not be the first."

Mom finished her coffee. "Friday is an away game and Lori has volunteered to be available for team members under eighteen. There'll be a motel and Jim will be present in case there's a problem. She'd like you to be her walker."

I was nodding. Jim was a town policeman. He was okay.

"Tracie will be in another room. I'll understand if you say no and Lori will also. She did ask for you. Frank's been a disappointment; he won't be there for Tracie. I'm afraid what was done to Frank wasn't fair to him. More unfair than what was done to you."

"What about Lori?" My voice was soft.

"Ask her Friday if you want. Anytime. He wasn't a good walker. And Lori's steady needs to be a good walker for her."

The frustrating thing was I could see that. Frank was a good guy but he was getting a kick out of sharing Lori and didn't always pay attention. "She loved him."

"Ask her if she still loves Frank and ask yourself if you still love Tracie and you'll see the difference. Ready to walk me?"

I wasn't going to finish the coffee. "Sure."

"Leash me here or in the car?"

"You can be a tease, Mrs. Johnston." I stood.

"Where do you think my daughters get it from?" She left a good tip and joined me.

## Chapter Thirteen

Tracie wasn't in school Monday. I didn't see Lori and Frank waved but steered clear of me. I waved back but it was reflexive, didn't really mean anything.

Trish gave me space like I asked her and I was appreciative. It wasn't easy withstanding her constant lusty bombardment. Maybe she realized it'd be better if she didn't storm the castle but that I lower the drawbridge and meet her on the open field.

I needed to talk to Tracie before I did anything. While her letter said there'd be others for both of us, I had to be sure before I did anything. Her having others didn't have quite the same significance in my mind compared to my becoming someone's steady.

Lisa joined me for lunch but we both didn't say much. I wondered how it felt for her to be away from her art crowd. We didn't share a lot of the same interests. She was fun to be with and I felt good when I was with her which was a start, I guess.

Mrs. Stevens wanted to talk, not garden, after school at her house. I learned the cats' names (Rambunctious -- Rambo, Nastertium -- Nasty, and Cereal) and their individual foibles, Princess' love of chocolate, and more about Wally. After two hours of roundabout, Mrs. Stevens nailed me with a series of questions about Trish and Lori that were, I guess, more than anything a way to get me to think about them. She was a lot cannier than she acted. A libertine Socrates.

After walking Mrs. Johnston for a few hours and taking her back home, I wandered around town. I was staying at the Johnston's for a week, to Trish's delight. I told Trish, after dinner, she could join me tonight in the guest room but she'd still have to bear with a major disappointment.

She was probably there now wondering where the hell I was. I couldn't do much about that.

I'd looked for Tracie in school and every time I saw a girl from the back with hair like hers my heart skipped a beat. I had two things from Friday. The kiss in the morning and the letter that night. Which should I trust more? I believed both and was caught in a paradox; my mind was going in circles.

I ended up at Lori's house. Her light was out but she'd said to wake her so I did. I expect I woke everyone in the house but only

her light came on. There were no curtains, she stood at her window and looked down at me. She was naked, at least what I could see, and familiar.

She was down in a moment in a flannel shirt and jeans.

"Want to go for a walk?" I asked.

"Sure." She held out her hand which was cool to the touch.

"You weren't in school today."

"You looked!" She gripped my hand. "No, I didn't want to see Frank. Maybe tomorrow."

"You're going to the game Friday?"

"You heard. Would you," she stopped, tried again. "Would you?" She let go of my hand. "Follow me."

She cut through some yards, went down a slope and into the woods by the river. The clear spring night was lit by a full moon. It was really light under the bare trees but silvery and cool with shadows everywhere.

"It's around here somewhere." She took my hand and led me. The trees were all young saplings. The ground was littered with old plastic and debris from flooding. We were in a flat area with trees as far as I could see. I knew the houses weren't that distant; we hadn't walked long. And I knew the river was close but I couldn't hear it.

"Here it is." She drew me into a low clubhouse built by kids out of scrap lumber. The walls and roof weren't solid so there was plenty of moonlight inside. We sat across from each other.

"Did you see Frank?" Lori asked me.

"Yes. He waved."

"I can't believe he'd just dump me like that. Under the bleachers, on my hands and knees, and go off with Tracie. I can't believe she did that. I can't believe I ever let him touch me. I did everything he wanted. Or I thought I did. I did everything he asked me to do. He never had any complaints. Or made them to me at least. Maybe to you. Did he say . . ."

"Nothing. Out of the blue. How old are you?"

"Almost sixteen. Maybe he got crazy. Why do you ask?"

"So you're a lot younger than me."

"Not that much younger. What's the problem?"

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"Did you want to fuck?"

"Not really. It's not you." I touched her hand. "It's definitely not you."

"Remember how it was before you met Tracie?"

"I can't forget, Lori."

"Sure you don't want to fuck?"

"I'm sure. I need to get over this weekend first."

"It would be okay to hurt me. I want to be hurt. Pretend I'm Tracie." She stared at me while she said this.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Not hurt hurt. Just fuck me hard up the ass. I'll be your bitch."

"That's not going to fix anything, Lori."

"What's wrong can't be fixed. Not at all."

"I don't want to make it any worse."

"You won't make it any worse. God I hate myself. I'm such a fool. I thought Frank really liked me. You know?"

"He really liked you."

"He has a strange way of showing it. That's a line from somewhere. I'm talking about Frank and I should just act like he was dead or gone or something. You're here with me, you like me, I don't know why, and I'm boring you to tears. I'm so stupid." She hit her leg. "Stupid."

"Look, Lori. Frank isn't worth it."

"But Tracie is. You think everything will be different tomorrow but it won't be."

"I think I'll be able to see Tracie some time this week. We'll talk and I'll know what's going on. I'll be your walker Friday night."

"You will! So maybe you'll be my steady?"

"I need to choose sometime. But I need to talk to Tracie first."

"You still love her, don't you?"

I couldn't say it.

"All last week it was Jas this and Jas that when we talked, Tracie and I, making plans for Friday. It was to be her big splurge before her birthday, something she'd always wanted to do. Jas taught me this or I learned this from Jas." Lori began to unbutton her shirt. "I really need you to fuck me, Jas. I really do. Anything you want, you can do."

I stopped her hand. "I think it'd be a big mistake, Lori."

"I don't." She shook my hand away. "I don't at all. I need someone to wash Frank off of me."

"Friday, Lori. Wait till Friday. Come to school tomorrow if you can, if not, join me at Mrs. Stevens afterwards. We're working on her garden."

"She doesn't have a garden. Her yard is a mess."

"Yes, I know. But today I learned the cats' names."

"Those are the laziest cats I ever saw. They wouldn't catch a mouse if it came up and bit them." She took off her shirt.

"Lori."

She stretched out on her back alongside me and unfastened her jeans. She worked them down off her hips. I wanted to touch her back when she sat up to pull the jeans off. I wanted to touch her neck.

Lori lay naked on her back. "Jas, just tell me I look okay. You don't have to do anything but I wish you would. I ache for cock. I remember how good Frank felt. It's stupid. I have phantom cock syndrome. You know? Like people who've lost an arm or a leg. I can feel Frank's cock inside me, or rather I can't feel it. Have a ghost of a cock in me. I'm crazy."

I knew how she felt. Looking at her I could feel Tracie, could almost hear Tracie speak. I wanted to touch Lori, pretend she was Tracie. "You're not crazy. I know exactly how you feel. Exactly as you feel." I held up my hand. "This isn't Frank, Lori. And you're not Tracie."

I touched her belly, warm and soft. I spread my fingers and traced my hand across her stomach to her breasts. "Don't shut your eyes, Lori. Look at me." I kneaded her breasts, squeezed the nipples, felt them harden. She felt somewhat like Tracie but wasn't. I knew that. I touched her lips. She kissed my fingers.

I got up onto my knees and bent over her, bracing my body with my other hand as my fingers explored Lori's body. Her skin was so soft, her eyes never left me. I was close enough to hear her breathe and see goosepimpled flesh in a patch of bright moonlight.

I tugged her pubic hair gently and kissed her. Lori held my hand against her damp skin. I leaned away from her, my hand still held by hers. She let me go, said, "You're right. Let's not fuck. Not now. But thank you." She grinned. "And promise me when we do, you'll fuck my ass so hard I'll scream. Promise me that. I want you

on me and I want your cock in me and I want you to really pound me."

"Promise me you'll scream."

"I promise, Jas. I need to get dressed. It's too cold to be like this and not doing you know what."

I made room for her. She put on her shirt first. "I'll put the pants on outside."

"Okay?"

"Better."

"If not me, there'll be someone else. Don't act out of desperation. Take your time."

"Not the first guy to mumble I love you in the middle of a gangbang, hunh?"

"Still choosing yes?"

"Never a doubt."

"Ready to go?"

"In a minute. I feel so domestic in here with you. That's a surprise."

## Chapter Fourteen

I had a lot on my mind, when I got to the Johnston's after school, from earlier talks with Lisa, Lori and Trish. Then Mom said we were going out to eat dinner and I'd meet Tracie and I was glad I hadn't had a lot of time to prepare myself. To prepare myself to do what, I didn't know.

Mom drove and I worried. We went to the same restaurant we'd gone to Sunday night – très chic. I was dressed in school clothes and Mrs. Johnston wore a short pleated skirt and tight sweater. She looked like a 1950s cheerleader. The suit didn't bat an eye when she told him we had two tables and the other member of our party was waiting.

I saw Tracie's blonde hair from the back and I knew it was her and couldn't understand how I'd been fooled so many times. I followed the suit and Mom; they stopped at Tracie's table and I sat across from her. Tracie gave me a very brief smile and turned to watch her mother sit at another table.

Mrs. Johnston sat at a table close enough to hear us if we, or I, got loud, but not close enough to hear us if I remained civilized. I guess she had hope for me. I turned back to Tracie and she was serious and maybe a little mad at me.

"You needed to see me, I understand."

I just stared at Tracie. I thought I was being allowed to see her.

"In spite of what I wrote." She laid the menu down and closed it.

"I'll have what she has," was what I told the waiter.

Tracie always had more class than me and she showed it. I kept my mouth shut, looked over at Mrs. Johnston and she wasn't paying any attention to us.

The waiter took the menus and I tried to figure out what to say.

"I understand three girls have already asked you to be their steady and you don't know yet which it'll be." Tracie brushed her hair over her ear, looked away.

"Your sister Trish, Lori and Lisa. I'm not sure about Trish, she's nice, but . . . Lori is still broken up over Frank and that's all she can talk about. And I can't figure why Lisa is even interested."

"You can't, can you? Just be quiet for a minute." She watched me for a while. I had to look down.

"What part of my letter did you not understand? It's over, Jas. Over. You have your life. I have my life. Once you stop all this foolishness I can come home again. Do you realize that? It's because of you . . ." She tossed the fork. "Let's eat, not make a scene, and part graciously. Can you manage that?"

I nodded.

"Good. Don't look at me."

I looked at Mrs. Johnston who was talking to the waiter. "I can leave," I said. "Why don't you go sit with your mother?"

"Because we have to do this or they'll never . . . Don't you understand anything?"

"No. Not much." I turned back to her, looking down.

The waiter brought our meal after a very long wait. We both drank water. I didn't even know what I was eating. The entrée was tough like cardboard.

I'd never been through anything like this with anyone. And I could never explain what it felt like. That it felt like sinking ever deeper in a pit. No light, no warmth. Nothing, but I cherished the pit and wanted to go deeper.

"I bet you carry the letter around with you, don't you? You have it now. Don't you? That's stupid, Jas. It's over. I'm your past. You have a future."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"Give me the letter. Give it to me." When I didn't move, she kicked me under the table. "Now! Give me the letter, we'll talk for a minute and you can go sit in the car. Where is it?"

I'd never heard Tracie angry with me, not at her brother who could be stupid sometimes. Not at her sister who could be really obnoxious.

Trish had been good to and for me since Saturday. She was funny, she pushed but stopped when I asked her and never overstepped the limits I set. She was a lot smarter than I ever gave her credit for.

I handed Tracie the folded letter, put my billfold back in my pocket. I heard her open the letter, raised my eyes and watched her read it.

"I think I said it pretty clearly."

"I don't believe you."

"Who said you could talk?" She twisted the letter and held the paper to a candle. She laid the burning spiral on her plate and looked up at me when it was mostly ashes. "Now all you have left are memories, Jas, and memories fade."

I saw her smile at me and if I hadn't noticed a twitch in her lip, I would have believed her. "You said you loved me. I have that. I said I loved you. I have that too. You're a part of me, Tracie. As real as the skin you can see, the skin you touched and felt you."

"Don't pretend you're a poet, Jas. You're not."

I turned to look at Mrs. Johnston. She had a glass of wine in her hand. She set it down and returned to her meal. I could see a diner, a man, watching her along with me. He looked as if he couldn't understand her. He didn't know whether or not to feel contempt.

I turned back to Tracie who was stirring the letter's ashes on her plate. She looked up at me. "What do you need, Jas?"

"I need you to release me. I need you to say it's okay for me to see other people."

"This is utterly ridiculous. That's silly, Jas. There's nothing keeping you from doing that."

"Say I can, Tracie. Just say it. I'll leave, go wait outside for your mother to finish and you're done with me."

"Was my sister a good fuck?" She didn't blink.

"We've never . . . I never . . ."

"You expect me to believe that? And Lori last night. You expect me to believe you didn't? What about Lisa following you around like a puppy dog. It's grotesque." She crossed her arms, leaned on her elbows. "Grotesque."

"Tracie, I'm sorry. I'd better go." I pushed the chair back.

"You leave now and we'll have to go through this whole charade again until you get it right."

I put my napkin on the table. "I'll be back in a minute."

I sat across from Mrs. Johnston. "What's going on?"

Mrs. Johnston set her wineglass down, her lips moist. She paused, said, "She loves you. Isn't that obvious?"

I watched Mom eat. She held the knife and fork as if they were surgical implements, used them to carve her meal, separate out bits

which were lifted daintily to her mouth. She watched me, didn't stare, didn't smile.

I got up, my eyes filled with tears, found the men's room and sat in a stall. I didn't know what to do, much less what they wanted me to do. I had no idea how long I sat there, whether Tracie or her mother were still in the restaurant.

I walked into the dining room. Tracie looked at me and her gaze never wavered as I went to our table. I sat and saw desert waiting for me.

"Eat," Tracie said.

I wanted to capture her every movement with my mind, hold it forever. She ignored me.

"My desert's done," she said. "You want my release."

"I don't."

"You want my release, you have it. I'm partial toward my sister but Lori's a friend and what Frank and I did to her is shameful. Maybe you can make it up for me. Lisa? I don't know Lisa that well. Do you like her?" Again that slight quiver of the lip.

I shook my head.

"Tell me about Lisa."

"She's beautiful, funny, a little scary. I've never been part of her group. I'm not sure if we can make anything last."

"She's older than you? It won't last, Jas."

"It does."

"Who do you favor?"

I shrugged, "You?" and grinned.

"Wrong answer, Jas." She threw her napkin on the table. "Guess again."

"I don't know. I don't know what I would have done without Trish these past few days. Lori needs me. I think maybe Lisa and I need each other. We're walkers."

"So you have a choice to make. My blessings on all three of them and on you. I . . ." She stopped and her mouth moved but no words came. She covered her eyes, lowered her face so she talked to the table. "I wish you luck. I hope we can be friends sometime in the future. I hope . . ."

"And I'm supposed to walk away and that's that. Tracie, I . . ."

"I hope you come back after college and make a home."

"If you wait, with you."

She shook her head. "There'll be others for both of us, Jas. What we had doesn't."

"Have."

She shook her head and looked at me. "Doesn't last that long. It's ephemeral. It'll die if nothing feeds it."

"Next year after I'm eighteen. I'll skip college."

"You can't." She shook her head, wiped her eyes. "Just let it die, Jas. Please."

"No."

"Pick Lisa." Tracie looked toward her mother. "I have to leave." she stood.

"I love you." I rose to my feet, caught my chair before it went over.

Tracie left not looking back. Mrs. Johnston stood by me, holding my arm. "Don't follow her. Sit down. Sit." She let me go and I sat heavily in the chair. Mrs. Johnston sat in Tracie's place. "Just a minute and we can leave."

I leaned into my hand, elbow scrunching the tablecloth.

"While we wait you can decide if you want to leash me here or outside."

"Here," I said.

She tossed the leash onto the table. "You watched her take other lovers, she'll have to watch you. Jealousy is a strange creature, Jasper. We can go now."

"I need a minute."

"Take as long as you want."

## Chapter Fifteen

I wasn't a big fan of sports. It was fun going to games and seeing people but I never paid any attention to what was happening on the field or court. After I went steady with Tracie I was too busy walking her mother to find the time to go to a game or dance.

So this was a night off, I wasn't walking Mrs. Johnston. I was having a busman's holiday and was walking Lori and frankly I was bored to tears. Lori was in nine, I was in a car parked in front of nine, and Tracie was three doors down. Jim was somewhere – in twelve with Tracie or in a car like me. I never saw Frank and guessed he was in twelve also, but could be wrong. Mrs. Johnston said he had been a disappointment. I hadn't seen Tracie either, just knew where she was.

I knew Lori had hoped I'd be in the room with her, would join in but I couldn't. A long, involved explanation was possible but not really necessary. I couldn't.

Lori and I had dinner together while the game was on and talked. She didn't want to talk about Frank but had to and that had made her uncomfortable. I couldn't talk about Tracie and there really wasn't much else on my mind. Some dinner.

The car had a crap radio, my coffee was long gone and I wished I'd brought a book but I had trouble reading anything at the moment so didn't.

Only about a quarter of the team was over eighteen so Lori was having the time of her life. I wasn't going to think about Tracie. Not because she shouldn't but because I couldn't – not with her.

Jim said everything would end at two a.m. I wished him luck.

I got out of the car and walked to the coke machines. It had rained earlier and turned cooler, typical spring weather. I got a Pepsi, grabbed a cube of ice from the freezer and went back to the car. When I smashed the ice cube against the pavement fragments skittered everywhere.

The motel wasn't that popular, about ten or so cars; I thought the Buick was like us, just using the bed for a few hours. We weren't near the highway and it was quiet. Street sounds but not the heavy truck drone. It was too cold for insects to be out and the motel parking lot looked barren.

Watching the motel room door from inside a car was new for me. I never had that much distance from Barbie. I might be in another room, I was often much closer. It was strange how everyone was different and we were all the same. Tracie was never like her mother but I had deja vu moments while we were making love. Not that I'd done it before; that this was something I'd seen Barbie and someone do. Just like this.

The Pepsi was too cold. It hurt to drink it.

A car pulled in next to mine and parked. I slumped a little in the seat feeling weird. I shouldn't be in the parking lot, I should be in a room. I took a drink, watching the door to nine and heard two car doors slam. The car backed out and someone knocked on the passenger window of my car. I flipped the lock.

"Mom said you might be bored," Trish said. She sat next to me; Lisa sat in the back, leaned in the space between the seats. Lisa held out her hand, I passed her the can.

"What if I was inside?" I asked as Lisa handed me the can. "What would you have done then?" I passed the can to Trish.

"The more the merrier," Trish said.

"How much of this was your mother's idea?"

"About half." Trish pushed the can into my hand. "We can have the room all to ourselves once they've left."

"We?"

"Another," Lisa said.

I put the can in her hand. "You two can have the rest. We?"

"You and me, duh." Trish made a face.

"Or you and me," Lisa said. "Want any more?" she asked Trish. "Or you and Lori. We."

"I'm not moving fast enough, am I?"

"It's cold in here," Lisa said.

"I'm willing to wait," Trish said. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"Lori's in nine." I turned off the radio. "Is that okay? No music?"

"Anything to kill the mood for love." Lisa leaned on my seat back. "Think we can go somewhere to get something to eat? I'm hungry."

"There's a candy machine down there." I pointed.

"Real food, Jasper. Not corn sucrose laden calorie bombs."

"I have to stay here and watch."

"You're watching a door?" Trish said.

"You know what I'm doing."

"I'm cold." Lisa put her hand on my cheek. "See?" She didn't feel cold to me.

"So I'm to choose tonight. One way or the other. Come hell or high water."

"That was mother's plan, yes. If you were normal it'd be easy. We'd go in nine where you'd be with Lori and the rest of the team. We'd join in. Whoever you woke up with in the morning would be it."

Lisa gave snort. "She thought I'd go in there, where there's a bunch of flaming male heterosexuals. Wiggling their thingies and squealing in high-pitched voices. En flagrant and just fling myself into the frolic. I'm either joining you two up front or you two are joining me back here. It's cozier back here."

"Candy bars are down there?" Trish asked.

"Down there."

"I need some money." She held out her hand. "Go ahead and join her in back."

"Trish!" Lisa said. "Can you get me one too?"

"You want anything, Jas?" Trish asked from the open door.

"I'm okay."

"You joining me, Jas?" Lisa asked.

"Is it safe? No funny stuff."

"We'll keep our trousers on."

I joined her. She took my hand and held in her lap, not saying anything, facing the door to nine. When Trish came back we scooted over so Trish could sit on my other side. She passed a candy bar to Lisa.

"This is much warmer," Lisa said.

"Nice," Trish said. "I wonder what my mother was thinking?"

"Who knows? What kind of candy bar did you get?"

"Reese's."

"Can I have one? I'll trade you."

"Half and half? Sure." They passed candy across me. "What time is it?" Trish asked.

"Hell if I know. I don't have a watch. Next time you get candy, get Reese's for me too."

I checked my watch. "It's twelve thirty."

"We have a while, then, don't we?" Trish crumpled up the wrapper and tossed it into the front seat.

"Your mother said she'd pick us up at ten. Does the room have cable?" Lisa poked me. "Hey, you."

"I don't know. I don't think that was a consideration."

"Waterbed?"

I laughed. "No waterbed or porn movies."

"Shoot." Lisa leaned forward and said to Trish, "What will we do?"

"I forgot my three-sided coin so we can't toss for him. Watch TV and make nuisance calls?"

"He hasn't kissed me yet. He kiss you?"

"Not yet. He's shy." Trish whispered, "He reminds me sometimes of my grandmother's dog, Princess." Her voice returned to normal. "You ever visit her?"

Lisa shook her head, took my hand and held it in her lap. "So Lori's the only one who's actually gone all the way with him?"

"Of the three of us, yes. There's my sister . . ."

"Let's not talk about Tracie, okay," I said.

"Touchy subject," Trish said. "Nine and a half hours."

"Is this your car?" Lisa asked.

"The coach's," I said.

"So we can't go anywhere, can we?"

"We can walk," Trish said. "You have a quarter, Jas?"

I dug the change out of my pocket and passed her a quarter.

Trish tossed it in the air, caught it and slapped it against the back of her hand. "Your call, Lisa."

"Heads."

Trish looked at the coin, grinned, tossed it and caught it. "Your call."

"Heads again."

Trish uncovered the coin, giggled, looked up at me and made another toss. "Call again."

"Tails."

"You would." Trish checked the coin, laughed and said to me in her theatrical voice, "We're going to have a very interesting evening, you and I."

"I need to go to the bathroom."

"Jas, if you go in there, we're following you," Lisa said.

"All the stops will be out. Full speed ahead," Trish said.

"I can hold it a while longer."

Trish took my other hand. "We have a proposition to make you. We need to talk to Lori first, though. Think you can hold it?"

"Look, all I want to do is go back home."

"My home, Lisa," Trish said.

"And go to bed."

"With me." Trish wiggled and squealed.

"And sleep."

"That's all he does. Sleep and snore."

Lisa jerked my hand. "Look at me." I turned to her. "We're stuck, you, Lori, Trish and me. Until ten." To Trish, "Is your mom prompt?"

"Sometimes."

"Oh. Maybe to three. Everyone is kind of hoping."

"Everyone includes us three, not you, you're not included," Trish said to me.

"Hoping that everything will be resolved when the sun rises. Little do they know."

"They don't know a thing, do they, Lisa?"

"I don't think so. Jasper, you need to play along with us a little, relax, not fight it, and no one is in a rush to fuck you. Okay?"

"I am," Trish said gleefully.

"I am a little too which is most curious. Anyway. Just relax."

"Struggling will get you nowhere, Jas," Trish said.

Lisa squeezed my hand, touched my cheek with her free hand, her fingers slid across my cheek into my hair and pulled me to her. We kissed and it was . . . it was . . .

"Your turn," Lisa said. Her eyes held mine. "Relax, Jasper."

Trish pulled me to her; Lisa let go of my hand. Trish asked, "Is this okay, Jas?"

I realized Trish was a lot older than I thought she was. She waited, watching me. "I don't want to have sex with anyone yet. Okay?"

"We're just kissing, Jas. Honest."

I nodded and didn't shut my eyes.

## Chapter Sixteen

I still wasn't quite used to the idea yet and having Trish sit across from me at lunch in the high school cafeteria was unsettling.

Tracie sat across the room with her back to me, blonde hair in the unmistakable cut. She was sitting at a seniors table, with people I didn't know that well.

When we'd been together the town's geography had fit our own desires; the school became part of the constellation that surrounded us. Sometimes we had sat together in the cafeteria, alone or with Frank and Lori. Being with Frank and Lori back then was like being with good friends who shared everything, but only with their lovers. Tracie and I had each other, Frank and Lori had each other and we were comfortable with that, not clamoring for equality or identity. We hardly talked.

Tracie had new friends, or old friends recognized. I had new friends too.

"It's spooky, Jas, watching you stare at her like that," Lisa said.

I turned to Lisa who was sitting next to me. Lori was sitting next to Trish.

"It's okay," I said.

Trish swiveled in her seat to see what I'd been looking at. "Oh." She faced Lisa. "It's okay. Like Jas said."

"It's okay," Lori said. "Anybody see Frank?"

"Over there," I said.

Lori looked over her shoulder. Frank was with a group of guys. She said to Lisa. "It's okay."

Lisa probed her meal with her fork. "I'm not sure it's edible."

"It isn't," Trish said. "But that's okay."

"Okay," Lisa said. She put down her fork. "You know I had hopes for better things."

"Nothing can make cafeteria food better, Lisa. You know that."

"But one can hope." Lisa dug into my jello with her spoon.

"Hey!" I said. I tried to beat her away with my fork.

"He talks." Lisa grinned at me, gave me a wink.

"You know," Lori said. "I don't want to be in here. Not today. Maybe tomorrow."

"Okay," I said. "Elsewhere?"

"Jas is one of those commanding personality types." Lisa snatched more jello.

"I'm not done eating." Trish used her spoon to grab a scoop of my jello.

"Me either," Lori said, joining them.

"I thought you didn't want to be here." All three of them were making fast work of my meal.

"You're here, I'm here," Lisa said. "Ditto," Lori and Trish said.

"Let's go." I stood. I reached for my tray and saw Tracie looking at me, one of her friends pointing at us. I lifted my tray, not taking my eyes from Tracie.

"Jas," Lisa said. "Jas." She pushed my tray to the table. "Look at me."

I let go of my tray; Lisa stood next to me.

"That's right, Jas." She smiled. She took my arm and held me as we kissed.

People were laughing. I heard some whistles.

Everybody kisses differently. Lisa's kisses demanded attention and she got it.

We broke and I dropped my eyes to the left. The tray was gone.

"Jas, look at me."

I raised my eyes and she said, "Don't worry about it. Trish is taking care of your tray. You have more important things to do right now. Pay attention."

We kissed again. The cafeteria quieted; maybe it was just me.

We broke. "Ready now?" she asked.

I took her hand and we followed Trish and Lori out.

Friday night kind of resolved things and made everything a thousand times more complicated. We were still working stuff out and Lori's and my fixations on our former steadies was, as the British would put it, a spanner in the works. A spanner is what we call a wrench.

The wrench wasn't a big one, we weren't paralyzed, and if Lori and I had been able to physically remove ourselves from our fixations the wrench would have been barely noticed.

Trish led us to Tracie's and my former spot behind the school, the place where we'd killed the grass.

No one was boss; that was one of the things we decided early on. They sort of deferred to me but I think they did it to make me feel good, feel more important. They could have done without me. They wouldn't admit it, but it was true.

Lisa sat across from me, Trish on my right, Lori on my left. Lisa was as much a pivot point as I, by reason of experience if nothing else. But of course there was plenty else.

Trish and Lori, too, each of them, us, different, together having a sort of balance.

That was our hope, at least. An equality.

I couldn't be all their lovers; there just wasn't enough of me. Or enough time. I was still walking Mrs. Johnston.

"My house after school?" Trish asked.

I wasn't so sure about that. Tracie was back home now that I seemed to be on the point of choosing. Lisa watched me, a smile on her lips. She cocked an eyebrow.

"You know," Lori said. We all turned to her. She was flustered for a moment. "I'd like to go to Connie's house."

"Me too," Trish said.

"Lisa and Jas can have some time together." Lori looked at me. "Alone."

"Maybe meet together there at five," I said.

"Who's Connie?" Lisa asked.

"My grandmom," Trish said. "She's a little crazy, but it's fun crazy. She's old Family. Lori and I go there."

"We're her sluts." Lori liked the word. The first real smile from her I'd seen today.

"I walk Mrs. Johnston at seven."

"You both can come over while Jas is busy," Trish said.

Lisa looked at me.

I asked, "Were you thinking of one of those interminable games of Scrabble?"

"Hey, I like Scrabble," Lisa said.

"Or something else?"

Trish kicked the ground with her heel, raised her face and grinned. "Something else?"

"Sex and Scrabble. Count me in," Lisa said.

"Me too for the sex part," Lori said. "Do we . . ."

"Improvise my dear." Lisa turned to me. "What are you thinking about when you look at Tracie like that?"

I was probably blushing. "I'm just looking at her. Not thinking of anything in particular."

"Not undressing her?"

I shook my head. "I . . ."

"Flinging her naked across a table and screwing her in the cafeteria, in front of all of us."

I shook my head. "Just looking."

"Where do you fuck her first, Jas?"

"I'm just looking. Okay?"

"It doesn't look like just looking. Your face does something."

"My dog looks like that when he watches TV," Lori said.

We turned to her. "No way," Lisa said.

Lori shrugged, grinned. She looked at us and nodded.

"You, my dear," Lisa said, laughing, "are in for special attention this evening."

"From me, too." Trish said to me, "Like a dog watching TV."

"I can't help it. I still love her. I." I gave a shrug. "You know? I still love her."

"We know, Jas," Lisa said

"I don't know how I feel about Frank. I want to kill him. I want his cock up my ass so bad I can feel it sometimes." Lori dropped her eyes. "It's not even good TV."

Lisa checked her watch. "Not enough time before the bell for our resident cocksman to help the poor girl out. It's a shame."

Lori grinned at me. "Maybe later."

I was thinking about something and Trish elbowed me.

"We're talking about you," she said.

"I was thinking of your kiss," I looked to Lisa. "In there."

She nodded, took Lori's hand and used a finger to trace along Lori's fingers.

"Everyone saw us and at first there was a lot of noise. Then it was quiet. Wasn't it?"

Lisa shrugged, focused her attention on Lori's hand.

"Wasn't it?" I asked Trish.

"Here," she said. She held out her hand, took mine. She did the same thing to me Lisa was doing to Lori. "It got quiet when my sister left."

"Oh." I hadn't noticed.

"She was mad about something I think."

"Another perfectly good lesbian," Lisa said not looking at us, "gone down the tubes. Twisted by perversion and the lust for a man's, not just any man's--"

"Unlike me," Trish said and winked.

"Hand grabbing my cunt and giving a squeeze for old time's sake."

"Sounds nice," Lori said softly.

"Such lust is unnatural," Lisa said. "Spoken of only in hushed tones late at night. Boy is my rep ruined."

The bell rang.

"Time for class," Lisa said. "I get him after school?"

"Connie's at five," Trish said. She gave my ass a squeeze after we'd all stood. "We need to work out a schedule or something so we all," she grinned at me, "get some."

"Tonight, after Scrabble," Lisa said.

"After Scrabble?" Lori said. "Could we just forget the Scrabble?"

## Chapter Seventeen

Lisa had never been to Mrs. Stevens' and Mrs. Stevens was on her best behavior, which included knowing my name. I had to say I was a little disappointed.

Lori and Trish were already there. Lori had cut school after lunch and I think Trish might have also. The three of them were in the kitchen making fudge. Mrs. Stevens left Lori and Trish to finish and sat down with us in the living room. Princess limply wagged his tail a few times and one of the cats, Nasty, black with a white nose, slept on the back of the couch.

"I understand you're going to choose your steady today, Jason."

"Jasper," I said. Lisa giggled in the chair across from me. "I think we have it worked out."

"We?" As if Mrs. Stevens didn't already know.

"You'll tell whoever?"

"Tell who what?" She smiled at me. "I think the ground is almost dry enough to start digging in the garden."

"I'm going to be pretty busy, Mrs. Stevens."

She waved her hand while turning to Lisa. "I have an idea how he met the other girls, I didn't think Jay . . ."

"Jasper," I said.

"Stop interrupting. Jasper had it in him. But then the scrawny ones are often surprising in their," she paused, gave a grin, "eagerness, while the big ones just want to crush you and snore. Wally wasn't huge."

"Except."

Mrs. Stevens glared at me. "Thank you. Except in a certain way. This boy is no match in that department though few were then or are now."

Lori and Trish came in. "It's in the oven," Lori said. Trish sat next to her grandmother; Lori sat on the floor next to my chair.

"Well," Trish said, flapping her arms.

"Well to you too," Mrs. Stevens said to her. "You have the deportment of a three-year-old."

"It's Jas' influence."

"Dear, jazz then or rock and roll now never lived up to their reputations of turning respectable adolescents into drooling idiots."

"Punk," Lisa said. "Rock and roll is acceptable now. Classic rock schmaltz on the radio 24/7. Part of the fascist conspiracy."

"Funny. I thought the Nazis wouldn't like rock and roll. Don't fidget dear." Mrs. Stevens put her hand on Trish's knee.

"I want to hear what Jas has to say."

Mrs. Stevens leaned close to her and said loudly, "You need to learn how to spread your affections more broadly. I think I can smell the fudge now. Princess? Smell the fudge?"

All Princess wanted to do was sleep. Nasty looked at me, laid his head back down. Lori slowly stroked my calf. Lisa winked at me and returned her attention to Trish and her grandmother.

Everyone was working at keeping this light. I'd been listless, had a tendency to drift off, like now, or walk in circles. Mom said I had to make up my mind and soon or I'd be walking her all hours day and night. She sat me down after school last week and said, "You need to do something, Jasper. I'm ready to retire and you'll be my last walker. If I'm not allowed to retire in grace I'll walk you into the ground. I mean it. We're all waiting, Tracie included."

But it wasn't easy to turn away. No easier than it had been for Tracie as I was learning. Would we ever be back together again? I couldn't tell from one moment to the next. It seemed crazy to accept such intimacy as we'd had with another. Not just sex, the intimacy of sharing my life and theirs. I never would decide yes when I was eighteen, was not sure like Trish or Lori thought they were. And not even on the fence like Lisa sometimes thought she was. "I can't imagine you ever retiring, Mrs. Johnston."

"Barbara." She smiled. "You're right. There will be other walkers, at least until Trish turns eighteen, perhaps until Mike does. But I'm ready to lead a less active role. Marge needs help, she's as old as my mother and sometimes it's too much for her."

"Jas," Lisa said. She stood by me; we were alone in the living room. "They're taking the fudge out of the oven. Are you all right?"

"I'm okay."

"Already having second thoughts?"

"Of course I'm having second thoughts." I tried to say it so she'd know I wasn't serious.

"Once it's cool, we can eat the fudge with or without ice cream," Mrs. Stevens said coming into the room. "I hated how Wally would nod off like you, Jasper." She sat on the couch next to Princess who wagged his tail. "Though Wally nodded off after wild sex. Not in the mist of a tea. What's he drinking?"

"Lisa's her name," I said. "The same tea as usual."

"Jerry wants that licorice shit again," Mrs. Stevens yelled. Lisa pulled a chair next to mine.

Trish brought a cup to Mrs. Stevens, went back into the kitchen.

"What'd you do to her? She's almost civilized."

"Nothing."

"Whatever it was, as if I can't guess, it ruined her. I want my widdle girl back."

"Grandmother." Trish sat on the couch; Lori handed Lisa and me cups and went back into the kitchen.

"Same as me?" I asked Lisa.

"The Licorice shit? Yes. It smells absolutely revolting."

"Like Mountain Dew."

"I don't know how anyone can drink something the same color as piss."

"Piss isn't that bad," Lori said sitting in Lisa's old seat.

"What can I say?" Mrs. Stevens settled on the couch. Princess gave a soft moan and went back to sleep.

"Speechless, grandmother?"

"No. I was just remembering that it wasn't until I was a little older when I knew what piss tasted like. Now fudge . . ."

Trish had this look on her face. I said, "She was speaking metaphorically, Mrs. Stevens."

"Still." Mrs. Stevens took a sip. "Are we all drinking this licorice shit?"

"Isn't it funny," I said, "how the conversation here develops into certain subjects? I'm ready to make my announcement." Trish jumped up. "I can do without a cheerleading section."

Trish sat down and crossed her arms across her chest and grinned. "Well?"

"Lisa and I are going steady." Lori and Trish clapped and hooted.

"Kiss. Kiss. Kiss." Trish said.

"And."

"You have to kiss first." Trish pointed. "Or else it's not official."

"It takes more than kiss to make it official, dear," Mrs. Stevens said. "At least it did in my day."

"When men were men and women were women," Lori said.

"That's right. When men were men and women were women."

"It's not like that anymore, Grandmother. Lisa can be a woman or a man."

"I know. It gets confusing." Mrs. Stevens slowly shook her head. She had a smile on her face and I think she was working out the possible permutations.

"And Trish is also going to be my steady," I said.

"I'll walk Trish," Lisa said. She took my hand, held it to her lips and kissed it. "Lori will be my steady."

"And I'll walk Lori," I said.

"And mother."

"And Mrs. Johnston."

"Do you think the fudge is cool enough?" Mrs. Stevens said.

"I'll check in a minute," Lori said. "Tell the rest, Jas."

"When Lisa turns eighteen, Trish and Lori will be my steadies. If I last long enough. I'll be too busy to walk Mrs. Johnston."

"You'll be too tired to hold your head up in school." Trish came over and kissed me. "Thank you." She kissed Lisa and sat between us.

"Such shenanigans." Mrs. Stevens put her hand over her eyes. "Well I never. Go check the fudge."

Trish came back into the room, gave Princess a pet. "The fudge is ready."

"I'll help her," Lisa said.

"What's her name again?" Mrs. Stevens asked.

"Lisa," Lori and I said.

Mrs. Stevens sat on the couch. "You'll still come and visit me?"

"Of course we will," Lori said.

"You, too?"

I nodded.

"And you'll take good care of my two sluts?"

I nodded again.

"I'll pass it along. Can I watch? After we have our fudge?"

"I need to go soon to walk Mrs. Johnston."

"Barbara," Mrs. Stevens said. "I don't care if you're here. I want to watch the new girl with my two." She grinned.

"You get first taste, Grandmother." Trish brought a plate in.

We watched Mrs. Stevens as she savored a bite. She smiled. "It's good. Not great, because Mr. Whatshisname came and in and we rushed. But good."

Lisa sat next to me and took my hand.

## Chapter Eighteen

I heard a giggle and felt the bed move. My eyes were open and it was still dark. "What time is it?"

"Time to get up," Trish said.

They moved on the bed next to us, the giggling had stopped. Trish held my arm across her breasts. "I'm too tired to move," I said. Last night had been one of those that seemed to go on forever. Walking Mrs. Johnston was never the same twice in a row. Sometimes it was quick and fun, usually because I'd get to meet someone interesting or there'd be a party and I'd meet someone I knew who, like me, couldn't participate because they were too young. "What time is it?"

"Seven."

I groaned. Three hours of sleep -- I was still a growing boy. I fell back asleep.

When I woke the second time it was actually lighter. The bed was almost empty; Lori snored next to me.

"You two better get up," Trish said, toweling her hair. "The bathroom is free." She walked across the room, turned on the lamp by the bed and looked down at us. "You both are pathetic."

"I feel pathetic."

"My heart bleeds for you. Wake up Lori. Lisa has breakfast ready." Trish tossed the towel on the bed and put on a pair of underwear.

My room had been invaded by all their things, clothes and stuff, and as near as I could tell it all was pretty much communal. I think the last time I'd seen those underwear Lori wore them last week. The nice thing was I didn't have to worry about stuff like cleaning house, washing dishes and clothes. They did almost everything.

"Get Lori up." Trish left the room.

"Lori," I said. "Time to get up." I watched her face while leaning on my elbow. I touched her cheek and when her eyes opened, after that bit of animal fear was gone, kissed her.

Lori wasn't one to stay still. She wrapped herself around me while we kissed, body against mine, arm and leg over me.

"Breakfast is ready," Lisa shouted. Lori and I kissed again. I don't know why they did this to me since they knew I hated to leave the bed

with a hardon. For some reason I always got to use the bathroom last. "There's no time, Lori."

It was never easy to argue with Lori. I was in her and trying to make it as quick as possible when Lisa walked in the room.

"Isn't that just like a man? Always having his cock up someone's cunt. Like we don't have anything better to do."

"I'm not complaining," Lori said. Her hands pressed on my ass. I went faster.

"Seven twenty-seven and counting." Lisa gave my rear a swat and went to the dresser where she finished dressing. She took the longest; it was because of her gear as she called it. Chrome pins, chains and stuff she arranged as part of her costume.

Trish stood in the doorway. "Are they at it again? You two. Breakfast is getting cold." She asked Lisa. "Do I need these or not?"

Trish usually didn't wear panties. It was a fashion statement or something. Next she had to decide whether to wear a dress or jeans. She took almost as long as Lisa to get dressed.

I gave myself three seconds to catch my breath, kissed Lori and we went off to shower together. You conserved water that way.

Lisa knocked on the bathroom door. "Seven thirty-five."

There was never enough time in the mornings, not even on weekends. I stopped playing with Lori's soapy breasts and we rinsed off.

Breakfast was eggs and toast. The eggs were scrambled and didn't taste half bad almost cold. Lori was dressing; sometimes she did without breakfast even though we nagged her.

I finished dressing and grabbed my bookbag as Trish waited impatiently for me. Lisa and Lori had already left.

Dad was over at Dawn's which made things awfully convenient for us. My bedroom wasn't big enough but hardly anyone complained. Lori's and Trish's parents put up with this because of who Lori and Trish were, and looked to become. And also because of who Lisa and I were -- walkers. Not many people were thrilled with the arrangement, except for Mrs. Stevens. Mrs. Johnston didn't seem to mind except she missed seeing her daughter more. I think she was glad to not have the job of waking Trish up in the mornings.

Trish dragged me down the steps. Lisa and Lori were on the street, began walking when they saw us.

We almost never were late for school and since I hadn't gotten home until close to four I couldn't see how anyone would have any basis for complaint.

"Hold still," Trish said. She straightened my collar. She got that look on her face, pushed me against the building and we kissed.

The kiss didn't do anything to that look.

"Say you love me."

"I love you. I love Lisa and Lori too."

"Say you love me." Her hands held the small of my back.

"I love you." It was true.

The look blossomed, included every inch of her face, not just her eyes.

The school bus passed us. I don't know if they were cheering us or Lori and Lisa a few feet away.

She let go of me.

"Three minutes," Lisa shouted.

Lisa's timekeeping was a joke. We took her seriously, as seriously as she expected us to. Each of us gave benefits to the group. Among Lisa's were her determination to be on time and ability to wake up early in the morning. Lori's were a joyfulness at doing things that no one else enjoyed, like washing dishes. Trish loved to cook. I don't know what I offered; it must have been something useful because they kept me.

Some readers will say, because of your cock, but it wasn't that. Sex was an important part of our lives but we all did it with one another and they could have just as well done without me. Maybe what I offered, and Lisa too, was something I'd learned as a walker. Whatever it was I couldn't put my finger on it and it didn't seem to matter.

Trish held my hand for the last block to school. Besides our abilities in daily life, each offered something less tangible. Trish had a fierceness, Lori a lushness and Lisa a playfulness. Again I don't know what I offered; probably it wasn't at all what I thought it was and maybe what I was trying to do was actually annoying at best. If we ever had a minute I would ask them.

In front of the school, Lori was trying not to see Frank. She was trying less hard as time passed. Lisa had her art friends, after hugs she left us.

Mr. Johnston dropped Tracie off and went to park his car. I had him for English in a couple of hours.

Tracie looked good but was probably as tired as I was. She stood on the sidewalk and seemed a little lost.

Being Family in high school was probably harder than being a walker. She wasn't expected to assume full responsibilities, no one was until they were nineteen or twenty. Tracie's shift in status and because of her reaching eighteen required a realignment. New friends, new fatigue, new everything. Graduation was still a month away for her and was assured, even if she skipped the next four weeks.

She saw me, and Trish and Lori standing next to me. I couldn't tell what she was thinking; I was confused myself.

"I'm going to say hi to my sister," Trish said. She let go of my hand and left us.

"We'd better go," Lori said.

"Okay." I turned from Tracie and let Lori take my hand.

I wondered what Tracie thought and wondering saw us for a moment from outside, Trish, Lori and me. We were awfully young and didn't know what we were doing or the full implications.

Back in myself I thought about still loving Tracie but needing to stay away. That was hard. I yearned to be with her, would give up everything to be with her which wasn't true. I couldn't and wouldn't. I loved Trish and Lori and Lisa and they were who I had now and who sheltered me. Like Tracie had.

"Walk me after school, Jas?" Lori asked.

I nodded as the bell rung.

"Lisa and Trish will be there too."

"Okay."

"It'll be Trish's first time."

I hadn't known that. Trish was someone whose immaturity was racing to catch up with their agelessness.

"Don't rush off," Trish said next to us. "Did you ask him?"

"About this afternoon?" Trish held my arm; Lori held my other hand. "Yes."

"And you will? Great. Now we can ask Lisa." Trish gave my arm a squeeze.

"What are you two up to?"

Lori squeezed my hand, let go. "See you at lunch."

As she left us I asked again, "What are you two up to?"

"Gotta go, Jas. Thanks and love you." She left me wondering again what had I gotten myself into.

## Chapter Nineteen

Monday night and I was walking Barbie while Lisa and the others went out. I still didn't know what to call us, what to call Lisa and the others. The girls? L, L and T? Our gang? And the four of us – The Quartet? That didn't sound right. And when Lisa left us, did that mean we'd have to add another? None of us was sure. We were slowly feeling our way.

Nothing's ever simple. Nothing. Except things were falling into place for us. Dad's and my apartment was home. Dad was staying at Dawn's using the apartment for lunch to eat, if he wasn't over at Larry's, and to store clothes and stuff (like mom's things he still kept), so we didn't see him often. It would be a little different in the summer.

Barbie and I had done poker night at 23 Maple, a birthday party and a string of oners. I'd been working on a letter for Tracie all day and thought it was just about done. Trish said she'd pass it along, after reading it of course, which was okay. We'd all talked about it for the past two weeks.

Oners were more fun for me than the usual event. That's a generalization and I could immediately think about exceptions, like laundromat guy. And some events were fun, like the birthday party earlier tonight. But generally the average oner isn't going to totally ignore me or, just the opposite, involve me too much with what was happening. It's best I'm involved as little as possible. I'm the walker, not the gofer, prop boy or camera person.

The letter was this:

"Dear Tracie,

"I thought I'd try to tell you what's happened. I have two steadies and I walk two women. I walk your mother full time and Lori in my spare time. Lisa is my main steady. Trish is my backup steady which sounds weird (how typically Jas you must be thinking), but Lisa, like you, is older than me. We'll be separated by months, not a year, and during the interval Trish and Lori will be my steadies.

"It's goofy as hell and makes me sound like a sex maniac but you already know how much time I have available since I'm a walker.

"What can I say except it's great to have them there at home when I get in late at night. And it's great to know that Trish and Lori are getting the support they need.

"This is more formal than I wanted. But it's hard to talk about seeing you at school and not saying a word to you. But I know I wouldn't be able to stop with just a word. When Lisa passes over to the other side, she's promised me she'll look you up. Which sounds strange. We all go to the same school, live in the same town, and it's hard to cross that chasm of our ages.

"Lisa will be waiting for me as I will be waiting for Trish and Lori. And I hope you'll be waiting for Lisa. And me.

"Lisa? She was Donald's walker, has an irreverent and ready quip for every situation, is smart and beautiful, and is very much in love with Trish and Lori. Maybe Trish a little more. She's also in love with me and I her.

"What do I love about her?

"I love how her body, words and actions evoke memories of you.

"I'm all tangled up, Tracie. Still. Love is not ephemeral. It lasts. How long it lasts, I don't know. As long as your father's for Donald? I hope so. I hope longer.

"Trish says you're living at home until school ends and then you plan to take a small house near your grandmother's. Of course you know already where Trish is and where I am.

"I notice your light on sometimes when your mother and I return late at night.

"This is getting confused and I'm not sure writing more will add sense to it. So I'm going to end now.

"It doesn't demean Lisa to say I love her because she reminds me of you. Loving you has made it easier to love others. And I hope you find the same is true. That's scary to write because what I want you to say is that you'll love me and wait for me forever.

"But it doesn't matter, does it? Love isn't ephemeral.

"Jas.

"PS Trish and several others will be reading this. Partly to know my mind better, partly to help keep me from making an ass of myself. If you see this, then realize it isn't just from me. That the I is a group. We love you."

I folded the letter and put it in the envelope. Tracie was used to my scrawl. The paper wasn't fancy, the pen a Bic. The envelope wasn't even sealed with a kiss.

What I couldn't tell Tracie was how indescribably lucky I was to fall into a crowded bed at night. To wake up in the morning to utter

craziness. If I thought what we have would survive for long past my eighteenth birthday, I'd do everything I could to preserve it. But I'm not sure. Lisa will be waiting for me. That helps.

Barbie came into the living room and sat next to me. I pushed my glass of water toward her and she took a drink. She was getting that look, that glow.

I checked the itinerary and our next stop was a party near Langston and Fairfield, downtown. I leashed Barbie and we left.

It was warmer. Barbie had replaced her red robe with a white man's shirt, sleeves unbuttoned and loosely rolled, the buttons in front fastened or not according to her whim. She still wore high heels, I think purely for aesthetic reasons, but wasn't entirely sure about that. She never wore sneakers, my choice of footwear.

We could hear the party from the street. It wasn't that loud; the music was turned up a little and there were voices. Barbie led up the steps and waited while I knocked.

I unleashed Barbie as soon as we were in. She was taken by the hostess to the bedroom. I knew everyone, by face at least, so I relaxed on the couch.

People were polite but I wasn't part of the party -- there were no people my age -- more an observer. An anthropologist whose field notes were kept in his head. I could see the bedroom from my seat and I saw the hostess come out with Tracie. Tracie wore jeans and a t-shirt. She saw me, went into another room, the kitchen, and came out with a glass in her hand. She talked with people standing by the hall, then came over to the couch. "Could I?" she asked the man next to me. He got up, not saying a word. She sat next to me, took a drink of what looked like juice. "Fancy meeting you here, Jas."

"Is this okay?"

"Is this okay with you?"

I nodded.

She took a drink. "I still haven't found a good walker."

I didn't know what to say.

"It's not a real problem yet." She looked away from me.

"Do you want suggestions?"

She nodded, took a drink, still looking away.

"There's Lisa. She walked Donald. There's Lori."

"You're busy."

"I have a letter for you."

She nodded.

"But Trish needs to see it first."

She set the glass on the table. At that moment Barbie gave a yell. Tracie froze, said, "I've never heard her like that."

"Do you have someone to take you home?"

"I'm okay. It's just strange. You couldn't be my walker, could you?"

"It's best if you're not emotionally attached."

"You do Lori."

"You know about Lori?"

"I know about Lori, Trish and Lisa and your apartment where you all stay. You've become a scandal, except to grandmother. She wants to join the melange."

I heard words like "scandal" and "melange" and the tone with which "your apartment" was said. "Do you get enough sleep?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I keep pretty much the same hours you do. You know how that is."

"It'll be easier when school is out. Melange is a much better word than quartet which is the best I could come up with. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"I didn't put it in the letter, but you're invited to visit the melange any time you want. You pretty much know what times I'm there and I'm not."

"I know you're busy." She said this as if each succeeding word slowly diminished in vitality.

"Do you want me to be your walker?"

"You can't." A dead tone.

"Look at me," I said.

She turned slowly, left the glass on the table.

"Don't move." I touched her collar. I took the leash out of my pocket, clipped it onto the collar, and laid the leash in her lap. "All you have to do is hand me the leash."

"What about my mother?" Her fingers twisted the mesh ribbon of the leash.

"Lisa will walk her. I'd have to check first. But I think she will. Lori after Lisa. Or Lori could walk you. It's confusing. When I walk your mother we barely talk, usually never. Is that okay?"

Tracie unclipped the leash, handed it to me. "I don't think so."

"Walking you won't change my feelings, Tracie."

She shook her head, picked up her glass. "I'd better go."

"Visit the melange sometime when I'm not there. Ask Lisa. I'll ask Lisa tomorrow if she can."

Tracie's face stiffened.

I wanted to touch her, push her hair behind her ear and touch her cheek. "Give the melange a chance, Tracie. We're flexible."

"Jas, I don't even want to imagine what you're doing much less see where you do it."

"Tracie, I . . ." I shrugged. "I don't know what to say."

"That's okay. I'm leaving."

"Tracie." I rose and touched her arm, jerked my hand back. "Promise me you'll read my letter. Please."

She shrugged. "I should go."

"I love you."

"I know." She turned from me, took a step. She looked like she was about to do something – turn or speak – stopped dead still for a second before she took a step. She walked to the hall, looked sideways at me for a moment, even smiled, and left.

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