

## Tom's Diary

Introduction & March 15th, 2002.

I'm Tom Ferguson; I'd doff my hat and bow, but the gesture is pretty meaningless when you're writing an introduction to people as opposed to actually standing in front of them introducing yourself. Plus, I don't hardly ever wear a hat.

I am sixteen years of age, sixteen and a half, more precisely, when the events I'm about to relate happened. A high school junior, attending North Phoenix High.

I am five ten, very skinny, barely a hundred and thirty pounds. I have short brown hair, what my dad calls a 'business man's cut.' I don't know; I'm not a businessman, but it's what I like. Blue eyes.

I'm a good student in school, but nowhere near a grind like some I could name. I'm not a jock, a nerd or a dweeb: just average in looks, above average in grades and below average in social skills. Like I said, average. This is about the change in my social skills, first and foremost.

Before I go on, I want to give an initial dramatis persona. Be advised that it quickly changes; I leave it as an exercise for the reader to keep track of the new names.

My dad is Dave Ferguson, an aerospace engineer, thirty-eight years old, married to my mom, Ellen, a year younger. Mom is an economist and mathematician; she's worked at home for years and years, before my sister and I were old enough to go to school on our own. At the time this happened, she was working Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from ten to six.

My sister is Joanna; I've always called her JR, no one else does. That's a story all by itself, and I'll get to it in due course. Joanna is thirteen, skinny like me, but eight inches shorter. JR's way skinnier than me, not even a hundred pounds.

Mom is best friends with Kim Wells, who is mom's age. Kim's daughter is Penny; thirteen like JR and Penny is JR's best friend. Penny is taller than JR, not as thin. Penny is a

little taller, a little heavier than JR. I'd never heard anything about a Mister Wells, but Kim and mom have been friends since college. Kim looks like she could be mom's sister.

My best friend is Tony Richardson, a junior like me; that's about all we have in common except being friends. Tony is the co-captain of the football team, a running back. Not only taller than me, but forty or fifty pounds heavier, very blonde, very crew cut. For all that Tony is a certified jock, he's really a nice guy; we've been friends since third grade. Tony and I average out to normal in the introvert/extrovert categories; he's more outgoing than I am, I'm more cautious. As a result, a time or two I've kept Tony from going off the deep end and doing something completely dumb; on the other hand, Tony has encouraged me to do any number of things I'd probably have passed up, left to my own devices. Dancing comes to mind.

Tony's girl friend is Sue Ellen Wilson; she lives next door to Tony. Once upon a time, back in third grade, Tony lived next door to me; in sixth grade, he moved next door to Sue Ellen, about two miles away from where we live.

A year after Tony moved I learned some important lessons. We were at Rosalie Sanchez's house for a New Year's Eve party for us seventh graders; my hormones had really started to kick in and I was eager to find out more about girls. I'd come on my own, Tony had come with Sue Ellen; I'd been at the party for about an hour, when the giggles and titters from the kitchen drew my attention.

I heard someone mutter something about mistletoe in the doorway; I glanced up and saw the sprig. Then Tony appeared, having heard the same news. With a big, shit-eating grin he left, coming back a minute later with Sue Ellen, who he proceeded to kiss a whole lot more hotly than I'd ever seen in real life. Sue Ellen got into it as well, and they caused more than a few blushes in the room.

A few minutes later Tony was standing next to me, as people were debating who might go next. "You should try it, Tom." He told me. I looked around, my eyes settling on our hostess, Rosalie. Short, dark, exotically beautiful. I'd had a crush on her since forever.

Kismet, Karma, fate... call it what you will. I started towards her, she started towards me. I wanted to kiss her; she

was on the way to the bathroom. I put my arms around her under the mistletoe, and kissed her the same way Tony had kissed Sue Ellen.

Abruptly I was pushed away, and Rosalie wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Eeew!" She exclaimed, "You put your tongue in my mouth!" She turned and stalked away; I was left non-plussed, not understanding why it had worked for Tony and failed for me.

Later, Tony kind of hinted that he and Sue Ellen had been doing a whole lot more than kissing for some time; that he couldn't tell people he was going with her, because everybody thought they were too young. Tony wasn't happy about that. And I realized that you can probably kiss a girl you're going with a whole lot more friendly than you can kiss someone you barely know, no matter how many times you've thought about her while jerking off.

In truth, that first exposure to the facts of life, however cursory, was a formative experience. Rosalie never invited me to a party again; was barely civil at school. I felt bad and would have apologized, except Tony convinced me that guys should never apologize. I learned later that sometimes Tony is full of shit.

As a result, after that I was even more cautious than I had been, socially speaking; with girls anyway. At the time of these events, I'd actually gone on one date, when I was a sophomore, right at Halloween. I took Ramona Duncan to the Halloween costume party; Ramona was the daughter of a woman mom knew from work. Her mom and mine arranged the whole thing. Ramona was significantly more shy than me; our moms knew that but had wanted to see if propinquity propinqued. It was a date filled with silence, as neither of us could think of anything to say to the other. We did manage to exchange a half-hearted, 'Good night' at the end of the evening.

One last piece of set dressing: our house. Mom and dad had gone to college together in the early 80's. When dad graduated he got a decent job and then he and mom got married. They looked around for a place to live and found this place, a two-bedroom duplex, somewhat unusual then in Phoenix as it had two stories. Down stairs was a living room, and a kitchen, laundry room, and bathroom; upstairs were two generous bedrooms and another bathroom.

Mom was pregnant with me when they moved in; three years later, pregnant with JR, mom and dad decided then that they needed a bigger place. They already knew JR was a girl and wanted her to have her own room. Right in the middle of house hunting, the family in the mirror image duplex next door moved away. Dad decided that we could buy it cheap, and did. They renovated the entire duplex, the room that had been our kitchen became a dining room, the living room became a family room; the other half pretty much remained like it had been. Because the upstairs bedrooms shared a long wall, there was no way to go between them. The only way to go from the upstairs bedrooms on one side to the bedrooms on the other side was to go downstairs, then up the other set of steps.

Mom fretted about that, when I was little; they were in the new bedrooms, while I was in their old room, and JR across the hall from them.

We had fire drills once a month; where I'd run down and meet them at the bottom of the steps and we'd go outside. We had smoke detectors and all of that. Personally, I liked the arrangement; my parents didn't 'drop in' all that often, unexpected like, to my room. The guest bedroom was across the hall from mine, but usually if there was a guest, JR got sent to sleep there and the guest moved, temporarily, into her room.

A typical day at that point in my life was to get up at 6 am, go down the hall to the third bathroom in our house, shower and dress for school. At half past six, I'd have breakfast with everyone else, then at 7:30 or thereabouts, I'd drive myself to school; JR usually rode with dad, as the junior high JR went to was in the opposite direction from the high school. While mom's schedule was regular, pretty much, she pretty much didn't leave the house until 8:30 or 9:00; even the days she worked. She was consulting with a major local bank, doing economic forecasts.

Anyway, schedule: I'd come home from school, usually picking up JR and sometimes Penny around three from the middle school. When we got home, JR and I would change clothes, and then we'd study until 6 or so, then start dinner preparations. After dinner, at 8, we could watch TV, read, or do what we wanted. Mostly I read; JR frequently went to visit Penny, or Penny came over to our house; JR reads a lot too, Penny not so much.

A word about JR: She's three years younger than me. My earliest memories are helping mom take care of her; I even helped change JR's diapers, although I doubt if I was that much help. JR was my little sister, and I was her big brother. Our relationship meant a lot to me and I was proud of it. I was there to help, advise, and make sure no one bothered her. I took to the role with a will; far more extroverted in it than I'd ever managed any place else.

We were friends, we talked a lot, played all sorts of games with each other and our parents; we had a lot of fun together.

The closest thing we ever had to a fight was when she decided that she would use some hydrogen peroxide she'd found and turn herself into a blonde. I convinced her, after much argument, that she should wait for mom to come home and ask her. Sure enough, mom explained that it had to be done carefully or it would look bizarre. Not then, but a week or so later, JR turned blonde for about a month; she hated it and applied a rinse to go back to brunette.

Enough setup!

Now to the actual events of the day it all started...

Friday, March 15, 2002

I was reading on my bed, lying on my back, book overhead, when JR knocked on the door to my bedroom. "Phone call, Tom. Tony."

I got up, headed downstairs, wondering who it could be, not even slightly aware how much my life was going to change, all stemming from that phone call.

"Tom old buddy!" Tony was in a jovial mood. Which meant, I figured, that Tony wanted something.

"You doing anything, Tom?"

"Reading," I replied. I heard the snort on the other end of the line.

"You remember I was telling you this week about my Uncle and Aunt from Seattle coming to visit us; that this was spring

break up there, so my cousin Marsha is with them."

"Yeah," I said, curious. "I remember."

"They got in earlier than we expected. Did I mention my Uncle works for the Seattle Supersonics?"

Maybe a million times. "Yeah," I replied.

"Marsha is a few days younger than me; she's a basketball player. Anyway, Marsha wanted to know if she could come to the game with us tonight. I told her Sue Ellen and I were going with you."

A fig leaf for Tony with his parents, I knew. How many times in four and a half years had Tony pretended to be visiting me, or out with me, when he'd really been inside Sue Ellen's panties? I hadn't any idea, but I was sure it was a lot. I was the perpetual third wheel that he trotted out to show that he wasn't having sexual congress with Sue Ellen. From the number of times I was trotted out, I assumed he was a busy beaver. He was my best friend; Sue Ellen was nice; I'd never, ever had a problem covering for Tony. And, of course, since we'd both gotten driver's licenses, the number of times and excuses had increased an order of magnitude.

"No problem," I told Tony.

"Ah, there's a problem," he said limply.

"A problem?" I sighed, thinking I had a glimmering of the problem.

"They're loaning my car to my Uncle and Aunt for the weekend, so they can go up to Sedona and scope out houses; they're thinking about getting a house there to stay in during the summer."

I'd heard often enough about snow birds, and I murmured assent, although anyone expecting warmth in Sedona was going to have a big surprise their first winter there. "So, I was hoping you'd be able to drive Marsha, Sue Ellen and me to the game tonight."

"Yes, sure," I said, a little miffed he hadn't understood my grunt the first time; then realized that was probably a bad

way to go about deciding such things.

"And could you, ah, escort Marsha?"

"Is this ah, like a blind date, Tony?" I asked sarcastically. "She's ugly, right?"

Tony came right back. "Marsha isn't ugly! She's really nice, Tom. I promise." I could tell there was something else. "Like I said she plays basketball, right?" he went on defensively.

"That's what you said." I knew there was something else; it only remained to find out what.

"I mean, aside from the fact her dad was a player, she is too."

"Tony," I said, getting a little exasperated, "what?"

"Tom, she's six six."

I tried to imagine a really nice, six and a half foot tall girl. My imagination failed me.

"Please, Tom! Please! I mean, we can leave early, if it's a problem."

Sure, leave early. Drop Marsha off, he'd go to Sue Ellen's house and play doctor or something. I sighed, "I guess this is what friends are for, right?" I asked.

"Yeah, Tom. Thanks, you'll do it?"

"Sure, why not?"

"I owe you, guy. I owe you!" Tony said he had to run, he was at the airport waiting to pick up his Aunt and Uncle's bags.

In the meantime, I was left to contemplate what to wear on a date with a giantess. I decided, like I always decide when going out, to wear dockers and a long-sleeved sports shirt. Tony says I'm sartorially challenged, I asked him to spell either word, which he had problems with. Yeah, Tony dresses better than I do, but I once pointed out to him that I'd dated as many girls as he had. That broke Tony up, as of course, I'd

been on one date with one girl, and he'd been on a million dates or more, with just the one girl.

I drove over to Tony's a little before six and got out. Tony was there at once, smiling, shaking my hand. A minute later I met Marsha Richardson; Tony had been right about her, low-ball if anything. She was drop dead beautiful, if a little tall. She smiled shyly at me, I smiled shyly back.

She was thin, but had a really cute face, and her dark blonde hair was done up in a ponytail. She was wearing a flower print blouse and black stone washed jeans. Sue Ellen was abundantly sumptuous when it came to breasts; Marsha had a full plate as well, although nothing like Sue Ellen.

Tony went next door to get Sue Ellen, and as soon as she and Tony were in the back seat the two of them immediately lip-locked. They were kind of like Romeo and Juliet, with only half the family baggage; Sue Ellen's parents worshiped their daughter, nothing she wanted was denied her. Tony's father wanted his son to be a NFL super star, and didn't want any 'distractions.' Tony's mother was much nicer, but more quiet and reserved than her husband. Tony and Sue Ellen were star-struck tragic lovers, who could never get enough time together.

As I drove I glanced at Marsha to see how she reacted to the back seat frolics. Marsha flicked her eyes back towards Tony and Sue Ellen, and mock-grimaced. Tony and Sue Ellen had passed the kissing stage and were now feeling each other up.

I nodded, and a few minutes later we were at school.

Marsha was much easier to talk to than Ramona, and we traded a lot of anecdotes about our schools. Like Tony, Sue Ellen and I, she was a junior, and as Tony said, a jock on the varsity girls B-Ball team, majoring in pre-college athletics.

As such, she was lucky; our girl's varsity played first and applied some major whupass against their opponents; it was pretty to watch. The boy's team was pretty bad, and managed to lose by thirty points; nothing pretty about it.

After the games we went out into the commons where they held the dances. I'd not really had much of a chance to learn to dance; that was more Tony's thing than mine. "Not hard, Tom," he'd told me once. "You just stand out there, pretend



you're a bag of shake and bake. No sweat."

Marsha did want to dance, and that was when I learned a lot about Tony's cousin that hadn't been apparent up to then. Marsha was just a little wild out on the dance floor. She really got into the music, and she danced like there was no tomorrow, right up to getting really, really close to me. I'd heard about freak dancing, but never really had any experience with it; now I experienced it.

I might not have that much experience with girls or freaking, but when a girl is rubbing herself against me, I found it pretty easy to jump to conclusions; not to mention rub back. And that's what she was doing. First her breasts, then a while later her groin came in contact with mine and stayed there for several minutes, grinding against the biggest boner I'd ever had in my life.

After the second dance like that, it was all I could do to keep from messing my pants, Tony came over to me after that dance, leaned close to me. "I don't know about you, but I feel the urge to go someplace more private."

I could only nod, trying with every bit of my will power to make it seem like this was no big deal, it was something I did every day. "Where?" I managed to gargle.

"My parents and Marsha's went to a Sun's game, they'll be back around eleven. It's nine thirty now. Sue Ellen's parents won't be back until one."

"Sue Ellen's would be good," I said, wondering if Marsha would be interested in continuing to grind pelvi together some place else; some place where it wouldn't excite comment if neither of us was wearing anything when we did it.

I drove the two and a half miles to Sue Ellen's; it was hard to keep my mind on the road, because Sue Ellen was going down on Tony while I was driving. Between that and Marsha sitting next to me with a smile on her face, no matter what stupid thing I said. It was very hard to concentrate.

Sue Ellen had to be pretty good at it; she managed to bring Tony off in the five minutes it took to make the drive. I was worried about how Marsha was going to react, but she just had a big smile on her face.

We went inside, Sue Ellen directing us to the family room. For a few minutes Tony and Sue Ellen did some passionate make out while standing up, then they vanished. Headed, I was sure, for Sue Ellen's bedroom.

Marsha and I had been making a little kissy-face ourselves, stopping only after the other two vanished. "Most boys," Marsha whispered, her hand now on the front of my jeans, "are kind of put off by how tall I am. I intimidate them." She had worked the zipper of my jeans down, her hand wrapped around my hard on.

"I could never do this in Seattle," she said, looking me in the eye.

I nodded, trying to show I was interested as much in what she was saying as what her hand was doing, that all of this was something I was used to, instead of my very first time ever, except in wet dreams, none of which had compared to this. Then Marsha was kissing me, hard and passionate, and I kissed back. After three or four minutes, she pulled back, smiling at me.

"Can I tell you a secret?" I nodded, and she smiled again. "Three quarters of the girls on my team are gay, the rest are bi. I've never been with a guy."

With that, she leaned down and took me in her mouth. I was startled, again real-life with Marsha was even better than any wet dream I'd had over the last few years. I looked down at her, her head in my lap. If a girl is sucking on your hard on, is she likely to object to being groped? I didn't think so, although it was a temptation to defer my explorations until I'd been gratified personally.

I cupped her breast with my hand, letting the warm, full, firm shape fill my palm. At once her nipple made itself felt, rock hard solid; an obvious target for further titillation. I concentrated on her hard tip, first just brushing it with the palm of my hand, and then taking it between my thumb and forefinger.

"Ahhhhhh!" Marsha sighed sibilantly when I did that, and then redoubled her effort in my lap, using her tongue now as well. I thought about frying bacon, I thought about clouds in the sky; I did everything I could think of not to think of how close she had me to coming.

My orgasm, when it came, did not appear to suffer for the delay, and for a moment all I could think of was the blaze of pleasure in my midsection. When I grew aware again, Marsha was finishing me up, licking everything that was putting in a belated appearance. I'd shrunk to about two-thirds the size I'd been a minute before; as soon as I noticed she was still licking me, it stood right back up.

Marsha giggled, gave me a dainty little kiss, and then sat up. "Would you be grossed out, if I kissed you?" She asked me in a soft voice.

I looked at her, considered for a millisecond, and then shook my head.

She leaned close, and then we were kissing; I'd made a good choice, I found, as I didn't taste anything, just Marsha. Even when she stuck her tongue down my throat.

This time I slid my hand underneath her blouse, searching out her other breast. I learned that her nipples were in sync when it came to hardness. I started chaffing that one too, and Marsha went into overdrive with the kiss. After a moment, her hand went back to my boner, still sticking out of my slacks; that lasted a few minutes, before she pulled away. For a second I wasn't sure what she was doing.

Turned out, Marsha was unbuttoning her blouse, so I could get at her breasts without messing with her clothes. She smiled at me, glanced down; the message was clear: not only did she want to be kissed, but where. I leaned down, kissing one of her hemispheric breasts, until I finally reached her nipple. I used my tongue on it, swirling around the erect center, three or four times. Marsha took my hand, moved it between her legs.

I mentally did a double take; sure, guys were always saying that girls were just as horny as us. I'd just never met a girl where that had been true. Now, evidently, I had. Still, in spite of my cornucopia of plenty, there was a niggling worry in the back of my mind... what if she was just a tease? Her hand had gone back to my hard rod; I laughed at myself. What kind of tease starts with what is normally considered to be the holy grail of relationships?

For the next few minutes I proved my inexperience; I wasn't

sure what I wanted to do. I was kissing Marsha's breasts, my hand was rubbing around her crotch. Right in the middle of that, I decided that odds were, she wasn't going to object if I hauled her slacks down, so I started undoing her jeans.

In seconds I had my hand inside her panties, feeling her crinkly, damp pussy hair while I was still working on her breasts with my tongue.

I heard a soft chuckle after a few seconds, and I stopped and looked up.

Marsha was smiling at me, nodded at my erection. "I always heard that with a boy it was pump once or twice, then he'd shoot. After that, he'd fall asleep and let you rest."

I could feel her hand, squeezing my hard on, I felt her hips lift to meet my fingers pressing against her pubes. I couldn't think of anything that wasn't a smart-assed remark; I had no intention of messing this up, so I kept my mouth shut.

"Tom," I looked more directly at her, when she said my name. "Would you do for me, what I did for you?"

Go down on her? I nodded, wide-eyed, agreeing without hesitation. This was so far beyond my wildest dreams that I made a quick decision to review my wild dreams as early as possible, in view to upgrading them at once.

"At my school," Marsha whispered, "when you try out for the girl's varsity, they have a little 'attitude test' we have to take. You visit each of the five starters, go down on her. At the end of the night, they get together, compare notes and declare a 'queen of the night.' Then all five go down on their favorite. When I was a freshman it was me they picked."

I somehow doubted that was something that got back to the coaches and parents; I wondered why I was hearing about it.

Marsha grinned wickedly. "I didn't sleep at all that night; never even felt tired. Not my first year, not my sophomore year when I was a starter, or this year."

Another words, I thought, while no man might have gone before where I was about to go; there had been a lot of lips there before this.

Ah, hormones! Had I heard this story in the privacy of my own room, I would have thought it wildly erotic, I would have masturbated imagining it. But here and now I wasn't sure if I wanted to do it with someone who had sex with quite so many people.

Of course right then my hormones were more interested in what was happening than my brain. I moved down to get between her legs, and Marsha finished sliding her jeans off. I leaned close and for the first time tonight had serious second thoughts. There was an odor, very strong and not all that pleasant. I hadn't a clue what to do, until Marsha breathlessly told me to kiss her clit.

Her clit wasn't hard to find, it was nearly the size of the tip of my little finger. I spent quite some time licking and sucking on it, and after a bit, Marsha was too worked up to give me any more directions.

As unpleasant as the odor was, the taste left even more to be desired; I'd heard that girls smelled like fish, that the fluid was heavy and acrid. Marsha smelled like sweat and maybe a hint of pee; mixed with a taste that was simply strong and gamey. On the other hand, there I was, eating a girl's pussy; what I lacked in experience and intellectual enthusiasm, my hormones made up for.

"Put your tongue in me!" Marsha gasped, and I tried to do just that, shoving my tongue up inside her. I was startled by how far it went; my nose pressed against her clit; I almost laughed. A head job for sure! Maybe a nose job! I stifled my giggle, and concentrated on using my tongue. I found the best position was with my hands underneath Marsha's bottom, lifting her up; she was twisting and writhing, trying to get my tongue in deeper as well.

Marsha was moaning and sighing, then gave a huge spasm, twitching and jerking as if she was being electrocuted; except someone being electrocuted isn't saying, "Harder! Faster! Deeper!" while she's dying.

"Oh yes!" She finally said, calming down, "just like that! Oh, did that ever hit the spot!" She leaned over, pulling me up, her tongue coming into my mouth, harder and more passionate than ever. She was fumbling with the front of my jeans, sliding

them down over my hips, pulled me into her.

I nearly came as I slid inside her. My God! It's really happening!

Still, the sensation wasn't at all like what I'd expected. I'd heard a lot about tight, hot boxes; Marsha was slippery and while the sensation was wildly exciting, there seemed to be a lot of room left over. Oh God! I don't measure up to most guys! That realization shot through me, and went a long ways towards adding to my staying power; a cold douche cutting through the fog of my hormones.

"Marsha should I use a rubber?" I asked, looking down at her. The expression on her face is one I'm going to remember all of my life: Girl in major lust. After a second her expression vanished, replaced by a deep laugh.

"You know what they call a girl who leaves birth control to a boy?" I was still getting used to the feeling of where my hard on was; the hormones were coming back.

I shook my head.

"Pregnant," she completed the question. "Coach doesn't want any of us knocked up, she has this arrangement with the school nurse; we got shots. I'm not going to get pregnant. You're the first boy I've slept with; you aren't going to catch anything from me. Am I gonna get anything from you?"

I shook my head emphatically no; not possible, unless you really can pick it up off a toilet seat.

She lifted her midsection against me, started moving with me. Things kind of went on autopilot there; I started some serious humping, she humped back. It took a while, but I could sense Marsha was getting close; when she closed her legs underneath me it wasn't hard at all to come with her. Both of us were pretty noisy, and it was only afterwards I felt the least bit of embarrassment. I looked around, breathing a sigh of relief; no spectators.

I leaned down, starting kissing Marsha's breasts again, and I heard her giggle. "It's getting kind of late to start over."

I was still inside her, I moved a little bit; if I'd

thought she was moist and slippery before, now the sensation was cubed. Hormones didn't care a bit, I just kept moving. Marsha's legs wrapped around my butt, she stuck her tongue down my throat and in about a minute I was getting close; Marsha was too.

"God, I think I'm gonna nickname you Ironman," Marsha breathed in my ear. That's when I spurted again.

This time it was me who came down off a tremendous high; Marsha was lightly stroking my butt with her hands, kissing my ear, using her tongue. "Oh, I wish I could package you up and ship you back to Seattle!" Marsha murmured in my ear. "All that stuff about boys not being any good was just bull shit!"

My hands made a beeline for her breasts, and she giggled. "They're right about the one track minds though!" She lifted my hands away, "We need to get up, get cleaned up. It's almost midnight."

As if on cue, I heard Tony say from outside the room. "Marsha and I need to be getting back, Tom."

I glanced hurriedly at the door, afraid he'd come in, but he wasn't visible. I got up, held out my hand for Marsha, and I pulled her to me, kissing her like men have been kissing their first woman since the dawn of time. Hard and hungry for more.

Marsha kissed back for a second, and then pulled away. "You're nice," she said, then leaned down and picked up her blouse and jeans from the floor where they'd fallen. She hastily got dressed, and perforce, so did I.

A few minutes later Tony and Sue Ellen came in; Sue Ellen had a definite 'just been loved' look, just like Marsha. The two girls traded smiles; I didn't dare look at Tony. Tony, Marsha and I walked over to Tony's, where they bid me good night.

The porch light was on, the house lights were on. I reached out and took Marsha's hand anyway.

"Don't get all sloppy and gooey," she said matter-of-factly, looking now, like she had at the start of the evening.

"I had a good time," I told her, knowing it sounded really

lame and stupid.

She grinned. "I did too. Something I will always remember. G'night Tom." She and Tony went through the door, and I drove home by myself.

My house was as dark as the Richardson's had been lit. I got out of the car, walked inside, and went upstairs and straight to bed. I lay awake for just a few seconds, remembering all of the sensations; Marsha's mouth around my erection; my hands and tongue on her breasts. Going down on her; being in her and coming and then coming again. Three times? I thought so for me. How many times for Marsha? At least three, maybe four or five times. I fell asleep, a grin on my face.

Saturday, March 16, 2002

I woke up in the morning, stiff and sore; muscles I'd never imagined hurt in ways I wouldn't have imagined. I took a shower, knowing that when I did, the last lingering smells of Marsha were going to flow away. I sighed as I soaped up; I'd seen the clock before I'd walked to the bathroom. Almost nine; Marsha had told me that her parents had planned to be on the road by eight. Already she was gone.

I contemplated life and the universe.

I wasn't ever going to see her again. Never. And, if that was bad, I had a strong suspicion that was Marsha's intent all along. What was it she said? 'I could never do this in Seattle.' It was something like fifteen hundred miles between Phoenix and Seattle. There was no way I was ever going to get there. Maybe her parents would buy that house in Sedona? Maybe they'd come and visit Tony's parents again?

It was March, would she be faithful until June? July or August maybe? I laughed at the thought. Not from what she'd said. Was someone like Marsha seeing someone? I expected so; realized that if she was, it was another girl.

Me? I'd never imagined going out with a girl for the first time and doing everything I had ever imagined doing with a girl and more besides... and then never seeing her again. What if it happened again? Experience said that if the opportunity presented itself I wasn't likely to say no. I shook my head,



nope, I wasn't in love with Marsha; she had been the first girl I'd been with and it was a deliberate thing on her part. Well, it had been pretty deliberate on my part too.

Around noon, I was fixing a PB&J sandwich, when my mom breezed into the kitchen. "Tom, I know I asked you if you'd go shopping this afternoon."

I nodded; a small price to pay for the use of the car; I did all of Mom's errands and she paid for the gas.

"Well, your dad and I have been talking about getting a new dishwasher, so we're going off to Costco, then the mall. I'll get the shopping done while we're out. You won't mind?"

I laughed and shook my head.

"Joanna's stayed over at Penny's last night, she should be back before I leave." Or, in other words, JR had better be home before Mom left.

I finished my sandwiches, cleaned up after myself. JR appeared while I still had my hands in the sink, grinned at me, and announced her presence. JR had turned thirteen in January. Stamped from the same Ferguson cookie-cutter like Dad and myself, five two, thin, brown hair and blue eyes. She was studious, usually serious and intent; smarter than the rest of us and then some.

Not for the first time, I watched her leave the room; she was wearing jeans that stretched taut over a nicely shaped posterior, a crop top that was more modest than a bikini top... but still left a lot of skin showing. You are, I mentally told her as she vanished into the dining room, getting to be quite a little hottie, sister mine.

A while later, Mom and Dad vanished down the road. I retired to my room to listen to some tunes on my boom box and read. In this case, an old Heinlein juvenile about a boy caught up in interplanetary intrigue and ends up stranded on Venus during a war; really cool, and hardly dated at all, even though it was fifty years old... except for the descriptions of Mars and Venus of course.

After a few minutes, JR knocked on my open door, and I looked up at her. "Afternoon, JR. Have a good time over at

Penny's?"

JR nodded and smiled, and I waved for her to come in. We were really good about each other's personal space; Mom was forever praising me to her friends and holding me up as a paragon of virtue. And here I was oogling my sister's small breasts, clearly outlined under her top; I could see the shadow of her nipples beneath the fabric. Trying not to stare was pretty hard.

"Could I ask you something, Tom?" JR asked, "Something personal?"

"Sure, JR, you know me." Over the years my sister had asked maybe a million questions of the people around her; maybe three quarters of those had come my way; I was about the only person who was always patient with her.

"Promise you won't tell anyone," she said, and I met her eyes.

"I promise. When have I ever?" I said neutrally, wondering all the while what thirteen-year old girl secrets I was going to hear.

"Never, but this is special."

"I promise, cross my heart, hope to die," I said, crossing my heart.

She smiled at that. "I want to ask my question, then I want to explain why I'm asking, so be patient, okay?"

"I'm always patient, JR. Even when you spend ten minutes beating around the bush."

She stuck her tongue out at me, and I waved for her to go ahead.

"Is going down on someone having sex with them or not?" She asked then, getting down to brass tacks with patented JR quickness. I stared at her, and then started to say something, but she had gone on before I could get any words out.

"I'm asking because of two things. Last year, the first week of November was Camp Weekend." Some weekend, I thought

sarcastically. We'd done that when I'd been in seventh grade too. You get Thursday and Friday off from school, but you go to a camp in the mountains. And have to stay Saturday and Sunday as well. No offense, but making reed mats and bead chains aren't my favorite things, although walks in the woods are ok.

"I was in a cabin with Penny and a bunch of others you don't know, except maybe Nicki Barrett." I knew Nicki a little, her brother Stan was my age and was an avid Magic player, as was I. "Susan Morgan was our counselor." I nodded, knowing Susan slightly; she was a senior, and played Magic sometimes too.

"The first night Susan explained that oral sex isn't really sex; President Clinton said that. And that there had been a lot of talk, and the congress had ended up agreeing with him."

I laughed, "Mom and Dad were certain you weren't old enough to hear about any of that." In fact, they'd done their best to keep me from it as well; but eleven-year-old boys are incurably curious about anything like that being talked about so openly and in such exquisite detail.

"Susan did it to us. All of us, except Nicki; she was having her period."

I blinked in astonishment. Susan Morgan was gay? She'd chowed down on a whole cabin of twelve-year-old girls? Eleven and twelve year old girls, because that's how old JR would have been then? Wow!

"Susan told us it was okay, it was just girl play, and a couple of girls did it to her, too." JR made an odd twisting motion with her hand. "Now, well Penny's boyfriend says going down on a boy isn't sex either. That it's okay because it's not really sex." A pause. "Is it okay?"

"I'm the wrong person to ask," I told her. "A boy has just one thing on his mind; I don't know about girls, but boys will say and do anything to have sex with a girl."

"Is going down on someone having sex?" I asked rhetorically. "I don't know. If that's all you did..." Again I shook my head. "Then maybe it's not. But usually with a boy, it's just the first thing he wants." Actually, until my experience last night with Marsha, I hadn't been aware it came first. But I was willing to put it at the top of the list now!

"Penny and I were talking, we thought maybe Susan and Penny's boyfriend are BSing us," she said right out. JR bit her lip. "Penny said after she did it to Susan, Susan offered to finger fuck her. We decided that's sex."

This was the first time I'd heard the term, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what she meant. I nodded, but added, "Like I said, I'm the wrong person to ask about this. Girls and girls..." I sighed. Well, Marsha was like that, she had certainly seemed nice.

"Have you ever done it? Oral sex? Real sex?" JR asked.

I looked my sister right in the eye. "JR, that's personal. Asking my opinion about something, that's okay. But ask what I do..." I shook my head.

"I hear you, at night you know," she told me. "Your bed squeaks, and when you get really excited, it bumps the wall. I do it too, listening to you."

I blushed from my hair roots to my toenails. "It's all right," JR told me, "everyone does it. I rub myself a lot."

My sister masturbated listening to me beat off? Maybe a couple of times I'd had fantasies about JR, but not often. How many times had she done it? I'd had a serious raging hard on for some time over the topic of conversation; now it seemed to swell yet again.

"I'd like to see that!" I said in a soft voice, what I thought was to myself. Instead, it was JR's turn to blush and I realized she'd heard me say the words.

There was a moment of silence between us, and then JR surprised me again. She waved at my midsection. "If I did that for you, go down on you, would you tell me if I was doing it right?"

I gargled, stunned. "You're serious?" I asked, seriously surprised myself.

JR stepped towards me, nodding. "Turn a little more to face me," she murmured. Woodenly, I complied. Then she knelt between my legs, worked my zipper very expertly, and with less

trouble than Marsha had the previous night, pulled my erection out of my shorts.

She took me in her mouth in a manner completely different than Marsha had; Marsha had never had more than about half of me inside her mouth at a time, using suction and her tongue to get the desired result. JR used suction, but essentially swallowed me whole. It felt very, very much like the last few minutes with Marsha than the first few; completely inside a moist, soft embrace of skin.

With Marsha, I'd done all sorts of things to keep from shooting early; this time I was unable to muster up any desire to do so, shooting in just a minute or so of JR's attention. And she was paying attention to more than just my hard on; one hand cupped my balls, lightly stroking them. When I came it was as hard as I'd done with Marsha, I moaned and groaned and sighed as I came.

Afterwards JR was more like Marsha had been, using her mouth and tongue to wipe me clean, before rocking back on her heels and looking at me. "Was that okay?" she asked, with a mischievous grin on her face.

"That wasn't the first time you've done that," I said, saying the first thing that popped into my head.

"You said that this was personal, and you didn't want to talk about it. You don't want to tell me how many times you've had a girl do this; I'm not going to tell you how many times I've done it."

"Well," I told her, "yeah, that was good. Really good." My hormones then made my mouth run away. What was it that Marsha had said last night? "Would you like me to do the same for you?"

Her eyes bulged. "You'd do that?" Her voice was a whisper. "Gosh, Susan and Penny both say, boys don't want to."

"Penny and Susan don't know everything," I told her. "I like it." I remembered Marsha twisting and moaning; somehow it didn't seem that big of a deal that I hadn't liked the taste or smell. I reached out and popped the snaps on JR's jeans. "Say the word and I'll make your day, too."

I watched her face as I ran her zipper down, then tugged on her jeans. For a second I thought JR was asleep; then her eyes, half open, opened all the way and looked into mine.

"You want to have sex with me, don't you Tom?" JR whispered.

"I was going to eat you up," I told her, adding to myself, "Then I was going to try to have sex with you."

She pushed her jeans down, a little defiantly. "Penny and I thought since we're friends, it was okay to have sex. So we finger fuck as well as go down on each other," JR said, looking at me. "It seemed stupid not to kiss on the lips, when we kiss everywhere else."

"Now, she's got a boyfriend and they're having sex too. Guess it's my turn."

To my surprise, JR waved at the bed. "Lay down."

I looked at her, not understanding, so she elaborated, "Lay down on your back." I did as bid, and she pulled off her jeans and got on top of me, starting with her legs on either side of me, even with my stomach. She grinned at me. "You don't have much practice, do you?"

"Haven't heard any complaints," I told her. JR grinned and moved forward. When she did, I could see what was going to happen. She was going to sit on my face, another interesting concept I'd heard about, but not truly understood the mechanics.

JR's pussy was completely different than Marsha's. Marsha had a hairy, thick bush. JR was completely bare, and there was almost no smell; when I tasted her, JR's flavor was a little sweet and tart, reminding me of lemonade. Marsha had a larger clit, JR's was a small button, difficult to find. JR had long prominent pussy lips, that seemed to go on forever.

I kept at it, using my hands on JR's bottom to push her more tightly towards my mouth. It was harder to get my tongue inside her as well, it didn't go in nearly as far; the difference, I thought, between someone six and a half feet tall and someone five two.

I looked up from where I was licking, saw that JR had

pushed up her crop top, was massaging her breasts. And what breasts! Marsha had generous grapefruit halves; JR was much smaller, they were conical, mainly nipple. I found the sight of them more stirring than Marsha's much larger breasts had been.

Marsha had reacted quickly to my tongue, JR was slower, but responsive nonetheless; I could see she was enjoying it immensely, but then so was I. Marsha had made ten thousand little comments, mostly suggestions to make it feel good for her. JR was intent on one thing, and one thing only: coming. And when she came it was softer than Marsha's, a trembling shiver, a long sigh. Then a single word: "Again!"

This time I let my hands roam more actively over her butt and back as I used my tongue to work at her clit, before returning to her sweet honey pot. This time JR's orgasm was more like Marsha's, wild and shuddering, and she was much louder.

JR leaned down, propping herself up on her elbows, as she slid down my torso. "I was wrong about not being experienced."

"Not much," I admitted, aware of her damp pussy, now lying on top of my hard on. It twitched, and I wiggled it against her.

JR smiled at me. "You want to do it with me, don't you?"

"I told you, that's what boys want." I put my hands back on her butt, pressing her down against me. "I didn't lie about that."

JR giggled. "And girls want something else? I don't think so!"

"I don't want to get you pregnant," I murmured, wanting ever so much to plunge inside of JR, regardless of consequences.

"And I don't want to get pregnant either. Tom, it's another secret. I haven't had my first period. The doctor said, maybe not for another year. And I got some cream stuff I can use. I won't get pregnant."

She reached down between us, lifting up a bit. She took hold of my cock, started rubbing it on the outside of her pussy lips. It was an exquisite feeling, and she rubbed it for a

couple of minutes, then slowly starting putting it inside her.

Again, she was very different from Marsha. I'd slid into Marsha easily; but even wet, it was slow entering JR. JR was much smaller, and now I knew the difference between a 'tight box' and the rest of womankind. I was definitely going to be a fan of the 'tight box' sort of girl, I thought.

But all good things finally happen; and now I was fully inside JR. I moved and she moved and the world and sky moved; it was beautiful. Not to mention, we did it for a wonderfully long time.

Afterwards I felt lazy and wonderful, like the night before, enjoying the feeling of just laying there, my erection buried inside JR's pussy. JR was silent as well, for a long time. Then she moved, looking off to one side. "Oh my God!" She murmured, I looked, at saw the clock on my nightstand. After three thirty. "Mom and Dad could come home any second!"

"And might not be back for hours," I told her, my hands roaming her bare back from shoulders to bottom, my thumbs moving stretching out over her chest to rub across her breasts.

JR giggled. "It was nice, wasn't it?"

"It was very nice. I'm glad you liked it," I told her.

"Oh yeah! Not at all like when I'm with Penny! But..." She sighed, and I felt her pussy contract around my erection. "God!" she murmured, and started to move again. "I want it again!"

I did too, and the hell, I thought, with the risk. I pulled JR down to me, kissing her hard and hungry, like I remembered Marsha kissing the night before. We started some serious loving then, JR bouncing up and down on my midsection, me trying to hang on while trying to reach deeper inside her each and every stroke.

We were well on our way to another mutual completion when the sound of a car door slamming in the driveway came from below; a spasm of fear shot through both of us. For a second I thought my erection was in a vice, JR squeezed so hard. I shot instantly, and I could feel her tremble as well; but it was only for an instant. Then JR was up, frantically grabbing clothes



and then hurrying down the hall and the stairs.

I lay in my bed, still dressed, except for undone jeans, my cock still twitching and dribbling a little. Only belatedly did I remember that I was supposed to go downstairs when Mom got back from a store trip to help carry bags inside. I hastily got up, used an old t-shirt I just happened to have on hand in my night stand to clean up, zipped up my jeans, checked myself in the mirror, hoping I didn't look too obviously like I'd just been doing it with my sister.

I'd brought in most of the bags with Dad's help, before JR came down from upstairs, yawning. "I was taking a nap." She said, "Sorry."

"That's okay, dear," Mom told her. I finished my chore and went back up to my room.

After a few minutes of contemplating the afternoon, I picked up the book I'd been reading. Folded inside it, where you couldn't see it, was a piece of paper. It read simply, "That was the best!" and had JR's initials on the bottom; JR liked to do a fancy loop on the J. This time there was a happy face inside the J. I grinned to myself. It had been, that was for sure!

Still, I had to think about life with JR after this afternoon. Sure as the sunrises and sets, I thought, we're going to do it again. The thought of doing it again brought a hard on, and I pressed my fingers against it, wishing I had the time and privacy to whip it out and get some relief. Or better, have JR come and suck on it. Simply thinking about JR coming.

Except of course there were one or two obstacles. First and foremost, our parents would have more than a major league cow if they found either of us was having sex with anyone; each other? We'd be lucky to survive the resulting explosion! So, we were going to have to be very careful and very cautious. And speaking of caution, JR might say there was no chance of getting pregnant, but she'd better do something more effective than put off birth control into the future. Or her first period might end up delayed a couple of months by her getting in the family way. That would be even worse than getting caught!

Nonetheless, I was confident that these were all details that could be worked out, and a glorious future opened up with

JR and me between the sheets as often as we could find the time. And who knew? I'd gone without my entire life; now in the last twenty-four hours I'd been with two different girls. There were, I was sure, even more girls out there. How to find them?

My parents almost never go out on Friday or Saturday nights, this Saturday was no different. In fact, they pretty much never went out at all. Sometimes they would go over to visit Kim Wells, sometimes just Mom would go, or Mom and JR. On the other hand, they never got home on weekdays until six or even seven. I might not be able to spend the night with JR, but there were, I was sure, going to be plenty of opportunities to spend quality time with my sister; even if I was going to have to be patient for a couple of days until I could get another chance to be with her.

Which brought to mind another question. Both Marsha and JR had been quite candid about their relationships with other girls. Both of them had been having sex before I was with them. Was that something I might look for in the future? Might I have a future as a seducer of lesbians? The thought made my cock twitch... that would be something, wouldn't it? Another wet dream!

Another thought in the same vein was that JR had told me she and Penny were doing it; what had JR done last night? Stayed at Penny's. For a moment, I was jealous of Penny, and then I decided I was being dumb. JR had a right to her friends, and hadn't I been thinking about finding other girls?

Eventually, it was dinnertime, and as usual our dinner conversation ranging widely from plans to politics, current events and calendar items in the future. I made a point not to spend much time looking at JR, fearful of alerting our parents that something had changed in our brother-sister relationship.

A few minutes before we would normally have gotten up from dinner, the phone rang, and Dad went to get it, then called for JR. JR cleared off her plate, and spent a few minutes talking to Penny, then announced she was going to visit Penny for a while.

She and Mom went over, while I went up to my room, and much earlier than usual, a little after 8, I fell asleep.

Sunday, March 17, 2002

When I awoke I sensed someone else was in my room. Even though it was dark, I was pretty sure I knew who it was. "Tom?" JR's voice came softly from the dark.

"I'm awake," I whispered back. There wasn't really much chance of our parents hearing us, not through the wall of my bedroom and then JR's. I glanced at the clock on my nightstand, a little after one am. Even so... "This isn't a good idea. We'd get killed if we get caught."

JR giggled. "Oh yeah! We should have thought about that, though, before we started."

It had to laugh at that. "What fun would that have been?"

"Oh yeah!" JR said softly. There was a momentary pause. "You want to do it again?"

"Yes!" I said emphatically. I thought she was talking about right then, but she wasn't.

"I'm going over to Penny's this afternoon. Kim's going out shopping all afternoon. We could do it then, if you want."

"Sure," I said, wondering what that might be like. A threesome? Or was Penny just going to cover for JR?

Another pause, and JR whispered, "Are you going to dream about me tonight?"

"For sure!" I said.

"Rub yourself?"

"Probably." I knew that was a fib; Of course I was! But, I couldn't tell JR that.

"I'll be thinking about you, too." With that I heard a rustle of movement, heard my door open, and she was gone.

I lay there doing what I'd just said I wouldn't, stroking my rock hard erection, imagining being with JR and while I was at it, Marsha. I would, I thought when I shot off, never kick either out of bed. But, if I had to choose between one of the two, JR won, hands down.

I used the t-shirt out of my nightstand, kept for such occasions, to clean myself off. Hand jobs were okay, blowjobs were better. The real thing, much better yet! And this was just my first day! I rolled over and went back to sleep, a happy grin on my face.

The problem with going to sleep early was normally I'd have gotten up early. I was a little surprised when I didn't get up until after seven, nearly eleven hours of sleep. Not being entirely brain dead, and still having one or two stiff muscles, I equated the sex with getting tired; was that why guys were reported to always be falling asleep? I hadn't felt sleepy in bed with a girl, but on the other hand, it was all new and good. Really good. What would happen if it was old hat? I laughed at myself. It might get to be old hat, but it wasn't ever going to get old! I'd come a lot of times, in the first twenty-four hours of my real sex life; I even counted the time last night after JR left. No wonder I was tired!

Another day though, was ahead of me, and I already had one date to get laid. Life, I thought, couldn't get much better!

About one I was due to take JR off to Penny's, I casually told my mom, "I think I'm going to go over to Border's, after I drop off JR. See if I can find something new to read."

She smiled; I knew Mom liked the fact I went out and bought books, as opposed to Nintendo games. Frankly, books were better. Not as good as sex with JR, though...

It was an interesting drive to Penny's; for the first time since yesterday I had a chance to talk to JR. I mentioned my concerns about birth control, and I was pleased that JR didn't blow them off. "Penny has to be careful," JR said. "Her periods started in fifth grade." Penny was heavier than JR, not to mention a couple of inches taller. "According to the doctor," JR went on to explain, "there's a relationship between body weight and when you start." She shrugged. "I'm in no hurry."

I nodded. For a moment there was silence; we were nearly there. Then JR spoke suddenly. "Tom, do you love me?"

I was surprised, "Of course!" I said, "You're my sister!"

"No, not as your sister. As your girlfriend."

I blinked; I'd never thought of it that way. I didn't know what to say, and spent some time thinking about it. We pulled up in front of Penny's house, and JR looked at me. "I love you too... but when we were together yesterday; that was sex. Not love."

"I want to be your friend, as well as your brother," I told her. "You're a girl. I love my sister; I love the girl I was with yesterday. I definitely loved the sex." I thought I was being funny, but JR persisted.

"Yesterday with me wasn't your first time." It wasn't a question, but I nodded anyway.

"You were my first boy, but not my first time."

"I understand," I told her. "I'm not out to break up friendships, however close, no matter who with."

She nodded, serious. She waved towards the house. "In there is Roger Parker, Penny's boyfriend." I nodded, not sure where JR was going.

She took a deep breath. "A couple of weeks ago, after Penny and Roger had been dating for a while, she convinced me to go down on Roger. Just to see what it was like. Just the once."

Again I nodded, wondering where she was headed with all of this. Suddenly the words rushed out. "Last week at school, Keith Driscoll... he's bothered me since forever." I knew that! I'd told her a million times that she should tell me when it happened, and I'd see Keith was 'persuaded' not to do it again. "He stole my math book, my calculator. He was bragging to some boys, and Roger heard him. Roger made Keith give them back."

"What a turd!" I said with heat. "And, of course, Keith's not in trouble at all?"

"When is he ever?" JR said bitterly, this was, as I said, an old topic. She looked at me. "I... I told Roger Friday I'd do him again. It was supposed to be today. Just, I mean, just going down on him... not..." She waved her hand towards her midsection; I got the picture.

"JR," I said evenly, "I want to do it with you. Okay? I'm not your boyfriend; you're right about that. And it probably wouldn't be a good idea anyway, if we did it a lot. Do I want to have sex with you? Oh yeah!" We both grinned.

"I don't want to control your life, I don't want to monopolize your life. It's not up to me who you go with, nor who you see, nor what you do when you see them. I want a place in your life, but I don't want to control you; I'm not Mom or Dad. You are the one who makes the decisions." I grinned. "Of course, as Mom and Dad have said ten million times, we have to be responsible for the outcome of our choices. The more I think about growing up, the less I think it's bull shit they are trying to teach us."

JR nodded somberly, then waved towards the house. "We should go in. And Tom," I looked at her. "Penny said if you were lonely or bored, she might be inclined to help brighten your day." That was, I thought, clear enough.

We went and JR knocked on the door; it took a minute before I heard someone fumbling with the lock, inside. Penny stuck her head around the door, saw JR and smiled, "Come on in!"

We went inside. Evidently, I thought, Roger was already there and busy. Penny was stark naked, and from the look on her face, she'd already gotten started on a pleasant day.

Penny had breasts midway in size between JR and Marsha, and more interesting, shaped completely different. JR's were conical, mainly nipple. Marsha had two very large grapefruit halves. Penny had, I thought, apples. Hard, ripe, perched high on her chest, jutting out.

Penny eyed me, not quite as hungrily as I was eyeing her. "Joanna says you're cool about this," Penny said softly, her eyes searching mine.

"Yeah," I told her.

Penny gave me an odd little smile, while I scoped her out. Not nearly the hairy bush Marsha had, but not bare like JR, a dainty tuft of hair at the top of her slit. I was a little surprised when Penny stepped up to JR, reached out and took one of JR's hands and put it between her own legs, then started

kissing JR hard. I watched them kiss, I watched JR finger fuck Penny; it was seriously hot. Still, even if I wanted to be part of it, I stood and watched. Finally, Penny came; a shivering cry that sent chills up and down my spine.

"Oh, I needed that, girl!" Penny said softly, but loud enough for me to hear her. She glanced at me, smiled. "It purely freaks Roger out, when he sees Joanna and I kiss; if we get it on..." She shook her head. "It drives him nutz."o."

"Tom's cool," JR said stoutly. "I told you he was."

Penny looked at me again. "Cool enough to let your sister walk through the door over there, with Roger all hard and horny on the other side?"

"Yes," I told her. "And JR said you might want to help me spend some time waiting for her. I'd like it, but it's up to you." It was a bluff, mostly. I'd really like to have a chance to suck on Penny's tits; they were outstanding! In any case I stood looking at Penny, not challenging her, but curious to see what she was going to do.

I glanced at JR, she was standing looking at the two of us; I saw Penny gave a slight nod of her head. JR smiled at me, and then walked towards the back of the house and the door Penny had been talking about.

After a second, there was the sound of a door closing and Penny's expression changed. "So, you want me to take your mind off the back room?" Penny asked.

My eyes went to her breasts, then lower down. "I was thinking," I said softly, taking a step towards her, "of something JR said to me the other day." I glanced towards the back of the house and nodded. "That Roger doesn't like to go down on you. I was wondering if you'd rather me eat you right up."

Penny smiled a little. "And you think you're man enough to do me?"

"I'm thinking I haven't heard any complaints so far."

Penny smiled; a definite challenge. "Joanna did say you were good, really good."

"Come sit on my face and I'll show you."

"I think I will," Penny told me, "just to find out if what Joanna says is true, mind you. Like a science experiment at school."

She led me towards what I knew was the family room; I followed along behind her. She waved at a rug in front of their fireplace. "Lay down there." I did, on my back. She grinned at me, and then simply lowered her pussy right over my mouth.

Again, Penny was different than JR or Marsha; I knew what she wanted, Penny knew what Penny wanted.

I licked the inside of her thighs, while taking a good look at her innermost secrets. Her pussy anatomy was very different from Marsha or JR. Penny's pussy lips were fatter and thicker; her clit was buried deep inside folds of flesh, relatively hard to get to. I persevered, using my tongue to do the reaching.

Even when I found it, it was easily the smallest of the three, but the attention I was paying it got Penny's attention. She squirmed, pushing against me. "Oh yeah, baby!" Penny muttered, "Oh, I love to have my clit licked! Suck it hard, baby!"

One thing I was curious about, unsure what my reaction would be if I found a load of sperm already inside her; Penny didn't taste that much different than JR; a little less sweet, but nothing like Marsha's gamy taste. Marsha's butt had been full round and hard, muscles on muscles. JR's was lush and full as well; Penny didn't have much of a caboose at all. Still, I squeezed her cheeks and pushed her forward onto my tongue, and she continued to push against my face, too.

Penny was doing like JR had done the day before, rubbing and stroking her breasts while my tongue worked on her; and work it did. I spent ten or fifteen minutes on her clit, wishing I could be the one to stoke her breasts, but I thought it more important to push her pussy ever harder into my face, so that my tongue could swive deep inside the folds of her pussy, licking and sucking on her clit.

"Oh baby!" Penny muttered, "My clit loves you! Go baby! Go! Suck me hard! Do it!" She was pushing against me hard



enough that I was having a little trouble trying to breathe; I left off stroking her butt, moved my hands around to cup her breasts myself.

For a second she tried to push them away, but then she moaned like JR had done earlier when Penny finger fucked her. Penny was too busy for a second to care where my hands were. "Baby, baby!" Penny moaned, "You sucked me off just with my clit! My clit loves you! No one else ever did it like that! Now, fuck me with that tongue of yours! Tongue fuck me good!"

I wished the hard cock I had between my legs would get some action; but I did go for her pussy gold; chasing the source of her warm juice down from it's deep cave. Like JR, she was tight, hard to get my tongue into deeply, and I had to concentrate on that. I was surprised when I felt Penny's fingers there, next to her pussy; for a second I thought she was going to finger fuck herself, but I was wrong, instead, she spread her pussy lips apart, letting me get in another inch deeper into her vagina.

I realized my nose was close to her clit; I aimed for it with my nasal digit, tonguing her for all I was worth. Penny was commanding me to more and more heroic efforts, then she jerked and shrieked, and I found a small trickle of moisture coming out of her pussy. I licked it up, and Penny uttered a guttural sigh of satisfaction.

I was surprised when Penny lifted herself up, moving her pussy well away from me. "Joanna's right," Penny muttered, "You do that just right! Give me a minute to catch my breath and I'll show you what I can do!"

I looked her in the eye. "You could just slide down a few feet and I'll show you something else I can do pretty good."

Penny laughed, as she swung her leg up and over me. "Baby! I promised Roger that there was a place no boy toy other than his was ever going to go, so long as we were together. He doesn't care about tongues, but not that!"

Her mouth wasn't what I wanted on my cock; but I'd be happy anyway. She really was good, and I really was horny. She sucked my cock down her throat like JR had done, sucked hard, and then began to bob up and down over my midsection.

It had been an interesting day. I contemplating a number of things, shooting stars was a mistake; I promptly started spurting down her throat. It was a pretty sight, seeing Penny look up at me, a pleased expression on her face, as she continued to stroke my boner with her fingers.

"You liked that," Penny murmured.

"Oh yeah!" I told her, and we both giggled.

She glanced towards the back of the house, where JR had vanished quite some time ago. "Right back," Penny said as she bounced to her feet. I watched her go, smiling to myself. Great breasts! OK buns! Outstanding mouth! Nice clit! What wasn't to like?

When Penny came back, she walked over to me and lay down next to me on the rug. She started kissing me passionately and I responded as well; when her hand went back to wanking my erection, I nearly laughed. Well, evidently Roger and JR weren't swapping head! I felt a momentary burst of jealousy; I'd wanted to get into that very tight box again, myself! But, I consoled myself; tomorrow was Monday, and JR and I would be expected to come right home and do our homework together. Mom wasn't being there. Well, I thought, we're going to be studying something, but probably not school work!

Penny sent her tongue plunging into my mouth, and I responded, doing what I could to welcome it. After a few minutes I was as hard as ever, and Penny pulled back. "Guess what Joanna and Roger are doing right now?"

I shrugged, "Not eating tea and crumpets?"

Penny giggled. "No, nor eating each other. But, hey, I was kinda hankering to find out what you might be able to do with this," she pulled on my erection, "you know where."

"That would be fun," I told her.

"What would be really fun," Penny said with a throaty whisper, "is you doing me from behind, doggy style."

I tried not to show surprise, trying to envision how that would work; it turned out I didn't really need to think about it. Penny rolled over and got up on her hands and knees, now

wiggling her fanny in my face. I got up on my own knees, came behind her and attempted to guide my cock into her pussy.

Penny giggled, which wasn't the most inspiring thing in the world. "No, not there, silly!" I felt her fingers on my cock, tugging me lightly forward, then into a warm, wet tunnel. I nearly choked; Oh my God! I'd been knocking at that other place! That other door! I was surprised I still had a head left; much less the errant portion of my anatomy!

Still, I was in the right spot now, no doubt about it! Penny was almost as tight as JR; and moister; although not up to Marsha's level. I started sliding in and out, and Penny started moving her butt in time with my strokes, obviously getting pretty worked up. No surprise there! So was I!

My next thought wasn't very loyal to Penny, but I thought about how great this would be with JR; Penny had good buns, but JR's were great! I'd loved cupping them in my hands yesterday, I'd loved the round, firm shapes in my hand. I wished it was JR's ass cheeks I was bouncing off right now!

Way before I was ready, Penny started really getting off, moaning and jerking, making it hard to keep pumping into her. I managed to stay with her, but the concentration and effort involved made it so she got there long before me.

Since I wasn't close, even after Penny started to cool off, I kept on, using my hands to stroke her bottom, occasionally putting my hands on her hips to pull her harder against me.

"Oh baby!" Penny muttered, facing away from me. "You still want it! Yeah! Go ahead baby! Let's do it again! Do it! Hard! Fuck me hard!"

It didn't take very long again, before Penny was thrashing and writhing even more than before. "I gotta lay down, lover!" She panted. "Don't pull out!" She lowered herself so that she was laying face down on the rug; I managed to stay with her.

She closed her legs, as I started pumping her again. and I found out a new meaning for 'tight,' and I was in heaven. I started getting pretty worked up myself; so was Penny. Right in the middle of things, I popped out, slicker than a whistle. I frantically tried to push it back where it had been before; it wasn't nearly as easy this time. She seemed tighter than even a

moment before.

I was hot and I kept pressing deeper; Penny was moaning my name, over and over and over. Finally I was buried in to the hilt, and I was close, very close. Penny moaned loudly one more time, and I shot my wad deep inside her.

She gave a shriek and came as well; this time it was me collapsing on top of her, although I was careful as I could, not to put my full weight on her.

After much too short a time, Penny wiggled a bit. "We should get up." Reluctantly, I withdrew, and she stood right up, then held down her hand to help me up.

"We need to wash up," she said, and I shrugged. She led me by the hand to the bathroom off the family room. I was surprised when she got a clean washrag, soaped it up herself, and started washing me.

"There's a first time for everything, I guess," Penny said, sounding muted. "That certainly was a first, not at all like I would have expected."

I tried to be nonchalant, just standing there nodding. I glanced down on my cock, now semi-erect again. There wasn't much, but I suddenly released what the brown stuff was. Oh my God! I'd fucked Penny up the wrong hole!

She did a careful and thorough job; and in spite of the stimulation, my mind was still whirling. What was Penny going to think of a boy who'd done that to her? She got a towel and patted me dry; then washed herself off. I took the towel and dried Penny off, and then she tossed both articles of linen into the clothes hamper.

"I'm not mad at you," Penny said softly. "I'm not. I'm mad at Roger, cause he said he wouldn't. I'm mad at Roger because he comes once, then needs a couple hours 'to recover.'" She hung air quotes around the term. "I guess there really is a difference between an experienced sixteen year old and a novice fourteen year old."

I was embarrassed, but I managed to get out, "Penny, you're nice, really good. You don't need to worry about experience."

She smiled at me, sighed. "It was nice, even if not exactly what I expected. Joanna's right; you're really nice! Really good!"

There was a soft knock on the door. "Tom, you in there?" It was JR's voice.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Could I talk to you?" JR asked.

"Sure, just a sec." I finished redressing, Penny didn't bother. We went outside.

"Could you take me home?" JR asked, her voice small and forlorn.

"You okay, Joanna?" Penny asked. "Roger didn't hurt you did he?"

"No, no... not that. I'm sorry; I'm just not feeling good. I'm sorry, Penny. Please, Tom?"

"Sure, JR," I told her, and we went out to the car. JR was silent.

I got the car started and headed back the right way. "You sure you're okay?" I asked her after a second of silence.

"Could you stop at like a store or something, so we can talk? So I won't distract you?"

I pulled into a gas station, drove up close to, but not blocking the air pump around the side.

"I'm a slut," JR said hollowly when I turned to her.

"You are not a slut," I told her. "Not even close."

"I did it with Roger! I mean, I didn't really want to, but I did it with him anyway. I bet Penny is pissed as hell. She'll probably never talk to me again, because I did it with Roger."

"Well," I said judiciously, "Penny was a little upset: but with Roger, not you. Just because you do it with someone, that

doesn't make you a slut."

"But it wasn't just Roger, it was you too! Two boys in two days!" She was almost crying.

I sighed, time to be a big brother. "JR, I told you when you first started talking about going down on a guy, I told you that guys want to have sex with a girl. You might think it's no big deal, but a boy looks at it as the first step down the road. Even me. You went down on me, I went down on you, and then we went to bed. I went down on Penny, she went down on me, and then we did it. The other night I was with yet another girl. Two in two days? How about three? That's what I've done."

Her eyes widened. "You did it with Tony's cousin?" I nodded.

JR was silent, then looked at me. "I went down on Roger, then he said he wanted to finger fuck me. So I let him. While I was doing that, he wanted me to touch him, so I did. Next thing I knew, it wasn't his finger in there."

JR looked at me. "And I wanted it to be him! And when he wanted to try all these positions, I was hot! God I wanted to do it!"

I nodded. "JR, it's the hardest part. You go out with someone and he wants to hold hands, and you hold hands. Then he wants to kiss you good night, and you kiss good night. Then you touch each other, and then pretty soon, you've done it. When you're with a boy, first thing, before you agree to go out with him at all, you have to think, 'Do I want to do it with this guy?' You can still go out with him if the answer's no, but you have to keep remembering the answer.

"If the answer is, 'I don't know.' Well, you need to keep an even closer watch on things... or you'll end up again like this afternoon. You have to keep thinking about it, making up your mind. And when you reach a stopping point, you tell him; then whatever you do, don't change your mind. Not right then. The next day or week or month, or whatever. But not in the next few minutes. The first time 'No' turns into 'Yes' right away, the boy knows you're on the slippery slope... he's got you."

"You make it sound all cold and calculating."

"Well," I told her, "the boy's usually all hot and calculating. He knows what he wants, and he's going to do what he has to, to get there. Nothing wrong with letting him succeed... but you have to want to do it as much as he does."

I looked at her. "And I've been thinking that I need to be careful as well. It would be real easy right now, three girls in two days, to get a swelled head as well as a..." I waved at my midsection and JR giggled. "I think I did the right thing, each time. Marsha is going back to Seattle, and I doubt if I'll ever see her again. You... you and I are special. Penny just wanted to get back at Roger; that was the one I'm least proud of, even if by that time I wanted to do it with her. Maybe I shouldn't have; she's going to have enough problems with Roger as it is, I think."

JR was silent for a long minute. "Thanks, Tom. I really did want to do it with you this afternoon."

"I know... and I wanted to do it with you, too. But, look on the bright side."

"The bright side?" JR asked.

"There's always tomorrow, Mom will be at work when we get home from school," I told her.

She giggled. "Really Tom, thanks. I'm going to think about what you said." I nodded, seriously. She smiled at me again. "And I really, really wish we had had some time together."

"We will have some, if not now, then later. Besides, I'm going to go to bed tonight, thinking about you! Maybe not as good as having you there, but pretty good!"

"And I'll think about you!" She said, her earlier fears now gone.

I drove us the rest of the way home, and we walked in, said our hellos and adjourned to our respective rooms. I spent a little time on homework, a little time looking out the window, wondering about life and the future. I really had been getting a swelled head; and I'd really put Penny in my sights and went after the Gold, regardless of whether or not it was the right thing to do.

I was a little startled when my mom knocked on my door later. She just about always sent Dad whenever she wanted to 'talk' to me. "Can I come in?"

I nodded, trying not to show my nervousness. She walked over and sat down on my bed, a few feet away from my desk, where I was sitting. That was so uncannily like what had happened with JR the other day, my nervousness redoubled.

"Did Joanna have a fight with Penny this afternoon?" Mom asked flat out.

"I don't think it's the big thing JR thinks it is; Penny's pretty cool."

"It was about a boy, wasn't it?" Mom asked.

I shrugged. "I don't want to talk about JR like this. I wouldn't want her to talk about me, either," I told Mom, looking her right in the eye.

"I guess that's a good thing, but I'm pretty sure it was about a boy, wasn't it?"

I smiled. "Not going to tell, Mom."

She reached out and touched my arm. "I know, that was more or less teasing." She was silent, for a minute. "We've tried to raise Joanna and you as best we could, Tom, your dad and I."

"I think you did a good job. JR and I love you both."

Mom nodded. "I understand. I also understand about having an older brother, too. Your Uncle Craig was a big help to his little sister with all sorts of things. He was my rock, my source of advice and help. There were all sorts of things I couldn't talk about with my mom; I couldn't talk with my dad about anything. So I talked to Craig." Her eyes met mine. "I'd hope you'd do the same thing for Joanna."

She waved at me, "And no, I don't expect you to tell me what she's said or done. I just want you to know, as I just finished telling Joanna, I'm not stupid, and I do care about her, about you. About all of us. Please, if Joanna has problems, talk to her. And if you think it might be too big for



you to handle, please, Tom, talk to David or me. You don't have to get specific, but please, I'm here. We're both here."

"JR and I talk," I agreed. "And I promise to come to you if she ever decides to do something really stupid. Like get her navel pierced. Or turn blonde again."

"Something like that," Mom said with a grin. She was silent for some time, looking at me.

"Once upon a time, I was thirteen," Mom's voice was soft, a little sad. "I didn't have a clue about the facts of life. Mom kind of hinted around things, but I wasn't sure what she was talking about. And after that one conversation, my mother wouldn't talk about it at all.

"I thought it was cool to have a boy friend. Kissing was nice. Touching..." She shook her head. "One thing led to another. He knew what he was doing; I was the one who was surprised when I got pregnant."

I blinked in astonishment. "He didn't want to help, just said, 'Your problem, you should have done something in the first place. Deal with it.'" She grinned wanly. "Craig beat the living shit out of him. Then he got together with a bunch of his friends, scraped together enough money for an abortion.

"I was clueless about that, too. Until years later when I held you in my arms for the first time and realized what I'd so casually let them cut out of me.

"It was Craig who sat me down, talked about the facts of life to me, talked to me about all kinds of things. Kept me from making any more mistakes; helped get me over the ones that I'd made, without a lot of baggage in later life. I've loved him almost every moment of my life that I can remember, but after that it was different. We were close, very close. Still are."

Her eyes bored into mine, driving deeply. She took a deep breath. "He was the most important person in my life until I met your dad. And from the first, I let David know how I felt about Craig." She stopped talking, looked directly at me for a second before going on.

"So, when Craig comes to visit, Joanna moves out of her

room and into the guest bedroom, Craig sleeps in Joanna's bed. And most nights when he's here, I sleep with him."

The last sentence nearly knocked me out of my chair. I looked at her in astonishment, my mind racing a million miles a second, going, zip, zip, zip! Around in circles!

I stared at her, and she grinned at me with a pleased look on her face. Was she maybe teasing? I didn't think so. Just appreciative, I thought, of blowing a fastball, right past me.

"I say all of this for the simple and obvious reason that I hope you talk to Joanna; that if it is a boy problem, you can help her work through it. She and Penny have been friends, close friends, very close friends for too long to let a unthinking mass of male hormones come between them."

"That about describes Roger," I said, my brain partly disengaged. Mom smiled slightly.

"And, then there's the fact that Craig called earlier; he has to be in Chicago for a big meeting on Thursday. He's decided to stop off here for a day or two to visit his favorite sister; he'll be here in an hour or so and your dad and I are going to the airport to pick him up. I'd appreciate it, if you'd find some way to preoccupy Joanna tonight, so that she doesn't get too upset about having to move to the other end of the house again."

Her eyes met mine, directly. I mentally gulped. The good news: Mom was telling me that if JR and I wanted to sleep together tonight, no one would be curious. The bad news: Mom either knew or suspected we already had. And what was that crack about JR and Penny being 'very close' friends? Did Mom suspect that too?

Mom suddenly smiled. "I was Joanna's age once, your age too... I know all about hormones. I know what someone looks like after they've made love. Trust me, one day you'll learn to recognize it, too."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Dad poked his head in my door, looking at Mom. "Craig just called, his plane will be in early." I saw his eyes flick to me, saw Mom's slight nod.

"Sorry, Tom," Dad said. "Ellen and I have to hustle over

to the airport. You'll have to tell Joanna that she has to move for a few days. Craig's going to stay today and tomorrow, leaving late Tuesday."

"Okay." One word, but I felt like I'd just finished a marathon.

Mom got up and started towards the door, she stopped just before she went through it. "And, if Joanna is okay with it, she could even stay with you; then you won't have to make up the guest room." With that, she was gone.

I shook my head, still punch drunk. Receiving tacit permission for JR to slip across the hallway at night had been a stunner. Just a casual, 'If you want to move in together, go ahead.' was another thunder stroke.

I heard Dad's car start, and I shook my head. Well, I wonder what JR was going to say? I smiled to myself, got up and headed towards her room to find out.

I met her on the steps. She was headed downstairs. "Mom and Dad just left," she asked, curious. "Where are they headed? Are they going to be long?" I could read the blaze of expectation there easily. I smiled.

"Good news and bad news. Then it'll knock your socks off."

She looked at me in confusion. I waved towards her room. "They went to the airport. They'll be gone an hour or so. Uncle Craig's stopping in for a few days."

A cloud passed over JR's face. "I'm not moving out of my room this time, I'm sick and tired of having to move every time Uncle Craig shows up!" JR said with considerable vehemence.

"I came to help you move your stuff," I told equitably. She looked defiant. "He's only going to stay a few days; besides," I said, preparing to drop the bomb now on her too. "Mom said if you didn't feel like making up the guest room, you could stay with me in my room."

JR stopped and blinked; looking at me as if she wasn't sure she'd heard what she'd heard.

"She knows about us," I said quietly, "Dad knows about us."

"They know?" JR asked in a small voice.

Now it was my turn to blink; hey, Mom had snuck that right past me! Okay, she knows when someone has made love, but why assume it was JR and me who'd done it, when it could have been us and someone else? Mom had sounded awfully positive. That was something to think about.

I shrugged, "Doesn't really matter that much," I told her, "not if they don't mind about us being together." I paused, and then gestured towards JR's room. "That's why they want your room. Mom's going to spend the next couple of nights with Uncle Craig."

"Mom sleeps with her brother, too?" JR's eyes were wide open in astonishment.

I nodded. "So, let's get some of your things, enough for two or three days, then we can sit on my bed and talk or something."

JR looked at me as if I was crazy. "Mom said it would be okay if I spent the next couple of nights sleeping with you?" she repeated, and I nodded again. "What would Dad say?"

"He was standing three feet away when Mom said it. He was in a hurry to get to the airport to get Uncle Craig."

I stopped then; that didn't add up. Okay, Mom and Uncle Craig had been lovers when they were young. Fine, wonderful. I could understand that. They were lovers now, cool! I hoped in twenty, twenty-five years from now, I was still able to make love to JR; she was nice! What about Dad? He was going to be alone in his room for the next couple of nights. He was okay with the idea of JR spending the night with me. If they knew we'd had sex, they could reasonably assume we were going to do it more, rather than less, sleeping in the same bed. Why was Dad happy with this arrangement? How many times had I heard from him in the last three or four years, words of caution about girls and relationships?

"Mom really said it was okay?" JR asked.

I nodded absently, wondering about Dad. Why was he okay with this?

"Well," JR said, making up her mind, "I guess there's nothing I can do about it. Come on, let me get a few things."

It didn't take long, I got to carry seven or eight hangers of stuff; JR carried a pile of folded things. I carefully hung her things at one end of my closet, and then stood there for a moment, contemplating my closet. I had a bunch of clothes hanging there, but it was a big closet. I moved the dozen or so shirts on the end I'd put JR's things, so she had her own part of my closet. Cool! I thought, maybe she can move in permanently! The thought of all the sex I could want for the foreseeable future was an awe-inspiring vision!

JR was looking at me, when I turned back to her. "We can spend the night together?"

I nodded, and JR smiled at me. "I have to call Penny, and make sure she's not mad at me."

"She was more mad at Roger," I reminded her.

"Please let me do this, Tom." I nodded, and JR vanished downstairs to use the phone.

I contemplated the window, the outdoors and the other great mysteries of nature. Why was my dad not upset that Mom was sleeping with her brother? My mind wandered to this afternoon with Penny. Wow! That had been something!

And as suddenly as I thought of it, it struck me. Why had Penny and I done it? Because Roger was busy with JR. What did Aunt Shirley do, those times they came to visit? Where did she sleep when Mom and Uncle Craig were together? That wasn't so hard to figure out! No wonder Dad didn't object; although it was a little surprising that Uncle Craig was coming by himself.

JR returned and sat down on my lap. "Do you know what Penny said?"

I shook my head. "Not a clue."

"That you were nice and she's not sorry she did it with you, but that Roger is a jerk and she's sorry she ever did it with him. She wants to know if she and I can share you for a while, as our boyfriend."

I raised an eyebrow. "And what do you think about sharing?"

JR smiled at me. "I get to share Penny with you, too." That was a thought!

She wormed around a bit on my lap, and then giggled. "You're all hard and horny, aren't you?"

I could only shrug. "Pretty much all the time."

JR laughed openly. "And the thought of sharing two horny girls?"

"Not helping. The girls can help though."

She reached down, rubbing her hand over my crotch. "We're not tiring you out?" She had an impish, mischievous grin on her face.

"Not yet," I replied, and JR started working on my zipper. In a second, she slid it down and was fisting me, then took me in her mouth. It was exquisite, and after about ten minutes I decided that I'd waited long enough for satisfaction, and let go.

I came spurting into her mouth, and she looked up at me. "You see, it isn't as bad as you said," she told me.

"I never said it was bad, I told you that it wasn't the simple thing you think it is. Boys want to do it to you; but I want to do it with you. As long as you know that's what we want, and make up your own mind what you want to do... that's fine. But just sucking..." I shook my head. "Like with Roger, that might be how you start, but after that it's not as far as you think to home base."

She giggled, her hand still on me. "Girls like to score too, you know."

"I'm learning that," I told her. "I like it." I reached down and pulled her up onto the bed and starting kissing her. In a few seconds our tongues were twirling, and I had my hands on her breasts, rubbing and stroking them through her top. It was nice, really nice, and was only interrupted by the slam of

car doors from the driveway.

JR pulled away, and smiled a lazy, happy smile. "I guess we have to go be nice to Uncle Craig."

I kissed her nose. "Just remember when you're talking to him, that because he's here, you and I have the entire night together."

"A school night," JR reminded me. I groaned and she laughed. "We'll just have to go to bed early."

"That'll surprise Mom and Dad," I said, and then remembered that tomorrow was a workday as well; odds were Mom was going to want to go to bed early, too. Once again, I shook my head in amazement that such a thing could have gone on all of my life, and I'd never noticed it.

We did put in an appearance, and we sat around talking. Around seven, Mom and Dad decided we should go out to eat, and that pretty much put the end to my hopes of making an early night of it. Still, it was a surprisingly relaxed evening; and for a change, Mom openly flirted with Uncle Craig.

We got home, and JR and I went down the hall towards my room, and stood inside for a minute. She yawned, and I smiled at her. "I'm tired," she said and I nodded, I felt it too. "Maybe we can go to bed early tomorrow."

"After school," I told her, and she nodded and grinned. "Then maybe later as well."

"Boys!" JR giggled, and I patted her on the butt.

"Go get ready for bed," I told her.

She looked at me, then at the bed. "This is going to be fun! But I'm sleepy! You won't make me stay up, will you?"

I shook my head. "We can just cuddle, kiss good night." She nodded, and vanished down the hall towards the bathroom I usually used. JR returned a few minutes later, wearing a smile, carrying the nightshirt she usually wore.

I gave her a hug, and she tossed the nightshirt on my desk. "I want to sleep bare with you."

I nodded, and shucked out of my jockey shorts. JR eyed my erection. "Sleep, sleep," she said. I nodded, pulling back the covers. JR climbed in, and rolled on her side, facing away from me. I climbed in behind her, pulled up the covers and snuggled up to her, spoon fashion, my erection sliding into the crack of her bottom.

Memories from earlier raced through my mind, me pumping Penny doggie style, then the mistake that had happened. Mistake or not, that had been pretty nice.

JR murmured softly, "Put your arm around me." I reached around her, and she took my hand in hers, and led it to a spot on her ribs a few inches below her breasts. "Good night, Tom," she whispered.

"Good night, JR," I replied, and kissed the back of her neck. For a few minutes there was silence, and I realized that JR must indeed have been tired, because she was sound asleep. I contemplated my erection in the crack of her ass, my hand a few inches away from her breasts. Did I want to wake her?

Honestly, the answer was yes. Instead, I closed my own eyes, and let go, falling asleep almost as fast as JR had.

Monday, March 18, 2002

I slept well, and when I awoke it was to the sound of my alarm clock ringing in the start of a new day. JR wiggled her butt, and said, "Get the alarm, sleepy head!" I hated to move away, but I did.

JR sat up, grinned at me. "You were a good boy last night!"

"I was," I agreed, "and you'll find out I'll be a good boy again after school." She grinned, and went to the closet, got out clothes and vanished towards the bathroom. I lay in bed, stroking my rod, happy in my heart.

Mom poked her head in my room, saw what I was doing. I blushed, but she pretty much ignored me. "We're going to have breakfast here in a minute, Tom. Tell Joanna." I nodded, and it seemed to me, she stared at my hard on for a second, before turning to go. Except I wasn't as hard as I'd been a moment



before. I got up, got my things, and when JR was out of the shower, went in myself.

The day seemed like most of the others in my memory; Dad drove JR to school, Uncle Craig stayed home, and Mom was going to work later. I was scheduled to pick up JR but not Penny on the way home.

Same old stuff, I was a junior, bored out of my skull with my classes. Tony and I met between our second and third period classes. "You did pretty good with Marsha," he said grinning.

It took a second for me to remember that as far as Tony knew, Marsha had been not only my first, but also my one and only. I decided that best friend or not, there was no need to enlighten him about JR or Penny. "You weren't doing badly yourself," I told him with a grin of my own.

He laughed. "I never do badly. Marsha said you were really nice; most guys don't like girls that are taller than themselves."

"She's nice," I agreed. "And it wasn't that big of a deal." I dropped my voice, "She was a perfect size."

He gave me a little punch on the arm, "We need to get you a real girlfriend, not one who's already gone!"

"Yeah!" I told him. Sure, and I'd get in mega trouble if it got out I had two eighth grade girlfriends I was supposed to be 'sharing.' Just what had JR meant by that? Parallel or serial? Tony turned and walked towards math, and I headed for history, contemplating what it would be like to be in bed with two girls at once.

At lunch, we were sitting in the commons, munching snacks from the snack bar, talking. Behind me I heard a girl say quietly and firmly, "Leave me alone, Roger!" Followed a second later by the same voice saying much more firmly, "I mean it, Roger!"

I glanced behind me; I knew the girl slightly, Shannon was her name. The boy was, I thought, younger than her, but he had his hand on her leg, under the table. She tried to scoot away, but he followed. "Stop it!" she hissed, still trying to keep the dispute private.

I turned around, reached out and tapped the boy on the shoulder. He turned to look, and I smiled at him. "I think she wants you to stop." I paused for dramatic effect. "So stop."

I've never seen anything like it in my life.

He saw me, his face turned beet red, and without any warning, he uncorked a punch at me, from where he was sitting. I leaned back a little fast, nearly fell off my own chair, but it was enough so he fanned air in front of my face. He jumped off the seat and started towards me; I got up too.

"You've butted in one too many times, Ferguson!" He swung again, and I moved to one side. "Damn you, stand still!" He swung a third time and this time I pushed his fist away.

Suddenly all the clues came to together. "Roger Parker, I presume?" I muttered. His face, still red, went almost purple. He lunged at me, grappling me, dragging me to the floor.

I might have been an inch shorter than him, not as heavy, but I'd been around the block a few more times. Besides, Roger was just plain lousy at fighting. After a few seconds, teachers were pulling him off and demanding an explanation. "He swung on me," I told them, not telling them why he swung on me. 'Cause I screwed his girlfriend yesterday, after she caught him putting it to my sister.' Like sure, that was an explanation.

Roger had calmed down a little, even though he was still breathing hard, and had to listen to a dozen kids rat him out for starting the fight, and tell the teachers I'd not even punched back; several of the boys said it with derision; yeah sure, like my parents would understand my getting suspended for fighting?

Eventually, Roger was sent to the office, I was admonished to 'keep out of trouble.' I nodded, and started to sit back down. Instead, Shannon touched my arm.

"Thanks," she said.

"No problem. I was wondering if I'd ever meet Roger Parker face to face. No wonder he's so unpopular with girls."

She grimaced. "He and I dated in the fall. I guess he had

a fight with his latest girlfriend."

"I guess he did. Penny is my sister's best friend."

Shannon looked at me, started to say something, then didn't. "Thanks. Tom, isn't it?" I nodded. She smiled at me, turned and left the commons.

I sat back down next to Tony, who'd sat still through out. I didn't blame him, he'd been in trouble a few times; the teachers were always dumping on him. "What was that all about?" Tony asked.

I shrugged, "He was going with Penny, but they broke up yesterday. I think he blames me." I shook my head. "This is kinda personal, Tony. I'd just as soon not go into it."

Tony glanced around, punched me on the arm. "Tom," he said, his voice low, "probably everybody at school knows that Joanna and Penny are queers."

"Tony," I said firmly, "like I said, it's personal. What JR and Penny do is their business; not yours, not mine." I waved my hand towards the school office. "Not what's his name's." I was tempted to say something about Marsha, but decided against it.

"You know about Marsha being queer?" he asked suddenly, catching me off guard. I'd just been thinking about it.

"Personal, Tony," I told him, repeating it again. "I don't talk about other people behind their backs. Not JR, Penny, Marsha. Not about you and Sue Ellen."

He nodded at me, and then grinned. "So Joanna and Penny are back together, eh?"

I made a zipping motion across my lips. "My lips are sealed, Tony."

He grinned just as the warning bell sounded. We got up and went to our afternoon classes.

After the last bell of the day, I stopped at my locker, got what I needed and turned to head out to the parking lot. Shannon came up to me, and smiled. "Can we talk for a second?"

I nodded, checking her out. Shannon was thin, with reddish blonde hair, pretty short. Small breasted, maybe even smaller than JR, it was hard to tell through her blouse and bra. "Roger stopped me after sixth period. He says he's 'gonna get you'." She hung air quotes around the last three words.

"He hasn't had much luck so far," I said with a laugh. "I didn't even know who he was; I just didn't think it was right, him bothering you like that."

She smiled at me, and I felt myself grow hard. Gosh, Tom, you have a one-track mind!

Shannon sighed. "He told me he was going to tell everyone that your sister isn't that good of a fuck, neither is Penny, and that they are really queers."

"Lesbians," I told her, wanting to get a little bit of moral high ground, to make up for my hormones now interested in yet another outlet.

She blinked, and then laughed. "Oh yeah, I guess so. Roger can be pretty mean."

"Well, he's going to be surprised; Penny and JR aren't exactly in the closet. It would not be unreasonable to assume that they didn't want to do it with him for inadequacy reasons."

Again Shannon blinked, then giggled outright. "I never thought about it that way! Oh my God! He starts telling people about them, and that's what they're going to think!"

"Shoots himself in the foot," I agreed.

She glanced at me. "You're pretty cool."

"Thanks," I said, trying not to preen and strut like some guys I knew would do. I made a quick decision. "Want to go to the basketball game Friday night?"

She looked at me steadily for a bit, before nodding. "Cool," I murmured, and asked for her phone number, which I got. That was cool too, because she wrote Shannon Leary on the top, and now I knew her last name as well!

I rushed over to pick up JR, knowing I was a little late. "Guess who I met at lunch?" I told her, as we started towards home. "Roger." She looked at me in surprise. "He was trying to feel up Shannon Leary right there in the commons," I went on, recounting what had happened. "I asked her if she'd like to go to the basketball game on Friday night."

JR looked at me, then nodded. "Mom talked to me a bit before I went to bed last night. She said that you and I have to be sure to keep our own lives; that too much togetherness, that's what she called it, wouldn't be good for us."

"Do you think Penny will be pissed?" I asked, anxious not to make her angry with me either. JR shook her head.

"No, and in any case, I can stay over with Penny on Friday. I'll give her something else to think about."

"Shannon said that Roger was going to tell everyone about you and Penny." I went on with that part of the story, including the part about Roger being inadequate. That reduced JR to hysterics, and as soon as we were home, she had to call up Penny to tell her.

Uncle Craig appeared and I talked to him while JR was on the phone. After a bit, he looked me in the eye. "Ellen told me that she and Dave explained to you about her and I."

I nodded and he went on, "They told me you were helping your sister like I helped her." Again I nodded, not really sure what the point of this was.

"Can I ask you a question?" He paused. "Two questions?"

"Sure," I said, curious what they were.

"Why do you call her JR, and absolutely no one else does?"

"She asked me to; asks anyone else who calls her that, not to."

"Do you know?" he persisted. I shook my head; I liked it, I'd never really thought about it. It was just something JR wanted. Why not?

"And are you comfortable with your mom and me?"

I nodded, "And does Aunt Shirley sleep with Dad?" I asked back. He nodded. I glanced out of the corner of my eye and saw JR standing at the door to the room. How long had she been there?

Uncle Craig saw where I was looking, and turned to look at JR. "Hello, Joanna."

She walked towards us and stopped a few feet from Uncle Craig. He smiled at her. "Could I ask you two questions too, Joanna?"

"I like Tom to call me JR because I always knew in my heart, we'd be together one day, even if it was just once. And I wanted Tom to have a special place in my heart; the only one in that place."

"And are you okay with your mom and I?" JR nodded, and Uncle Craig smiled. "Shirley said you'd be." JR nodded again. "Ellen and I are going to meet David for dinner, we thought you two would like a little time together." He turned and walked away.

My eyes went to JR and she shrugged. "Penny's on her way over," JR said quietly. I raised an eyebrow. "We both want to do it with you again." I once again contemplated if they were talking about serially or parallel. An interesting question, but one, I thought, that would shortly be resolved.

A while later, I heard a car pull up outside, and JR went to the door; there were a burst of voices, and with a start, I realized I could hear a voice I didn't recognize.

Curious, I went into the living room from the family room and found that not only Penny was there, but Penny's mom Kim and another girl, Penny and JR's age. I didn't recognize the girl; she was tall and thin, she would have been cute, except it looked like she was pretty upset.

"... So it's kind of an emergency, Joanna," Kim was telling JR.

JR met my eyes, then said evenly to me, "Jennifer's parents found out she's been with Penny and me. And another girl before us, a black girl."

I managed not to blink; even harder was resisting the temptation to glance at Penny's mom at the announcement. Evidently, I was about the only person who hadn't heard about JR and Penny up to this weekend. "And," JR added, "now they've kicked Jennifer out. Her parents kicked her out! Can you believe that?"

"If she stays with us," Kim said, and I glanced at her, "well, I expect staying with two lesbians is going to get someone in trouble, if not Jennifer, then Penny or me."

I nodded like I understood, but I didn't. Kim Wells was a lesbian too? She and Mom had been friends forever!

"So, I'd like to know if Jennifer could stay here for a couple of days, until things settle down, and we can work something out." Kim waved towards town. "I talked to Ellen a bit ago, she said it would be up to you two." She smiled slightly, "And that I should understand that sleeping arrangements right now in the Ferguson household are different than they had been because of Craig's visit."

I looked at Jennifer, a tall thin girl, not as tall as Marsha, but pretty tall, nearly six feet. Pretty black hair that was done up in a ponytail, tied tight. She looked back at me, defiant and angry. What's to like about being kicked out, then shopped around to the lowest bidder?

I turned to JR. "Your call, it's okay with me," I told her.

"At least for tonight," JR said then, nodding. "She can sleep in the guest room."

Right across the hallway from JR and I; and I'd already noticed we were both a little noisy during lovemaking. "Fine, then," I said, and turned back to Jennifer. "Welcome to the Ferguson household, Jennifer." I grinned at her.

She met my eyes. "Thanks," her voice was as mild as her expression was defiant. For the first time I put together the voice and the expression. Not defiance; fear. How could you get the two confused? I watched her for a few seconds. Because she doesn't want to show her fear, she's covering it up by trying to look defiant.

Kim waved to JR and the other two girls. "You three go out to the car and get Jennifer's things," She then waved to me. "I want to talk to Tom privately for a few minutes."

They left, and she looked me in my eye. "Can we talk privately, perhaps up in your room, for a bit?" she asked.

"Sure," I told her, and then led the way upstairs, curious as hell. I walked into my room, and then Kim came along behind me and closed the door. Again, I was really curious.

"Ellen and I didn't have much time to talk this weekend," she said without preamble. "She did tell me that you and Joanna had gotten together."

I tried not to show surprise. Was I the only person in the family who didn't talk to everyone else about who I was sleeping with? The next thing she said seemed to confirm it. "And now Penny has been with you; a little surprise, but I'm glad she's no longer going with Roger. I never liked him."

I nodded, not at all sure now what I wanted. Why was everyone talking about this stuff? For sure it was going to get out, and there would be hell to pay. I'd told JR about Marsha. Was that going to go all over too?

Kim smiled at me, shaking her head. "Which is why I'm here, Tom. To explain things a little. You got a start on it yesterday, finding out about Ellen and Craig. Probably figured out about David and Shirley." I wanted to roll my eyes in disbelief; instead I simply nodded.

"Stop that!" Kim said suddenly, angrily. "You don't understand!"

I met her eyes. "You're right about that," I said softly.

"In college, four girls were assigned as roommates in the dorm. Four girls drawn out of a hat. Me, your mom, Shirley Marshall and Keisha Jones. Three white girls and a black girl. We were all pretty bright; but Keisha wasn't very well prepared for college, she'd had a terrible high school, didn't learn hardly a thing.

"We sweated bullets, the four of us that first semester.



All four for one and one for all four, that what our motto. Our goal was to get all of us through the year, come what may.

"One day, Keisha aced a math test; something she'd never gotten close to before in her life. I'd been helping her prepare for that test for a week. We were excited and happy, deliriously happy; Keisha started hugging and kissing me. The next thing I knew, we were in bed, lovers." She laughed. "We'd just reached our second orgasm when Shirley and Ellen walked in on us." She shook her head. "Gawd! I thought I was going to die!" She smiled at me, and I continued to look at her, more curious than ever.

"To make a long story short; by the end of the term, we were all lovers. We took turns, spent a lot of time in bed, all four of us. Every combination you can imagine. Then Craig showed up for Spring break; he smiled and Shirley decided that it was something she just had to try. Then me, then Keisha. We were a little embarrassed we'd all seduced our roommate's brother; little did we know that Ellen had been there first, it was all a plot.

"That summer we moved out of the dorm and into the apartment right next door to Craig, Dave was his roommate. Their families had more money than the rest of us, except for your mom, and so there was just the two of them.

"Keisha thinks a guy now and then is like an appetizer at a restaurant; a pleasant way to warm up for the real thing. Ellen was spending more and more time with Dave. By the end of the summer, Ellen was pregnant with you. That next year, we helped keep Ellen in school. The year after that, it was Keisha's turn to have a baby by your Dad; she put it off until right after graduation. I was pregnant with Penny then too; Craig is Penny's father. Shirley, it turns out, can't have babies the usual way; she says being a virtual mom has advantages."

I blinked, but no longer as surprised as I'd been before. "And when Penny and Joanna discovered sex together, their parents had no objections. None." She grinned at me, "Not even their extended parents."

There was a short silence, and we could hear the girls across the hall, putting things up. "Tom, when Jennifer was at our house, she did make love to Penny twice, once she was with Joanna. Mostly, though, she was with me."

Suddenly I understood.

As bad as it would be if people found out a high school junior was doing it with grade school girls, it would be really awful if it came out that Kim and Jennifer had been together.

"I'm not going to tell anyone," I told her. "Ask anyone, I just don't talk about other people." Certainly a lot less than the rest of them.

She nodded. "I know, and I know I didn't really have to talk to you. But I wanted to, Tom, because it's been something we've taken for granted for a long time, but something you should have been told about long ago. At least when we told Penny and Joanna about your mom and I."

Kim saw the question in my eyes. "Just last Thanksgiving. It was a mistake," she repeated, "not to tell you."

"I don't think I was ready for it then," I said honestly.

"Joanna and Penny both said you had 'way more experience' than either of them. Ellen says you almost never go on dates."

"I've had two in my life," I told her. "Dates." It felt like a dentist was drilling on my head; I said it anyway. "One time on one of those dates, I was with a girl."

She grinned at me. "And I've always told Penny it isn't the amount of experience you have, it's what you make with what you have."

I was unprepared when she stepped close, put her arms on my shoulders and stood a foot away. "And one day," Kim said softly, "when we have a little time, I'd like to add to your store of experience."

Kim leaned close and kissed me, full on the mouth. I was startled and surprised, but not so much that I didn't kiss back. And quickly learned the difference between school girls and adults when it came to smooching; the kiss was an order of magnitude hotter than anything I'd ever imagined, much less had done.

She pulled back, a small smile on her face. "The girls

were right, you are an incredibly quick learner!" She glanced at the closed door, and then sighed. "But, this isn't the time or place." She brushed my lips with hers again, and then stepped back.

"What your mom and I decided was that when they get back from dinner with Craig, I'll take him home with me, Joanna can go back to her own room for tonight, and hopefully Jennifer won't see anything she shouldn't." Again Kim sighed, "Because it's pretty certain the social worker busy bodies are going to get involved, asking questions."

I nodded at that; I'd had a few worries about bedroom arrangements myself. Kim turned around and went back out, joining the three girls, all chattering away in the spare bedroom. I looked at them, shaking my head. I'd actually made love to half the girls in that room, and Kim, Penny's mom had more or less offered me a chance to make it three of four. Go for batting a thousand? I contemplated Jennifer; decided that maybe it might be a good idea to take things slow.

After a bit, the three moved down to the family room, while I carried JR's stuff back to her room. It seemed like only a few minutes before my parents and Uncle Craig were back, then Uncle Craig packed his things, and he, Penny and Kim left for their place.

Mom was firm, that evening. "I know you are a guest, Jennifer, but even so, we have a responsibility to you as well as for you." Jennifer's eyes were strange, almost like she was afraid, yet at the same time angry. "So, in bed early, by 9 pm, you and Joanna spend a little time on school work between now and then. Tom's a whiz, he's always glad to help; if he can't answer a question, come and see me.

"Tomorrow, we'll be getting up at five thirty am to give us time to all get ready; it's a school day. Okay?"

Jennifer nodded.

"Anything you'd like to ask?" Mom told her.

"Joanna showed me the bathroom, where things are," Jennifer said, her eyes on Mom. What had Kim said? That Mom and Kim were lovers? Did Jennifer know? Was that something of concern to Jennifer?

"I know I'm a bother," Jennifer went on. "I don't want to make a fuss."

"I know, dear. There are times though, when things are out of our control and we have to do as best we can."

"Dave called your parents a while ago, told them where you are." Mom looked a little angry. "They said they don't care, more or less, or words to that effect."

Jennifer and JR studied, I studied, and my parents read. About nine, JR and Jennifer retired for the night, and I decided I'd retire to my room; maybe sneak a peek at Jennifer, or failing that, do a little reading of my own.

The door to Jennifer's room was open, I glanced in, saw her sitting on the bed, reading a magazine. I recognized it as one of my dad's Economists, a really boring news magazine from England. She was wearing a long flannel nightie, and looked up when she saw me go by.

I smiled at her, and went into my room; wishing she'd been nude had been pretty lame, I thought. Pretty lame. When you've just gotten kicked out of your family, are in a strange house with people you don't know, you don't need some lame guy staring at you, particularly if you were gay.

I decided that I was tired, and that I wasn't going to get to sleep with JR tonight after all. In fact, today had been a pretty dry day, when it came to sex. I tossed my clothes in the hamper, except for my jockey shorts, turned off the lights and crawled under the blankets. If I hadn't had any luck elsewhere, I thought, I'm going to entertain myself. The weekend had given me plenty of material, and a full-grown woman had told me I was a good kisser, and that she wanted to make love with me. That, and I had a pretty girl sleeping across the hall. Who knew what I might see tomorrow morning at shower time? I squashed the lame thoughts once again.

I took my erection in my hand and started stroking it; I laughed after a second. In three days I'd been spoiled by three different girls giving me blowjobs! I was contemplating that when I heard a soft sound. I jerked my hand away, looked up at the door.

I saw a dark shape there, one who closed the door behind her, before she came close. Jennifer said quietly, "You're awake, aren't you?"

"Yeah." I was tongue-tied; my imagination doing all sorts of things, all resulting in my erection growing even more erect.

She walked close to the bed, and then stopped a few feet away. "I was talking to Joanna earlier." She paused for a second. "She told me that last night the two of you slept together." She stopped again. "Not like, making love, just slept. You put your arm around her, hugged her, and slept."

"Yeah," I replied, still not sure what to say or do. Was my sister crazy?

"She said, if I were to ask, you'd do it like that with me too. Just put your arms around me, hug me. No sex."

"Sure," I told her, mentally wincing. What was Jennifer going to do when she found out I was hard? Freak out? I meant what I said about leaving her alone.

"It would mean a lot to me," she said quietly. "More than you can imagine."

I mentally crossed my fingers. "Jennifer, sure. But, well, I have a hard on. I mean, I won't do anything, but I wanted you to know."

Jennifer was silent for a second; then I heard something like a giggle. "Joanna says I can trust you; you promise?"

"I promise," I told her. "I just can't help it about..." I sighed.

She giggled a little louder. "You're a boy." With that, she climbed in my bed, snuggled down next to me. At least she was still wearing the flannel nightie, and there wasn't much flesh-to-flesh contact. I put my arm around her cautiously, not wanting to inadvertently put my hand someplace where it wouldn't be welcomed. Like with JR, she took my hand in hers, pulled it around to her stomach, and held it there.

Unlike JR, she wasn't as eager to cuddle back against my boner, and I didn't press it, as it were.

"Thank you, Tom," she said in a soft voice.

I applied a little pressure with my arm. "Any time, Jennifer."

Her fingers lightly pressed mine, then like JR the night before; she was asleep in an instant.

I laughed at myself. If nothing else, I can make a career out of cuddling girls to sleep. I seemed to have a real knack for it. At least it wasn't as much of a temptation to move my hand to cup one of Jennifer's breasts as it had been with JR last night. Or scooting an inch or two closer and nestling my hot rod in the crack of her butt. I sighed, went to sleep.

Tuesday, March 19, 2002

When I awoke, it was because JR bounced the bed; the sun wasn't up yet, even if my sister was. I cracked an eye at the clock, it was ten after five.

Jennifer rolled over on her back, and JR grinned at her. "Was Tom good, Jennifer?"

Jennifer nodded.

JR smiled. "I told Jennifer if you were good, I'd give you a reward." With that she shrugged out of her own nightshirt, to stand bare next to the bed. Then she tossed the sheet that had been over me back on to Jennifer, and then climbed in with us.

For the first second, I thought she was going to sit on my face, but I was wrong; what happened was that she placed her bottom over my face, and her head over my erection, and started to work on it. Oh my God! I thought, sixty-nine! I'd never understood it, but now I did! What JR was doing with her mouth was lovely, and there was her bare pussy just inches from my eyes. I lifted up off the bed, put my hands on her hips and gently pulled her into contact with my mouth. Again, the position was different than what I'd experienced up until then, not to mention the view.

For one thing, my eyes were focused on the dimpled rose bud of JR's backside, causing me to remember what it had been like with Penny, when I'd been in the wrong place. Still, I

concentrated on my tongue in her pussy; mildly wishing I could reach her clit as well from this position, but it was impossible.

Whatever I was doing, JR seemed to like it. She stopped sucking on my erection for a second and moaned; when she started again it was with a renewed vigor that made me come in just a few minutes.

As I soared down from my high, I heard a fast series of "Oooh! Aaahhh! Oooh! Aaahhh's!" coming from close by. I turned my head and was rewarded by seeing that Jennifer had pulled her nightie up around her waist, and her fingers were pistoning in and out of her pussy. Even as I watched, Jennifer started to pant, "Ah! Ah! AHHHHH!" The last one rising in volume and intensity as she came.

"Now this," JR said with a laugh, turning around and lying down between Jennifer and me, "is the right way to start the day!" I smiled and Jennifer giggled. JR leaned over and kissed Jennifer lightly on the forehead, then did the same to me.

"I'm going to tell you two of Jennifer's secrets," JR told me, her face inches from mine. "One is that growing up, her parents never, ever, not even once said 'I love you' or gave her a kiss or a hug. Jennifer needs to be hugged, cuddled and kissed; she has a lot to make up.

"Second, is that unlike Penny, me, Mom, Kim, some others I could name. Jennifer doesn't want to do it with a boy. But she isn't as finicky about being hugged and cuddled."

"I don't know about kissing, either," Jennifer said softly.

"I told her you were cool," JR went on. "And unless it was something she wanted, you'd never even try to get more friendly than Jennifer wanted."

"That's true," I told them. "I might want to, but I wouldn't."

JR smiled, and Jennifer nodded. "So, you're going to understand that Jennifer and I are off to take our morning shower," JR said with a giggle, and helped Jennifer out of bed.

I got up myself, puttered around my room, and in a few

minutes, Jennifer called out from the hall that the bathroom was clear. I glanced up, and saw her standing in my door, nude. I swallowed; of all of the girls I'd known in the last weekend, Jennifer was far and away the prettiest. JR had a completely bare pussy; Penny's was nearly bare. Marsha's had been a thick mop of curly hair. Jennifer had a thin veining of very dark hairs, a cute curlicue of color accentuating her pubes. She had protruding pussy lips, a dainty flower of femininity, like a lotus blossom. Breasts that were shaped like some ripe fruit, with largish, very red nipples.

I came erect in a fraction of a second; Jennifer saw it and smiled and shook her head, before she turned around and headed for her bedroom. I sighed mentally, contemplating a backside with two wonderfully tight globes of her ass. God, what it must have been like as a cave man, when you could bop a desirable woman over the head and drag her off to your cave!

Even as I thought that, I remembered JR's mouth on my erection, licking and sucking. Marsha's; Penny's. Wouldn't want to do that with a woman I'd bashed over the head and dragged back to the cave! A lot to be said for taking your time and getting her interested and motivated to want to do the same things to you, that you wanted to do to her!

At lunch Tony sat down next to me, and handed me an envelope. "That's from Marsha," he said, as I looked at him, curious. "They came in late last night, and we took them to the airport." He sighed. "I got my car back."

"Thanks," I told him. I debated opening the letter, and decided not to while Tony was there.

He confirmed my thinking a second later by adding, "Marsha said you were to read it when you could be alone." I could see his curiosity, but I had no more intention of assuaging it, than he would be interested in giving me a blow-by-blow description of him and Sue Ellen.

"Gotta find Sue Ellen," he said, echoing my own thoughts. "Back in a few."

He vanished and I opened the letter.

"Tom,



I thought and thought about how to start this, I c  
to use 'Dear Tom,' because that might make you think I  
you I don't ever want to see you again.

The other night was something I'd never imagined w  
happen, oh, I wanted to do it with you, but I didn't re  
to come, or that it would feel so good; I thought only  
woman would know the things that would make it possible  
enjoy being made love to.

It was possible; you were as good or better than a  
ever been with; if you were here, I'd want to drag you  
and do it again and again and again.

I went out with you wanting to do it, just to say  
it, so I could tell my friends boys were interesting, b  
were better. I thought it would be easy to walk away f  
never see you again. Better, I thought, for both of us

Except I wish you were here, with me now. I want  
much, Tom! I just don't know what to do. I dream of y  
me, rubbing my breasts, sucking on my clit, your tongue  
pussy; your hard male member plunging into me. Oh God,  
these things!

I don't know how it will work, but I'm going to fi  
come back and visit. In the meantime, here is my addre  
phone number, please, please, please write me!

Your lover, Marsha."

Underneath her name was an address in Seattle, an email  
address and a phone number.

I stared at the letter, and reread it a couple of times.  
Hot!

How, I wondered then, do you write someone and tell them,  
you were my first. Then I made love to my thirteen-year-old  
sister, and liked it better than with you? Then I made love to  
my thirteen-year-old sister's thirteen-year-old lover in the  
ass. That I woke this morning to a blow job and watching  
another gay thirteen year old masturbate herself to cumming? I  
gulped; life was interesting, life was complicated, and sex  
didn't necessary make things easier. More fun, maybe, but more  
complicated as well.

There was simply no way to write to Marsha and tell her that I no longer cared; if for no other reason than because I wasn't sure what I thought any more. Sex with Marsha had been the first in my life; if I knew then what I knew now, it would, I was certain, have been better for both of us.

Tony and Sue Ellen sat down at the table, and I saw Tony was looking at the letter. "Personal," I said seriously.

Tony nodded and didn't say anything. We talked for a while about the forthcoming basketball games lined up for the weekend; as sure as shooting, the varsity boys were going to get stomped; but the girls looked sure to be in the finals, and maybe were good enough to go all the way to State.

I stopped at the middle school, was surprised for a half second to see Jennifer with JR and Penny, but then remembered. Too much on my plate! I thought, but I smiled and we went home.

To my intense disappointment, everyone was there. Mom and Dad, Uncle Craig and Kim.

"Family meeting time," my dad said, and waved the three of us to seats on one side of the table. I looked around; the geometry was interesting. Mom and Dad and Uncle Craig were on one side; Kim was at one end, JR, Penny, Jennifer and I were on the other side, facing the three adults.

"We talked to your parents again today, Jennifer," Mom said. "I don't want you to think we were doing it behind your back." Jennifer nodded. "To put it simply, they don't want you back. They feel that you've made a life style choice that is incompatible with theirs."

"No big deal," Jennifer said, her voice indifferent.

"Except," my dad interjected, "children are not kittens that you can take out to the woods and turn loose. 'Incompatible' or not, they have obligations in regards to you."

"I don't want to go back," Jennifer said, looking at Dad. "I'd do anything not to have to go back."

"At your age Jennifer, it isn't possible for you to live on your own," Mom said gently. "Dave and I have offered to let you

stay here. There are, however, some conditions."

Jennifer's expression turned as wary and defiant/fearful as she had been yesterday afternoon. "First, we talked with Kim. We asked her not to see you for a few days, at least."

"Why?" Jennifer was now very angry.

"Because intergenerational relationships aren't something people should engage in without a lot of thought," that was Uncle Craig. "There is not a person sitting on this side of the table who hasn't indulged themselves a time or two... and it will happen again. All we are asking is for you to think about it for a few days, and then you can do as you please, both of you. With my blessing, amongst others."

Jennifer blinked, and so did I. Kim and Jennifer weren't the only 'intergenerational' relationship? What did Uncle Craig mean by that?

Dad took up again; it was like watching a wrestling tag team. "We have secured from your parents a limited power of attorney, allowing us to deal with your school, doctor, dentist, the like. You are, technically, simply visiting us, as if you'd gone to visit someone in your family for the summer.

"We have rules in this house, rules that you will have to follow. Chores, school work, everything," he went on.

"And if I don't agree?" Jennifer asked, still wary, but less angry.

"Your choice," Dad told her. "Then, reluctantly, we would notify Children's Services, and you'd end up in the foster home program."

"As poor a choice as you could make," Kim said. "Dearest Jennifer, please be patient. Relax, chill. Spend some time thinking; it won't make any difference to me. I care about you, and that's not going to change." Kim paused. "I love you, Jennifer."

Jennifer put her head down on her hands and started crying. Reflexively, I reached out and put my hand on her shoulder, gave her a little squeeze. I saw JR had done the same thing.

"We all love you, Jennifer," JR told her softly.

Jennifer lifted her head up, tears streaked down her face. "I don't know why... I don't understand."

"Kim spoke to us about your parents," Uncle Craig's voice was gentle. "That's not how we raise our kids, Jennifer. Never. Here, you are among people who will care about you, love you, if that's what you want. We are more than willing to have you a part of our family, Jennifer. If it's what you want."

For the longest time, Jennifer looked at each of us in turn, one after another, starting with Uncle Craig, and ending up with Kim. "Yesterday," Jennifer said, her voice quivering. "Joanna told me I was being silly; that in this family, love is something that is common as dirt, and treasured as gold. She told me that I could spend the night with Tom, and he'd put his arms around me and hold me and comfort me... and out of love and respect for me, that's all he would do."

"I didn't believe her. I told her that I'd had lovers who told me that boys aren't like that; they want sex and don't care how they get it. That men dominate women, subjugate them. That, for boys, there is just sex and power, and anyone who gets in the way of that gets raped or beaten or both."

She motioned to Kim. "Kim told me different. Penny told me different. Joanna told me different." A pause, "And Tom showed me different."

"There are good people in the world, Jennifer," Mom said, "and bad people. Some are men, some are women. Some are old, some young. Some people are vile and evil, some are saints; most someplace between. You have to judge people as individuals, Jennifer. Not as groups."

Jennifer nodded, staring intently at Mom.

"In this family," Mom went on, "the women and when old enough, the girls, have always set the limits. With each other, with the men in our lives. I personally argued Kim's side, that there be no waiting period. Jennifer, it would please me if you would take a day or two to think about it; but if you were to go to Kim right now, I wouldn't mind. The others here would accede you the right to make that choice, but they think you would be making a mistake."

"This is a family," Mom waved around the table. "This is barely a quorum of all of us, there are others you haven't met. Yet. Stay with us and you will. And you will find that they will come to love you, just as Kim has, as Penny, Joanna and Tom; each in our own way and in our own time." She beamed at me, and I felt proud of my self-control.

"I want to stay here," Jennifer told us. Then sighed and added, "There's really no choice."

"No smart one," Kim said with a smile.

"I'd like to go lay down for a while," Jennifer told us. There was a concerted nod around the table.

She got up, stopped, and then looked at Mom. "Would you come cuddle with me?" Mom met Jennifer's gaze, then nodded. The two of them vanished into the back of the house, while the rest of us sat stiff. I was as sure as I could be that there was going to be some 'intergenerational' cuddling and then some, going on. That it was going to be my mom and a girl my sister's age.

That was going to take getting used to.

It was Uncle Craig who broke the silence that developed. "I have a 1 am red eye to catch later. I was wondering, Joanna, if I could take a nap on your bed?"

"Sure, Uncle Craig," JR told him. "I've got some stuff on it. I'll move it."

They got up together, and headed for her room. With a start, I wondered if Uncle Craig was going to get any sleep from his 'nap?' Intergenerational with a vengeance! I looked straight ahead; Dad and Kim, Penny and I. Could it really be?

"Tom," Kim's voice was soft and level, "if you have a minute, I'd like to thank you for being nice to Jennifer."

I started to say that JR had already done that; then I realized that wasn't what Kim was talking about. I stood up, met her eye. "We could talk privately in my room if you like."

Kim nearly guffawed; Dad did chuckle. Penny contributed,

"Cool line, Tom!" Nonetheless, I led the way to my room.

Passing the door across the hall, my eye was drawn to the three-inch gap there. Mom was kissing Jennifer, her hand on one of Jennifer's breasts, stroking it. I stared for a long second, and then opened my door. Kim walked ahead of me, and when I came in, it was she who pushed the door closed, and latched it.

"Jennifer knows I have other interests," Kim said bluntly. "On the other hand, she's not as much of a voyeur as you guys are."

Kim reached out and started undoing my shirt.

I contemplated what a cool, debonair, suave man of the world would do right then; I decided that tackling her and pulling her into bed wouldn't make the list. She was very quick, then equally quick in taking her own things off. She reached out, took my hand, and led me next to the bed.

"Just last week, Ellen told me," Kim said, standing holding my hand loosely in hers, facing me, "that so far as she knew, you were a virgin. A date Friday; I understand you got in around midnight. Joanna said the next day she went down on you, and you talked her out of her panties. Sunday, Penny told me that she was just going to go down on you, until she found that Roger was going a lot further with Joanna than they had agreed. Personally, I think it was a dumb agreement, but that's not how you renegotiate an arrangement. So, she said, she did it with you. Both say that you are in a class by yourself.

"Joanna, of course, has no experience to base that on. Penny doesn't have much more of a base line."

I reached out, and stroked her cheek, then deliberately scoped Kim out. She was my mom's age; but still trim and fit, just a little thickening around the waist. Of all the women I'd seen naked to date, not many as she'd pointed out, she had the largest breasts, breasts that were a little pendulous. Huge nipples, very light in color. A bush more like Marsha's than her daughter's or JR's, very thick and large.

I finished, looked back to her face again. "Kim," I said evenly, and she met my eye. "I don't talk about who I've been with or what we've done."

She smiled. "I think that was a polite request to do the same," she waved at the door. "They are going to know we are here, together."

"That's okay," I told her. "But if asked, I'm simply going to shake my head, and if pressed, tell whoever that it's none of their business. Even if they catch us doing it at high noon in the commons at school."

Kim was silent a long moment. "Here I am, stark naked with a sixteen year old boy who's sporting a huge erection, and I'm the one being taken to task for gossiping too much," she sighed. "I think you're right though; for years we've talked among ourselves, this and that personal detail. It's second nature. Maybe for us, okay. You, Joanna, Penny, and above all Jennifer... maybe not such a good idea."

I nodded, and she smiled. "All that being true, now what?" She asked.

I glanced at the bed, and she giggled, sounding very much like her daughter. "Morality stops at the bed's edge," Kim said quietly.

I shook my head. "What happens in bed, stops at the bed's edge. I never said I didn't want you." I stepped close and lifted her chin and kissed her hard, as she'd shown me before. It didn't take long for her to warm to the task; then we were exchanging tongues; hands running over each other's bodies.

"God," Kim muttered after a second, my erection in her fist, "you have no idea how flattering it is to get this kind of a reaction from a boy your age."

I ran my hands over her breasts, hefting them, chaffing her very large nipples. I'd never seen nipples expand like hers did, one second they were bigger than a silver dollar, but relatively flat. Now they grew like small mushrooms; a hard erect center, perhaps three quarters of an inch tall and almost that around.

I leaned down and kissed one, then sucked it into my mouth, while working on the other with my free hand. Kim started running her fingers through my hair, finally groaning in pleasure. "And you're sure you haven't been talking to anyone else? Taking notes?" she said, looking at me, eyes bright.

"No," I told her.

"Well, I have and I did. I'm told that when you've licked my pussy, I'll know I've been licked!" She sat down on the bed, spread her legs, pulling her pussy lips wide apart. "Eat me, Tom!"

For the next half hour, I did exactly that. Kim tasted very much like Marsha had; her pussy was like Marsha's too, large and accommodating to my tongue. It was hot and furious. Like the others, when I was busy with her pussy, Kim was occupied stroking her own breasts. When she came, she shuddered and gasped, "More, harder!" Her breathing was a fast pant.

I found I could work her clit with my thumb, while holding her pussy lips apart to get my tongue inside her. Kim's next orgasm came a few minutes later. I hit a rhythm and for quite a few minutes Kim was twisting and writhing in ecstasy as I brought her off.

Suddenly, she reached down and hauled me bodily up, grabbing my erection, pushing it into her pussy. "I hope to God," Kim said, starting to move against me, "your cock is as good as your tongue."

She had her hands on my butt, pulling me tightly into her; after I stroked into her a few times, she wrapped her legs around my butt too, and we moved fiercely and passionately together.

Except, Kim was like Marsha; much larger inside than JR or Penny. There was a lot of friction, but not quite the right amount to get me off; of course, this meant I spent a lot of time trying to come. After a few minutes, I saw Kim was looking at me.

"You can't get there," she murmured, breathing hard and fast.

"Close," I said, a little winded myself.

She grimaced. "Before Penny, everyone said I was so tight. Since then, no one has said anything like that." She slowed, moved. "Put your legs outside mine." It was distracting to move like she'd asked, but I did. At once, I noticed things fit



much better, there was much more contact; her legs were closed now.

"Better?" Kim asked and I replied breathlessly in the affirmative. Suddenly I remembered the other day, with Marsha.

"Oh yes! Cross your legs!"

Kim chuckled. "Not yet, Tom! Still a ways to go, before we sleep tonight!"

She started moving; I started moving. The sky moved; I surely did. Then Kim crossed her legs and it was like with Marsha, only ten times better. I think I emptied my entire life's blood into her; Kim was shaking and trembling, still trying to hump me back.

I collapsed across her, suddenly more tired than I'd ever been in my life. I felt her hands stroke my forehead, then a kiss. "You have a right to be tired, Tom! That was really, really fine!" She kissed my forehead again.

I found my eyes about an inch from one of her breasts; it was a natural move. I lifted my tongue a few inches, took her into my mouth and started suckling. Kim gave a very throaty chuckle, hugged me tight. "Enough, already!"

I looked up at her, curious. My fatigue gone, I was ready to do it again. Kim saw my expression and laughed out loud. "You, Tom Ferguson, are a sovereign remedy for feeling old! That and you are a randy goat!"

She kissed me lightly. "Tom, Jennifer is a fragile person right now. She knows, in her heart, we love her. But she's not sure. Today wasn't good for her, not good for her at all. I think it's best that she didn't have to hear us rutting and enjoying ourselves for too long."

I thought and thought, and then I lifted my eyes to hers. "Kim, I know you and Mom are ever so much more experienced than I am. So are Uncle Craig and Dad." I pictured them, then. Mom with Jennifer, Dad with Penny, Uncle Craig with JR. My heart stopped, and I felt dizzy; crazy jealous. Then the world turned right side up. Yeah, I'd done it with them and others. Who was I to limit someone else's choices? Did I want them limiting mine? Either I could choose, and so could they... or we all

stayed home and played mumbeldy peg.

I felt Kim's belly bounce against mine. "Not, mind you, that I don't intend to come back for a repeat!" She kissed me again, and I kissed her; a very thorough kiss. She got up and dressed, and I watched her as she did. Kim smiled at me, blew me a kiss. "Later, Tom. And Tom..." I looked at her. "You're a good man, Tom. Keep up the good work. If Jennifer wants to cuddle again tonight, give her a kiss from me to her, on the tip of her nose." With that, Kim was gone, and I fell back on my bed, exhausted.

I awoke much later. I was surprised at finding a warm body with me in my bed; more surprised at finding it was Jennifer. I leaned close, kissed her on the nose, like Kim had said. Jennifer's eyes snapped open, visible even in the dim light of my room. Fear, stark fear; replaced very quickly with recognition.

"Tom," Jennifer said quietly. "You surprised me."

"Good evening, Jennifer," I told her, then kissed her on the nose again. "The first time, that was hello from Kim. This time it was hello from me."

Jennifer smiled at me, and I felt ten thousand times better than I usually felt. Not all like if I was making love; but pretty good anyway.

"It's a little after ten," I told her. "I don't know about you, but I missed dinner."

I was unprepared for Jennifer to giggle. "I thought you ate out with Kim?" she whispered.

I spluttered, and then decided, what the hell? If Jennifer knew, what was the point of pretending? Even as I thought that, I saw her eyes. Her words might have been joking but she looked absolutely terrified. I could see that Jennifer was close to the edge of something; something not good.

"Jennifer..." She looked at me, curious, but again there was something dark, buried behind her eyes. "Joanna wants me to call her JR, just me, because she says that I'm a very special person for her. No one else is supposed to call her that." Jennifer nodded, not sure where I was going.

"I haven't talked to you much, I know from the things people have said, you've had a rotten life. Here," I waved around the house, indicating more than just my bed, "here I want you to be my Jenny, a special, unique person, the only person I will ever call that."

She stared at me. "Jenny will always mean you, to me. We can be friends, real friends." I grinned then, and realized I really meant it. "As near as I can tell, just about everyone in this family is having sexual relations with the rest. For you and me, Jenny, it will always be what you want. I promise you that you can come to me anytime, ask me to hug and cuddle you, and I will. No sex."

"I like sex," Jenny said quietly.

I shrugged and asked the obvious question, "With me?"

She bit her lip. "I don't know if I'd like it with any man, but if it ever happens..."

I reached out and touched her fingers. "Jenny, it's never going to happen. And I know why; I know what you've never told anyone."

Her eyes widened for a moment, again the fear blazed in them. I watched her force herself to relax, and then she shook her head. "There's nothing."

"Yes there is. Did he tell you he'd hurt you, if you told anyone?" Her eyes changed back to the dark, wild thing I'd seen before. There was more than fear there, abject terror, anger and frustration. More raw emotion than I'd ever known in my life, outside of an orgasm and as different from that as night from day.

I waved towards my door. "Ask, ask anyone. I don't tell. Not even to my family, nothing. It's your life, Jenny."

She buried her head on my shoulder, crying buckets, sobbing and shaking. We sat there for most of an hour, before Jenny finally sat up. She looked at me, reached out and touched my face. "All my life, no one cared. Not about me. Oh, everyone wants to have sex with me; but..."

She shook her head in frustration. "I like it with Kim and Penny. Joanna. Your mom was nice... but it's just sex they want."

I shook my head. "Kim loves you, really loves you. JR, I know personally; she likes sex, but she doesn't do it with someone she doesn't care about. Mom?" Again I shook my head. "Mom is the nicest person I know. Penny, too."

"Then why did Kim come in here with you?" Jenny asked seriously.

"Sex," I agreed. "I'm a little mixed up right now about it myself; as near as I can tell, my family believes in having sex with anyone they love. It's nice, really nice, making love to someone." I pursed my lips. "I don't know why they do it with so many different people, I don't."

"But there's love here, real love between them, it's more than just sex. There is care and love and understanding and concern; everything in the world that makes the world a good place to live."

"I can't begin to imagine what it was like for you before. It must have been horrible." I waved at the door a third time. Was a genie going to appear? I smiled inwardly at the thought. "But I do know that no one in this family is going to let someone bad through the door into our house, someone who could hurt you."

Jenny hugged me tight, but this time there were no tears. When she started to speak, her voice was hollow. "As long as I can remember. As long as I can remember, since I was five or six. Penny was so proud of learning how to go down on a boy; I've been doing it as long as I can remember. I was seven when I was big enough to be fucked the first time. And almost every day since."

I hugged her, hugged her tight. "Jenny, no one will ever force you to do anything here," I grinned then, "except homework and housework."

She smiled slightly, then her eyes started to leak again, her voice changed to a dead monotone. "I had a cat. At Christmas my brother told me that if I ever told anyone, he was going to show me what would happen to me. He cut off her head,

chopped her up into pieces and ground them up. Then flushed the pieces down the toilet. He told me if I ever told anyone, he'd do it to me too. He made me watch! He made me watch!" Jenny kept crying then, crying and crying and crying and crying.

I told myself over and over and over again, I will not vomit. I will not get up and find her brother and rip his living heart out and step on it, spit on it.

I petted Jenny like I would a cat, stroking her hair, murmuring soft sounds of tenderness and affection. Sometime around one in the morning, Jenny fell asleep in my arms. But there were still tears running down her cheek.

I write this in the dark of the night, alone with my thoughts, a person a few feet away who's been hurt more terribly than I can imagine. Tonight is darker than any other, tonight I feel like the caveman in his cave, growling at the entrance if anyone so much as looks this way. I can't sleep.

Wednesday, March 20th, 2002

It was Mom who came to wake us, just before five thirty. I sat at my desk, trying to keep my face expressionless.

Jenny bounced out of bed, and gave me a small smile, vanished towards the bathroom. Mom turned to me as soon as Jenny was gone.

"I came by last night to see how Jennifer was, to see if you wanted anything to eat. I heard her crying through the door. No screams, no shouts... it was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life, deciding to trust you and then walking away."

It seemed pretty clear that Mom wanted me to talk about why Jenny was crying. I, on the other hand, would rather visit the dentist.

I shook my head. "Everyone in this family talks too much about their own and other people's lives," I said, a little hotly. "I told Jenny I wasn't ever going to talk about her personal things." I paused, and then realized that I couldn't leave it at that.

"So I'm not going to say a thing. But tell everyone you'd

usually talk to that if they see her brother coming, to lock the door and call 911."

Mom froze, stared at me in shock.

I could see thoughts running through her mind; it was like I was the grown up, and she was the kid.

"And here, we've been thoughtlessly taking our pleasure from her." Her voice was bitter and angry; at herself, I was sure, and at Kim.

I shook my head. "Mom, it's not like that at all. Yes, you've made love to her, but it was Jenny's choice as much as yours."

"I can't believe we couldn't see it!" Mom said, obviously angry.

"You have no idea. I didn't tell you a thing; you're guessing."

She looked at me, laughed, and most astonishingly, gave me the finger. "Time to get ready for school, Tom."

Later, Mom announced she wasn't feeling well, and was staying home from work. Uncle Craig had vanished sometime in the middle of the night. I caught JR's eye, and she smirked. I was sure Dad had slept with Penny last night as well. I couldn't see anything different about the way they behaved together. I hoped Mom had found a moment to talk to Dad.

I drove JR and Jenny to school, dropped them off. Jenny looked a lot better, JR still had a smirk.

At lunch, Shannon sat down to me and we talked; it was pleasant, I found, not to have to deal with all of the family crises even if just for a short time. Just before the period ended, I asked Shannon if she would mind if I brought along JR and Jenny on Friday, and that I'd drop them off after the dance. "Joanna, that's your sister," Shannon said, and I nodded. "Who's Jenny?"

"One of JR's friend, she's staying with us for a while. Moved in."

Shannon looked at me, as if she was on the verge of saying something. "You know Roger?" she said at last, just as the bell rang. I nodded, not well, I thought, but well enough. "Roger and Keith Driscoll are big buddies with Jennifer's older brother Sam. Son of Sam, that's what Dawn Driscoll calls him. Totally creepy. He's a freshman at State this year. Keith isn't much better, and Roger Parker is... Roger."

"Beyond totally," I said with heat, remembering what Jenny has said.

The last thing I remember is Shannon looking at me again, curious.

After school, I ran into Tony and Sue Ellen on the way out to my car, Tony waved and I went over. "What did Marsha have to say in her letter?"

I rolled my eyes. "She wants to see me again."

Tony laughed. "That'll be a trick!"

"You never know," I told him, "stranger things have happened."

He smirked, "Gotta go, Sue Ellen and I have a little quality time ahead of us." He vanished, and I picked up JR and Jenny. We got home, and Jenny promptly went in her room and closed the door, JR vanished and I went up to my room and started reading.

My mom came in after a while, sat down facing me. "I talked to Kim, she's going to talk to Penny. I've talked to Joanna." I nodded, not sure what she'd told them. "I told them we had to make sure that Jennifer's brother doesn't bother her any more."

She reached out, touched my cheek. "As a parent, you worry about your kids. It's part of life, being a Mom or Dad. You worry about them getting hurt, physically and emotionally. You hope they grow up happy, making good choices."

"I worried about you; everyone else in the family is oversexed, yet you didn't seem to be in a rush at all. I was worried, these last few years, wondering if we'd messed you up." She kissed me on the forehead. "Some things, I guess, are like

vintage wine. The longer you wait, the better they taste. I have this feeling you are the most responsible person in the household, right now."

I blurted out the words; because I was afraid it was true. "Mom, are you hitting on me?"

She blinked, and then pulled back, seeming flustered. "I... no... yes..." her voice trailed away. She laughed, "Okay, yes. I'm that horny."

I sighed. "I am too." I looked at her, like I'd never looked at my mom before. Nice breasts, really nice. A pleasant face and an even better disposition.

Mom's eyes went towards my bedroom. "Right now, Joanna's not studying together with Jennifer," she said softly.

I thought that through and laughed. I looked into her eyes, instead of at her breasts. Did I really want to do it with my mom? Mom had sex with Dad, Uncle Craig, Aunt Shirley, Kim, and now Jenny. With a blink, I realized that Mom hadn't talked as much as she could about who she'd been with; there was that 'intergenerational' stuff too.

"About now," Mom said dryly, "you probably figured out more."

"Have you been with JR? Penny?" I asked, not entirely sure I wanted to know the answer.

"Penny is a mink; she just plain loves to be loved. But Joanna, too. Only once, during the Christmas break when you were at Tony's. Kim's been with Joanna two or three times. You were the first boy Joanna was with. Now Craig." She huffed a sigh, "Dave's thinking about Joanna, this was his first time with Penny."

I took a breath. Do it? Or not? Our eyes were locked; then I smiled and reached out and ran my hands over her breasts. They were loose under her t-shirt, and more than filled my hands. After caressing them for a second, I felt her nipples grow taut. Very different than any of the others; her nipples were small, the centers were tiny, but turned as hard as rocks.

I met her eyes; the warm compassion I had known all of my



days was there, and for a long second I could see nothing else, feel nothing else in my universe.

Something inside of me seemed to break; something like a psychic maidenhead. I leaned close, kissed her using every bit of the knowledge I'd acquired in the last few days. I wrapped my arms around her, kissed and kissed; a kiss that was returned in full measure. I started undoing her blouse, my fingers fumbling with the buttons in my haste.

I reached between us, unsnapped her jeans, and pushed them down over her hips, doing the same thing for myself. Without a word, Mom hitched her legs around my midsection, and we stood there, me buried inside of her, plunging in and out. Like Kim and Marsha, there wasn't the friction of JR or Penny, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the moment; when I came, it was the sum of all those orgasms that had come before.

When sensation returned, I was standing with my arms wrapped around her bottom, supporting her weight, our tongues still joined in the kiss I was never, ever going to forget.

Mom gave a small laugh. "I never realized how strong you are." She kissed me again, less passionate. "And I'm very, very greedy. Tom, lay down on the bed."

I'm not sure what happened next; I walked over to the bed, her legs still wrapped around my waist, sat down, swung my legs up, and then she was atop me, moving on top of me. She reached for one of my hands, led it between her legs. "Rub!" she commanded. I found her clit, long and thin. I rubbed.

It was an incredible feeling; seeing her pleasure, knowing it was me that was making her feel it. She met my eyes, grinned, and started moving faster, sitting up, with me deep inside her. I responded in turn, while trying to keep rubbing her clit; the demands of the moment became confused, lost in a welter of sensation and emotion before I came again.

I pushed as hard upwards as I could, she pressed down the same way, both of us feeling the glory of orgasm. After a long moment she leaned down, put her lips against mine and kissed me very very hard for a minute, then pulled back.

"That could easily become addictive," Mom told me. "Easily." She giggled, then lifted her midsection up, and

pressed down again. "Still hard!" She laughed, a deep wonderful laugh that filled her. "The energy of teenagers!" She kissed me lightly again. "God, I wish I still had it."

"You have something," I told her, "something that you never need to apologize for. No matter how old you are, or how old anyone else is."

"Hold that thought for another twenty years," she murmured, and then glanced at the nightstand and the clock. "I have dinner to get ready, you and the girls need to do some homework."

The mundaneness of the return to the regular world shocked and surprised me; I ran my hand down over her bottom, pressed her against me, lifting my body to move inside her. She giggled, kissed me lightly again. "Like I said, the energy of teenagers! Patience, dear heart, patience! In time, all things are possible."

She got up, and started to put her clothes on. I lay on one elbow, watching her. "Mom," I said softly, suddenly nervous. She looked at me, her panties in place, now pulling up her jeans.

"The other day, JR was afraid because she'd slept with Roger and me, that made her a slut." I sighed, couldn't believe I hadn't thought about this before. "I've made love to a whole lot more than two this week."

She finished buttoning her jeans, then sat down on the bed next to me. "Like I said, Tom, in time all things are possible. You haven't made love to a single person who didn't want you to love them in return. More importantly, with Jennifer, you didn't make love to someone who it would have hurt immeasurably. There are more people in the world, even still; ones you've met, ones you haven't. All of them capable of being loved. How many, who... that's got to be up to you and them.

"Oh, people say you can't do what we do in this family; maybe they can't, I don't know, I can't speak for them. Their opinions about what we do range from seriously negative to downright punitive; what you and I just did would land me in jail if you told anyone about it, perhaps you too."

I shook my head, shocked even at the thought.

"I'm not saying don't be judgmental; you have to take care, because if you pick wrong, you could mess up a lot of lives. On the other hand, if you don't pick, you could miss the one true love of your life.

"You are some kind of special, Tom. Very special; oh sure, different from your dad, and Craig, different in a number of ways. Craig is a take-charge guy, a leader. Dave is careful and thorough, looking at everything a hundred different ways before he goes ahead. Both of them have unmatched sex drives." She smiled and reached out and took my hand.

"Don't despair; don't think badly of yourself just because you've discovered something new and wonderful, and are enjoying the learning of it. Don't be ashamed of feeling the way you do. You are a decent person Tom, a kind, wonderful, decent person. Fundamentally decent. Not one of us is jealous of the others; instead, we are so pleased to be with you, to share what's inside of us with you."

She stood up again. "Now, homework! Life doesn't stop, Tom, just because you feel good!" She grinned and left, and I lay back, staring at the ceiling. What had I thought? That sex made life complicated? I shook my head in mock despair. That was back when life was only a little complicated!

I looked at the door, thinking again about what I'd just done. My mom, I thought, is a deep person; deeper than I'd ever thought... and I'd thought she was pretty deep before. Some of the things she said, just now, what she'd said before, all of it impinged on me at once.

At a guess, this wasn't going to happen often, not with Mom. Intergenerational did happen, but for the most part, not that often. Was that why Mom had been unhappy or unsure about Kim and Jenny? Not because they were doing it, but because they were doing it a lot? Mom had said Dad had never slept with JR, but was thinking about it now that he had been with Penny. Sometime, I thought, I need to talk to JR and Penny, learn a little about the chronology; several times I'd felt like I was on the edge of knowing something, something important... but I couldn't put my finger on it.

Of course, there were all of these surprises. Marsha, JR, Penny, Kim, Mom... I smiled, got up and put my clothes back on;

got my schoolbooks and spent a minute in the bathroom before going into the family room where JR and Jenny were already doing homework. I sat down, both of them smiled at me. I smiled back.

A while later, Dad was home, dinner came. It was more relaxed than ever I remembered, and at the end, Dad looked around the table, his eyes stopping on Jenny. "Everything ok, Jennifer?"

Jennifer nodded, and Dad smiled. "I think it's time we introduced Jennifer to another of the Ferguson pastimes."

I saw Jenny's eyes go wary, I wanted to kick Dad. Evidently, so did Mom, because she said firmly, "Dave's talking about Scrabble, Jennifer. He's just pulling your leg."

Jennifer nodded, and Dad sighed. "Don't ever dance with me either; when I don't have my feet in my mouth, I can't figure out what to do with them. I'm sorry, Jennifer, what I said wasn't very nice."

"It's okay," Jenny said mildly.

"Dad wants to play," JR said with a giggle, "because he usually wins."

"Superior intellect," Dad said, buffing his fingernails on his shirt. We played for most of an hour; it was cool, Jenny won, and Dad came in last. Dad looked at the score pad after it was all over and sighed. "Where does the time go? One day you have these little diaper-fillers, then bamm! They beat you at your best game!"

"Right now, Dave, you and I have a turn at the dishes. We have three youngsters who haven't spent nearly enough time cracking the books this week," Mom said. We all helped clear the table, then back to the books.

I saw Marsha's letter in my notebook; I contemplated it. I wanted to reply, but didn't know what to say. Also, what if someone else read it? Like her parents? Marsha didn't say anything about them knowing about her being gay, probably hadn't said anything about me to them either.

I got up and went into the kitchen, where Mom and Dad were

talking and doing the dishes at the same time. "Can I make a long distance call?" Mom lifted an eyebrow, and I added, "Seattle, I'll won't talk very long."

"Sure, go ahead," Dad said. "We already pay the phone company enough to feed all the starving children in India; what's a little more?"

I nodded, went and got the cordless phone from it's cradle in the living room, went upstairs to my room and called Marsha. It took a second, not hardly long enough to get psyched up; I'd only called a girl once before in my life.

"Marsha, this is Tom."

"Oh Tom!" she said. "Gosh, it's nice to hear from you!"

"I wanted to tell you that Tony gave me your letter."

There was a pause. "He didn't see it, did he?"

"No, Tony's cool. Curious, but cool." I paused, unsure what to say next. "I wanted to know if it would be okay to send you a letter back."

"Sure." I could tell she was puzzled.

"I wasn't sure if your mail was private."

She said seriously, "Yes, my mail is private. I get home first every day except Saturday, and Saturday I get it from the box anyway. Besides, my mom and dad would never open anything for me. Email..." She shook her head, "I don't have an address of my own."

"There's a couple of places you can get your own account," I told her. "I don't do a lot of surfing, but I have my own account. I'll put it in the letter."

"My mom's just across the room," Marsha's voice was suddenly soft, "Did you like my letter?"

"Hot!" I said with a laugh. "Like you!"

"You too!" she replied. There was a pause, and then Marsha continued quietly. "You were something else!"

"You were, too."

"I'm still not sure about us," she told me.

"Right now, Marsha, I'm not sure about much of anything. I do know that I'd like to be your friend, even if we never see each other again."

"I'd like that," she said simply. "I really would."

"Well, I'll write you a letter that will knock your socks off." I told her, wondering just how in the hell I was going to do that.

She giggled. "I'd really like that." She drew out the word really.

"If I was there," I said steadily. "I know where I'd like to kiss you."

"I know how I'd like you to," Marsha agreed, her voice quiet. "Wish I could talk freely."

"We have a cordless phone. I'm sitting in my bedroom."

"Thinking about me?"

"Thinking about you," I agreed.

"Hard?" I wasn't exactly sure what she was asking, but there was one answer that made sense.

"Yes," I said, reaching down to stroke my suddenly hard rod through my jeans.

"I wish I was there," she said softly. "But tonight I'm going to think about you too." There was a sound of someone else speaking on the other end. "I'm going to have to go, Tom."

"I do too. I promised I wouldn't talk long."

We said our goodbyes, and I pushed the off button. Was I being unfair? Leading her on? Telling her I wanted to go down on her again? I pulled my erection out of my pants, started to seriously stroke it. Yep, if Marsha was here, I'd want to do it

with her again. Or JR. Or Penny, Kim... Mom.... God! I thought, I'm a horny goat!

I sighed, reluctantly putting it away; need to keep in the mood, I thought, to write my letter. I went to my desk, spent about twenty minutes handwriting it; much more explicit than even Marsha had been in her letter.

I finished it, was looking it over to make sure I'd not said anything more than dumb, when I heard a knock on the door. I got up, putting the letter into my notebook, and opened the door.

JR smiled at me. "How are you doing?"

I grinned at her; she was wearing a thin shirt that showed off her breasts quite well. She saw the direction of my gaze, and giggled. "I was thinking the same thing," JR said, her voice low. "Tom, I asked Jennifer if I could sleep with you tonight." I glanced at my clock; it was half past nine. Tomorrow was a school day and I was tired. I was also horny.

"Jennifer said she really likes sleeping with you, but that it wouldn't be fair if she hogged you all the time, just to cuddle."

"Just don't try King Solomon's solution," I said with a grin.

JR looked at me in confusion. "Cut the baby in half," I added, sketching a vertical line from my forehead down across my chest.

JR shook her head. "You're weird sometimes, Tom." Then she giggled and dropped her voice. "Jennifer said she wouldn't mind if the three of us slept together. And if you and I wanted to..." JR's eyes met mine and I knew what had gone unspoken. "She wouldn't mind. I wouldn't mind either."

Well Tom, the ball's in your court. Jenny had watched us the other day when I'd eaten JR out while JR went down on me. Jenny certainly looked like she hadn't minded watching at all, then. And I'd enjoyed watching Jenny masturbate. What wasn't to enjoy? "Sure," I told JR. "I'll be ready to go to bed in about ten minutes."

"Us too."

They trooped in a little later, each wearing a nightie; I didn't quite moan in frustration, but I thought about it. Then Mom poked her head in the door. "Dave and I wanted to say good night."

They came in, Mom wearing a nightie not much different than what JR or Jenny were wearing, Dad was wearing a wrap-around towel that he liked to wear after a shower; one that had a snap in front.

Mom came over to me, kissed me solidly, and for few seconds, I felt her tongue touch mine. Then she smiled, stepped back and went to JR.

I was startled when Dad stepped in front of me; it must have shown in my face. He chuckled, shook his head. "No Tom, it's a double standard, I know. I've never had a problem with Ellen and her girlfriends; Lord knows I like them myself. Just I'm not a guy sort of fellow." He waved at my bed, "I'd tell you to sleep good, but that would kind of defeat the entire purpose, wouldn't it?"

I nodded, and Mom had finished a very similar smooch with JR that she had shared with me. Then Dad kissed JR the same way, while Mom kissed Jenny solidly.

At the end, Dad surprised me again, by simply putting his hands on each of Jenny's shoulders. "In this house, the women always have the right to choose what they think is best for them. Ellen loves you, Joanna loves you, Tom loves you... I've never met a cute girl yet that I'd kick out of bed. But, Jennifer, bed isn't the entire universe; you are welcome here for as long as you want to stay, even if you sleep alone."

Again I was surprised, Jenny put her head down on his chest, against his bare skin. "Thank you." It was muffled, and after a second she lifted her head up, grinned slightly. "I got you all wet." I could see tear drops on her face, on Dad's chest.

"As long as they are tears of happiness, Jennifer, anytime. Besides, I'm about to get a shower before bed." He smiled at her, and then they left.



JR walked over to my bed, flipped down the covers. "You need a bigger bed, Tom."

Jenny and I both giggled.

JR gestured at me. "You can get the light in a second. The way we're going to start this: Jennifer on the far side, facing me. I'll be facing her, Tom, you snuggled up against my back." Then JR nodded to me and I got the light, while she and Jenny crawled under the covers.

I came in and snuggled against her back, putting my arm around both her and Jenny. "Love you both." I told them, feeling enormously good. I felt JR's hand fishing around in my crotch, she tugged on my erection until it was at the entrance to her vagina; I put my own hand down there, helping out, not wanting to do what I'd done with Penny by accident.

She was dry and tight; it took quite a bit of work to get started inside her. I knew JR was kissing Jenny while I was doing this, which I thought was cool, and the thought of being in bed with two girls making out kept my interest up, even if the process was slow.

Perseverance finally paid off, that and JR was getting steadily wetter, and obviously enjoying it as well. JR reached out and took my hand, lightly resting on Jenny's arm, and moved it to one of her own breasts, and pressed down on my hand. I could take a hint, and I started stroking JR's breast.

It was an interesting position to make love to someone, I thought, but easily at the bottom of my list; it was difficult to thrust sideways on the bed. I was really moving the bed, too. JR took her hand away from where it had been, and for several seconds I continued to concentrate on JR's breast and sliding in and out of her pussy. After a bit I realized that JR was finger fucking Jenny; Jenny had started the Ooohs! and Ahhs! like she'd done in the morning.

I found it all seriously hot; I heard Jenny's breath catch as she came; JR clenched her ass cheeks around my erection buried up to the hilt and I came as well. I pushed hard one last time, kept it in as deep as I could go. After a minute, I felt JR's buns relax, and JR uttered a little sigh. "Is this good or what?" she murmured. "I hope everyone is good and sleepy now."

Jenny whispered softly that she'd been sleepy before.

JR leaned close, kissed Jenny on the forehead. "Sleep tight, sweet sister. Sleep tight."

I considered pulling out of JR; I felt her twitch, clamp down slightly as I started to move. Seemed to me that she was telling me she liked me where I was; so I stayed there.

In spite of how interesting the position was, the day came up and knocked me up along side the head. I was sound asleep in seconds.

Thursday, March 21, 2002

When I awoke, I could see it was starting to get light outside; there was no way to see the clock from my position without moving. I was still hard, still in JR's pussy. The alarm wasn't going off, so I knew it wasn't five thirty yet; I considered starting to do JR again, decided not to. I wanted to save myself for later, because I wanted to do JR right, after school when I could spend some time at it. And doing it with JR with Jenny in bed with us was okay, but I was uncomfortable with it.

I contented myself with running my hand over JR's side, stroking her velvet smooth skin. JR murmured something I couldn't make out, and then I could tell she was awake. "Morning, Tom," she whispered softly.

"Morning, JR." I felt JR move, I could see in the dim light of the room that JR kissed Jenny on the forehead. Jenny opened her eyes, smiled so pretty. Jenny kissed JR back; then I felt a hand fumbling around JR's crotch. My God! That was Jenny's hand! I blushed with embarrassment; but it was Jenny who giggled.

"Have you two been doing it all night?" Jenny whispered.

"No," JR replied, "but Tom stayed hard all night! He's some kind of wonderful!"

Jenny moved her hand, not a frightened spasm, but deliberately. After a second I realized she was still in the vicinity, stroking JR's clit. I stayed pretty much still,

letting Jenny work my sister's pussy; after about ten minutes the alarm went off, and JR spasmed in both surprise and orgasm.

I pulled out a second later, reached out and got the alarm. "Well," JR said dryly, "I'm really awake now."

JR scrambled over me, getting out and standing next to the bed. She stretched, and I admired the view greatly, promising myself that I was going to make love to JR over and over and over again; and I was going to love every second of it. She saw I was staring at her; JR in turn checked out my midsection.

"I'm going to nick name you indefatigable," JR said with a giggle. I saw Jenny lean over and look, cocked on her elbow.

"That's too long," Jenny said after a second. "How about Indie? Like Indiana Jones."

JR thought about that, and grinned. "Our name for him, eh sister?"

Jenny nodded, then surprised me by rolling over on top of me, pausing just a second, her pussy pressing against my hard on. "I love you, Indie," Jenny whispered to me, then was off, standing next to JR.

JR shook her head, sighed. "Jennifer, Tom is a good boy; but if you do what you just did to him again anytime soon... no one's that good."

Jenny looked at me again, smiled. "I'm sorry, Tom."

"Twice more," I said with a laugh. "You could probably do that twice more." I paused for dramatic effect, "I really am good."

Next thing I knew, I was being pummeled by pillows. Mom poked her head in the room a few minutes later to calm the commotion and get us moving towards getting ready for school.

School is school; what can I say? It was a Thursday, so Mom volunteered to take JR and Jenny to school. Since I had a little extra time, I took a little detour and dropped off my letter to Marsha at the post office, giving it a little kiss before I put it in the box. I laughed at myself afterwards; what, I'm not getting enough?

At lunch, Shannon came and sat next to me, and we talked most of the period. At the end, she smiled at me. "You asked if it was okay to bring your sister and her friends tomorrow." I nodded, wishing I'd said no such thing. "Well, I have a sister, too. Do you suppose there's room for another? She's a freshman."

"According to my dad, there's always room for one more." Of course, he'd been talking about putting things into suitcases at the time.

Shannon nodded. "Elizabeth has one of the biggest brains in the whole world. And is about the shyest person in the world on top of it. I told my mom I'd take her to one of the dances."

"That's okay," I agreed. "I promised my 8th grade sister and her friends a short stay at the dance as well."

"I imagine they'll mostly want to dance with each other," Shannon said. I looked into her eyes, saw amusement not disparagement.

"Probably," I agreed, "although I could probably arrange a dance for you or your sister."

Shannon stuck out her tongue. "Elizabeth -- maybe. Not me. Not hardly me." Her eyes met mine, and I smiled back at her.

It wasn't until the bell rang and I was headed back to class that I realized that I hadn't seen Tony or Sue Ellen at lunch; that was a surprise. I looked around for them after school, but I didn't have much time; I didn't see them then, either.

I picked up JR and Jenny at their school. JR asked if Penny could come along, and I agreed; that happened a lot. We drove home, everyone talking about their day.

We put our books up, and JR smiled at me. "I talked to Mom this morning on the way to school," JR announced. "Mom said we don't have to come home and study right away any more. We do have to make the time up in the evening. We have 'free time' until four thirty." She looked at me, a grin on her face. "I intend to be pretty free with Tom's time until then."

She took my hand, and led me towards her room. For a second there was a mutual flurry of clothes, then she pulled me down on the bed. "This time just you and me," she said firmly. "I promise not to be distracted."

"I've no complaints," I told her, and she grinned.

"I do," she murmured, "I want you to eat me all up."

"I can do that," I said, sliding down a bit on the bed, bringing my head between her legs. I leaned close to her pussy, pulling her pussy lips apart with my fingers, moving my tongue over her smooth skin, then into her vaginal hole. "Ahhhh!" JR sighed, wiggling on my tongue. "That's what I wanted! Do that!" I started into some serious tongue fucking, watching JR's finger an inch away sliding over her clit.

After four or five minutes JR came softly, and then again. A few second later, she was crying softly. I stopped, looking up at her, concerned. I moved kissing her lightly, stroking her face. She let out a long sigh, and then smiled at me, wiping away a tear.

"Tom, oh Tom!" JR murmured, shaking her head. "God, I love sex so much!" I nodded, what wasn't to like? "I like having my pussy tongued, I like having my clit licked, my titties... oh God, Tom, I just love it!"

"It's okay," I said, not sure where she was headed with this.

"Okay?" JR snorted. "I don't want to stop! I want to feel a hard guy inside me! I want to suck on him, make him squirm and moan; I want to feel another girl's pussy on my face, so I can lick and kiss her until she comes over and over again. Oh there's so much I want!"

I started stroking her small breasts, then leaned close and kissed one, sucking her nipple into my mouth. She sighed, pulling my hand down between her legs, pressing it against her pubes. I finger fucked her, pushing my finger deep inside of my sister, feeling her juices start to flow, then flow even more as I worked harder. With a moan, JR came again, and then was pulling me on top of her.

I started righteously making love my sister. JR rose to meet each of my thrusts, pressing against me with every bit of urgency that her body could muster; in turn, I was more turned on than I'd ever been with her, and when I came, it was awesome, simply awesome.

I was still catching my breath when there was a soft knock on the door. I heard Jenny say, "Joanna, your mom is on the phone, she wants to talk to you."

JR looked at me, and sighed. Her clock was across the room; but had big numbers. She saw my glance; it read 4:32. "Mom's sneaky," JR said, as I moved off her.

"Yeah," I muttered to myself, a little surly about the interruption myself. After all, I'd been with JR more in the last day than I'd been with her before. JR got out of the bed, didn't bother to dress, and walked through the door. I scooped up my clothes, and when I turned to leave too, I saw Jenny standing by the door, watching me.

I'd deliberately never went undressed around her, even though she hadn't done the same thing with me. This morning was on my mind; it was hard to forget. I'd not been really erect; now I grew that way. Jenny looked at me for a long moment, and then her eyes met mine. "Penny isn't feeling well; it's that time of the month."

I contemplated that in the universe of sex and relationships; it was a straightforward statement that Penny hadn't felt like doing anything this afternoon, I thought. I decided that urges aside, there were two problems with stepping towards Jenny, my hard on ready. One, it was after four thirty, and we'd promised. And I'd promised Jenny I wasn't going to do that; if she came to me, it would be different. But it would have to be that way.

Jenny seemed to reach the same conclusion, smiled at me and said she'd be in the family room, studying.

So, study we did.

JR got dinner out to thaw for Mom to start cooking when she got home; Penny went home with her mom a little after six and the five of us had a nice dinner of baked chicken and green beans cooked with onions and some biscuits.

After dinner we cleaned up; Jenny and I had the dishes and we laughed and joked while we did them. Afterwards we played Parcheesi and I won. Then it was more time at the books, and then it was close to ten. We all trooped off to get ready for bed, then again Mom and Dad came to say good night to Jenny and I; JR was with them instead of with us.

This time Jenny was first and me second. Mom kissed Jenny very hard, running her hands up and down Jenny's back. "You okay, Jennifer?" Mom asked quietly. I was sure she was asking Jenny if she wanted to sleep with Mom tonight.

Instead Jenny nodded, "I'm fine."

Mom kissed me, and it was fine, really fine. Her tongue came into my mouth; her hand ran over my bottom, pressing me against her. All too soon, though, it was over, and I saw Dad had hugged Jenny as he'd done the night before.

Then Dad turned to JR and she all but crawled all over him, and quite suddenly I knew that JR was not done for the day. They left, and Jenny crawled into bed while I got the light.

When I got to bed, Jenny was facing me, instead of away. "I want to sleep like this tonight," Jenny said quietly as I climbed in.

I nodded, and moved close to her, and she moved inside my arm.

"Tom..."

I looked at her as her voice faded away after the one word.

"Tom, would you kiss me good night?"

I nodded, and applied a gentle, rather chaste kiss to her lips. Jenny kissed back, a little more eager than I was; nor was she in a hurry to part lips. I continued to kiss her, keeping it very mild. After some time, Jenny smiled at me.

"I love you, Tom."

"And I love you, Jenny."

"No one, no one makes me feel as safe, as loved, as you do," she continued. Her eyelids drooped, a second later her breathing was even and shallow. Asleep.

I did something I promised myself I'd not do: I leaned close, kissed her lightly on the forehead. "Always and forever, Jenny." Then I too joined her in sleep.

Friday, March 22, 2002

JR did not come to check on us the next morning; Jenny got up with me at the alarm, vanished into the bathroom by herself. I followed shortly, then a simple breakfast with everyone bright-eyed and smiling around the table.

Mom stopped me before I left the table. "You're going to the basketball game tonight?"

"Yes." I looked at JR and Jenny. "I promised I'd take JR, Jenny and Penny. The girl I'm going with asked if she can take her sister. She's a freshman. Shannon's sister, I mean."

Mom nodded. "And the dance after?" I nodded. "You will be home by midnight, ok?" Again I nodded emphatically. "Earlier would be better." No problem, I thought to myself. I'd made it clear to the others that I was on a date with Shannon; both JR and Jenny seemed okay with it.

At lunch, Shannon joined me again; again I didn't see Tony or Sue Ellen. Finally, just a bit before the end of the lunch period, Sue Ellen walked by. "Sue Ellen!" I called and she smiled at me and came over.

"Where's Tony?"

Sue Ellen's expression didn't change, but something behind her eyes did. "There's a team meeting. Last night, too." I got the distinct impression it was time to change the subject.

"You and Tony will be at the game tonight?"

Sue Ellen shrugged. "Yeah."

"See you," I said, confidently. She nodded, turned and walked away. Unless I was wrong, she was pissed at something, but not something having to do with me. Did she and Tony have a



fight? I wasn't sure, I hoped not.

Again I picked up JR, Jenny and Penny after school, and we all went to our house. All three wanted to get ready for the evening, not anything else; we studied for a bit after we got home, then showered and dressed, then a hasty dinner.

At six, I was at Shannon's, and she came out with her sister, Elizabeth. Elizabeth was red-haired, shorter than Shannon, less talkative than all the rest of us combined.

As I expected, though, the addition of two more passengers into Mom's venerable hand-me down Camry that I drove, exceeded the camel's load limit.

Shannon got into the front seat; there was nothing for Elizabeth to do but sit on someone's lap in the back. Jenny was tallest, so her lap was where Elizabeth got to sit.

We got to the game, and we'd only been there a few seconds when Tony appeared. "Have you seen Roger Parker?" he asked and I shook my head.

"If you see him, find me. Or one of the team." I looked at him, curious. Tony's expression was bland, unhelpful.

"Sure," I told him.

"Sue Ellen might need a ride home tonight, after. Could you?"

"Sure, Tony."

On the ride to the game, we had been six in the Camry, and Shannon's sister had to sit on Jenny's lap. One more? If it was Sue Ellen, I was going to have to relegate Penny and JR to sharing. I mentally crossed my fingers. That would be a crowded back seat... What if JR and Penny got frisky? JR had said Penny wasn't in a very good mood, what if Penny didn't want someone sitting on her lap?

The girl's basketball team won handily; there was a lot of shouting, applause and everyone had a good time. The boys stunk, lost badly, were bad losers and there were several small fights. We didn't quite boo, but there was no applause, no shouting, and no good time.

The dance started and I took Shannon off for a spin, remembering last week and Marsha. Shannon was far, far more sedate than Marsha had been. We danced three times, and then I danced with JR, then Jenny. Penny was in a surly mood, wanting to be left alone; even JR and Jenny were careful to be polite to her.

It was, I thought, entirely because of 'that time of month.' I'd heard a thousand jokes about it; never really been sure when any girl was suffering from that in particular. In it's own way, it was educational.

I'd come back with Jenny and was talking to the others when I felt Jenny's eyes widen. I looked up, saw Roger and two other guys coming closer; one looked older than the rest. A faint resemblance to Jenny. The last was Keith Driscoll, a senior who loved to bully anyone he could, particularly girls.

"I want to talk to my sister," the older guy said.

So, this was Jenny's brother. Well over six feet, dark. Darker, even, than Jenny. His expression told me all I needed to know.

"Get lost," I told him, standing up, putting myself between him and Jenny. "She doesn't want to talk to you. Not ever again."

Roger moved past me, towards Shannon. "Want to dance?"

"Get lost, creep!" Shannon said with heat.

Roger was unfazed, turned to JR. "How about it? You were a good fuck the other day, really good." It was clear to me he was deliberately ignoring Penny. From the look on Penny's face, she was very angry.

"And you were an asshole," JR told him to his face, loud enough for several people to turn our way.

"Please, we don't want any trouble," I said, still mild. "Why don't you guys just haul on out of here?"

Roger started to say something to Penny, but abruptly Tony was there, right in Roger's face.

"Parker!"

Roger looked at Tony, and then smiled at Tony in a way that told me that in a second, Roger was going to get decked.

"You hit on Sue Ellen the other day!" Tony told him. I goggled in surprise; Roger had a death wish!

"You hit on Janey Sussman, Melinda Lopez, Susy Gonzales, Emily Suderman, Gloria Rodriguez!" A list of names known to me; girlfriends of the football team starters or cheerleaders. "They all told you to get lost. Evidently you don't know how to do that," Tony continued.

Roger smirked and gave Tony the finger.

Tony smiled then. "Lucky you, me and some friends have decided to teach you what it means to get lost."

There had to have been a signal; I didn't see it. It was like magic; all of a sudden two dozen of the football team appeared, crowding around Roger, separating him from the others. Our basketball team might be puny, but the football team had been city champions once in three years, went to state a couple of times as well; they were all large guys, and no one, no one at all was slow getting out of their way. A moment later the group had moved outside, Roger in their midst.

I looked around; Jenny's brother and Keith Driscoll had vanished. Now that was no surprise! No one, no one sane anyway, messes with the entire football team!

The dance sputtered on for a few minutes; most people decided they had other, more important things to do.

Sue Ellen appeared. "Tony said you'd give me a ride."

"Sure, but you're gonna have to have someone sitting on your lap," I told her.

Sue Ellen looked at the group of girls, laughed. "Tom Ferguson! I do believe you have a harem!"

"Tom's the harem guard," Jenny said. I don't know if anyone else noticed that Jenny wasn't kidding, her voice hard.

"And good at it!" Shannon agreed. From the tone in Shannon's voice, I could tell Shannon had noticed what Jenny had said and how she'd said it.

"How about we go over to my place?" Sue Ellen said. "Like usual, my parents are out. Dad got a DVD of Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves today, we can watch it."

I blinked, remembering last Friday and Marsha. "How long is Tony going to be?" I was a little smug, not thinking about it.

Sue Ellen smiled, not a nice smile. "Roger pissed us off. And that's really pissed off the guys! Tony said, maybe tomorrow afternoon." I blinked; Penny and Shannon laughed, then the others. "Going to get him really, really lost," Sue Ellen added, and we all smiled again. Good grief! The better part of a day? Where could they get in ten, twelve hours?

The dance was essentially over, and it was just a little past nine. We gathered our stuff, and we drove over to Sue Ellen's. I didn't pay much attention to the seating, just enough to know that Shannon was still riding shotgun, JR was sitting on Sue Ellen's lap, Elizabeth, Shannon's sister, on Jenny's and Penny was by herself.

I was a little surprised that the seating didn't change in Sue Ellen's family room. It was set up as a home theater; the sound and picture of the movie were almost theater quality, really cool! JR was sitting next to Sue Ellen on a couch, the two of them talking. Jenny and Elizabeth on another couch, Shannon and I together on what was, I thought, a love seat; designed for two, not three. Penny was sitting by herself on the floor, a few feet from Jenny.

Almost at once, Penny leaned her head down, asleep I was sure. After a bit, Sue Ellen said something to JR, and the two of them got up. I thought they were after drinks, but they didn't return.

I'd been sitting with my arm around Shannon, and after a bit, we started kissing. I'd had a week to get to know about kissing; I'd not rate myself as all that expert, no matter how good the reviews had been. Still, I wasn't an amateur any longer, either. I was careful, considerate, and didn't push it

with Shannon. Even so, after a half hour of the movie, there was just her in my private universe, no one else.

At one point, Shannon pulled away, and looked around. I did too; the only one left was Penny, and she was obviously sound asleep. Shannon looked at me and kissed me lightly. "I'm not a virgin," she said in a low voice.

"Neither am I," I replied.

"That said, I don't sleep with every boy I date," she continued.

I decided to say nothing; I'd only slept with one girl I'd dated; the rest were rather ad hoc.

"Shannon," I said to her, wanting nothing more than honest. "Put me alone in a room with the ugliest girl in school and I'd be hard. I'm a guy." Shannon looked at me curiously. "I wouldn't sleep with the ugliest girl in school, nor the most beautiful: not unless she wanted to be with me and I wanted to be with her."

"I like you, but I don't know you that well yet," I told her.

"Well enough to do this," Shannon murmured, kissing me again, this time using her tongue.

I moved my hand, lightly brushed her breast. "How about well enough to do this?" I asked her. "But nothing you don't want. Not ever."

She pulled back, looked into my eyes. "I do believe you mean that."

I'd never talked about personal things of others before; suddenly I found I wanted to. "Shannon..." She met my eyes. "There's something I want to tell you."

I nodded towards the door where Jenny and Elizabeth had vanished earlier. "Jenny has moved in with us. Her parents are indifferent towards her. Her brother is scum."

"Sam?" Shannon asked and I nodded. "God, he gives me the creeps! I can't imagine having him for a brother!"

"It was bad," I told her as simply as I knew how. "Jenny's never had anyone in her life care for her, to look out for her. Shannon, Jenny and I sleep together. Just sleep," I added hastily.

I saw her eyes widen, then focus on me. "What do you mean, you sleep together?"

"No one in Jenny's entire life, up until lately, has wrapped their arms around her, told her she was loved, kept her safe. Jenny is in a lot of ways as much a sister to me as JR." Oh yeah! I sighed to myself. "I hold her, tell her I care about her -- as a sister."

Shannon was silent for a while. "I've never had a boy tell me to my face that he was sleeping with another girl."

"Sleeping as in," I snored theatrically; Shannon giggled.

"Twice you've stood up to Roger. This last time, Sam and Keith as well." She shook her head. "God! I can't believe I ever dated Roger! Just for two and a half weekends, last fall. The worst mistake of my life!"

"Mistakes can happen to anyone. Roger talked his way into my sister's panties. And she doesn't like guys that much. When Penny broke up with Roger, he started bad-mouthing both of them. That's when JR told everyone that she and Penny had gotten back together because Roger couldn't keep even one of them happy."

She looked at me. "Do you suppose that was it? What made Roger start hitting on the football team's girlfriends? He wanted to show he was adequate?"

"Boy!" I exclaimed, "That would be a major, major mistake." I laughed, remembering. "Was a major mistake."

Shannon nodded. "I suspect, about now, wherever Roger is, he's realized that."

We kissed again; after a bit I started to stroke her breasts. Shannon kissed back with more fervor, and for quite a bit of time we did just that. It was interesting, I thought to myself. I've spent more time playing with Shannon's breasts than with any other girl's. I've kissed her longer now, than

anyone else, too. Always before kissing and touching had been steps on the road we were traveling, a way point on the journey. With Shannon, I realized that this was the journey, and I contented myself with that.

Abruptly, there was simply the hiss of static on the TV; the DVD had finished and ended. I blinked, and as if on cue, Sue Ellen reappeared with JR. "It's late, Tom," JR said quietly. I looked at her, contemplated if I could possibly be imagining it, or had JR made love with Sue Ellen? I wasn't a hundred per cent sure, but the 99% left me uncomfortable.

JR vanished and in a bit Jenny and Elizabeth appeared; of all of us, those two looked the least ruffled. Penny hadn't wanted to wake up, but she did, nonetheless, at JR's urging.

I drove Shannon and Elizabeth home, and walked them to their front door. Elizabeth vanished inside without a word.

For a moment, Shannon stared after her sister. "Elizabeth," Shannon said quietly as we stood in front of the darkened house, "is like the smartest person on the planet. An IQ so high, they can't measure it." I blinked, wondering what it would be like to be that smart. "I can't believe she was with your friend."

"Jenny wouldn't do anything that Elizabeth didn't want," I told her seriously. "I'm as sure of that as I am that the sun will rise tomorrow."

Shannon raised an eyebrow. "Your sister and her friends aren't exactly the straightest arrows in the quiver."

"I don't think Jenny would bother your sister," I told her, repeating myself.

"Elizabeth is a big girl; I was just surprised." She leaned close, kissed me lightly on the mouth. After a second, my hands returned to her breasts.

Shannon giggled, moving them away. "You were very well behaved. Doing anything tomorrow evening?"

I shook my head.

"Come for dinner, around six. We'll find something or

other to do, afterwards." she told me. "My parents will be going out."

I met her eyes; there was no doubt in my mind that Shannon was either the worst tease on the planet, or that tomorrow I'd get to know her a whole lot better.

"Fine with me," I told her.

"Are you going to sleep with her, tonight?" Shannon waved towards the car where JR, Jenny and Penny waited.

"Probably, but just sleep with, not make love to."

Shannon looked at me, sighed. "I think I'm crazy. Good night, Tom."

She vanished inside, and I drove Penny home, then the rest of us. It was just a few minutes short of midnight, a lot later than I'd intended when we came in the front door.

JR hugged me. "Tomorrow, Tom!"

Jenny and I went up to our rooms. Instead of going into her room and putting on a nightshirt, she stood in my room and undressed completely, before she slipped into my bed. In spite of the fact that Jenny was completely bare, I left my jockey shorts on before I climbed in next to her. Like last night, Jenny faced me, letting me wrap her up in my arms.

"I love you, Tom."

"I love you too, Jenny," I told her.

"Elizabeth..." She bit her lip. "All we did was talk."

I shook my head. "You don't have to explain yourself or justify yourself to me. Never."

"She's even more unsure than me. Boys scare her. Girls too!" Jenny sighed, "She's so bright, so smart! All her life, people never let her forget it!" Jenny was silent for a moment. "She's a lot like me; all messed up."

"You are not," I told Jenny, hugging her tightly, "messed up. Hurt, yes. If you broke your arm, it would take a while to



mend. If you get sick, it takes a while to get better. Your family is the worst case of the flu, ever!"

Jenny blinked, then giggled. "You are so cool, Tom Ferguson!" She squeezed me tight. "God, I wish you were a girl."

It wasn't hard to read between the lines. If I was a girl, we'd be doing it. Jenny leaned close, and like before, we kissed. This time she was very tentative, as if she was more nervous than ever. We did this for several minutes, before Jenny pulled back a bit.

"Sometimes, Kim and I would play games in bed," she said in a faint whisper. "We'd pretend to be two different people, meeting, getting to know each other. Seducing each other. Kim calls it role-playing."

I'd played D & D a couple of times, Magic more often. I didn't think this was the same thing.

"Tom..." Jenny's voice was very faint, "Tom could we play pretend? That I'm Elizabeth and you're me? Could you pretend to seduce me? Do the things with Elizabeth that I wished I could have? Just that? Nothing else?"

In other words, kiss and touch Jenny, going down on her. Making her come, but not reciprocated. Hadn't I done that very same thing with Penny? Well, not quite the very same thing, but I'd been told that I could eat her out, and I did; and it wasn't until she came back from looking in on JR and Roger that we'd done it. I hadn't expected that; welcomed it, but not expected that. Could I do this with Jenny? Because I was certain it wouldn't turn out the same way as it had with Penny.

I reached out and stroked Jenny's face. "You're a very pretty girl, Elizabeth. I'd never do anything to hurt you. I won't do anything you didn't want me to." I kissed her gently, and she kissed back a little more animatedly.

"Call me Beth," Jenny said softly, "I like you, Jenny. You're really nice. Really nice."

I kissed her again, this time I boldly brought my hand up and lightly stroked one of the most perfect breasts I'd ever seen; that I'd been wanting to stroke now since the first time

I'd seen them. "You are so beautiful, Beth, the most beautiful girl in the world!" I concentrated on her nipple, which perked right up.

"I... I... I've never been with anyone," she said softly, "but I want to be with you, Jenny."

For the next few minutes I stroked her breasts, kissing her, gradually raising the warmth of the kiss until I put my tongue in her mouth; a tongue that Jenny welcomed fully, kissing me back as passionately as I was kissing her.

I looked down at those beautiful breasts, gleaming in the faint light of my room, found I hungered for them more than I had imagined. I bent down, sent my tongue questing after one of her hard tips, and then sucked it, and most of her breast, into my mouth. I shifted attention to her other breast, and Jenny murmured, "Oh Jenny! That feels so good! Don't stop! Oh, please don't stop!"

So I didn't; in fact I started stroking her body with my fingertips, long slow, languid moves from her hips to her breasts, her sides, across her tummy, dipping lightly into her belly button.

I felt Jenny's legs move apart, and her hands caressed my head gently as I continued to pay homage to her beautiful breasts. "Touch me, Jenny! Oh please, touch me!"

I figured that there was just one place she was likely to be talking about, so I stroked down, trailing my fingertips lightly across her pussy, down between her legs, touching the warm skin of her inner thighs, then coming back up, moving between her pussy lips, finding the tip of her clit. I brushed it, putting deliberate pressure on it, then back again almost at once. "Oh, Jenny!" she cried. "That's it! Oh that's so good! Touch me there! Love me, Jenny!"

I rubbed slowly, gently, enjoying the sensations running through my fingers, through my whole body. I looked at Jenny, her eyes closed, smiling and sighing with pleasure. Was this what women loving other women felt? Why was this different than what a man did with a woman? Sure, I had an erection that I could put in her pussy; rub it inside her until I came...

I felt a little jolt of electricity. When I was making

love to Jenny like this, it was me making her feel good; a single person devoted to making another person happy and joyous. When I was stroking into a girl, I was getting off as well. Was it attention to detail? Or just the fact that it was one person trying to pleasure another, without seeking at that particular moment their own pleasure? Was this way better?

I contemplated it as I stroked Jenny's clit, then I moved my index finger inside her, finger fucking her, while my thumb stayed busy on her clit and my tongue continued to caress her nipples.

It's simply different, I thought. It's just a matter of how you do it; it wasn't better than a man finding his pleasure in a woman -- so long as he was trying to pleasure her as well. Was that it? Too many of my peers were like Roger? Interested in getting their rocks off, and not giving a shit about the girl? I nodded to myself; that was it, I thought, that was it.

Having sex with someone was a beautiful thing; looking out only for number one would spoil it for your partner if they knew you were using them solely for your pleasure and not theirs. Sure, right now Jenny was using me for her pleasure, but she was a special case. Usually what goes around comes around, and at some point maybe she'd be doing unto me what I was doing unto her. I decided that we owed Jenny things like this, we who were her friends.

Jenny was in her Oooh! Ahhh! stage, and I tried to match my attention to the sounds of her pleasure, wanting more than I'd ever wanted anything else, to make this the best loving she'd ever had. Out of the clear blue, she said, "Use two fingers." That didn't sound very Elizabeth-like, but I didn't care. I found my middlefinger fit inside her pussy as easily as just the one; something I'd never contemplated before.

She suddenly pressed her hand down on mine, while lifting up with her hips, driving my fingers deep, deep inside of her, at the same time uttering a cry of sheer animal pleasure. I moved up, kissing her again, calling her Beth and sweet love, and she wrapped her arms around me and kissed me back fervently.

"Sweet beautiful Beth," I told her, looking into her eyes. "I've touched your beauty, now I want to taste it." Her eyes went wide, and I slid down a bit, putting the gentlest pressure on her to move to sit on my face.

I started off licking her pussy like a giant ice cream cone, from her clit to below her pussy hole; using my hands to pull apart her pussy lips, I moved my tongue in to taste her. Like JR, she was very sweet, almost no odor except sweat. I licked the inside of her thighs, her clit, everything I could get my tongue on. She was moving like I was a man, fucking into her with a cock, rather than a woman riding someone's tongue, hard strong movements. I used my tongue in the same way, pushing against her, as deep inside her as I could reach, using my fingers to help me, finding time to thumb her clit once again.

She came, and I simply kept on, and Jenny came again, moaning and crying in pleasure; a third time and she was trembling, shivering, and finally slumped down, coming to rest with her head on my chest, and her pussy entirely too close to my blazing erection; not as bad as this morning, but almost.

She shivered and trembled for the longest time; I was content to simply hold her, lightly kissing the top of her head.

Jenny opened her eyes and looked at me, her face a study in shadows and soft light. "Tom, Tom... " She said softly. "What have I done to you?"

I laughed and shook my head. "I was the one doing, Jenny."

"You want me." I felt pressure from her leg, pressing against my erection.

"I'm aroused, stimulated," I told her, "I can't lie about that. I didn't do this with you so that Tom could make love to Jenny. I did my friend Jenny a favor, pretending to be someone else."

"But you're all excited," she murmured.

"I'm not anyone else but me, myself, Tom Ferguson," I told her. "Trust me, long before I went on my very first date, I learned how to take care of this particular problem without anyone else around to lend a hand." At times, a lot of times, I'd despaired of ever having someone help. Now I'd had, and it was worth the wait.

"You mean jack off?" she said matter of factly.

I nodded.

"My brother used to make me do it for him."

For the first time I was a little angry, "Jenny, I'm Tom Ferguson. Not someone else. I can pretend to be someone else, but I don't think I could ever pretend to be your brother. If I did, I'd probably find a high cliff some place and go jump off it."

She reached out and touched my erection. "I wish, oh how I wish, I could do it for you, Tom." A pause, then her hand moved away. "Oh God, Tom! I'm so sorry! I can't! I just can't!"

"And you don't have to!" I told her. I reached down and tugged her higher on my body, getting her pussy further away from my rigid member. "I love you, Jenny! That's it. You are my friend, and if I can do this for you, well, I want to. But you don't have to do anything for me, except hug me back. That's it."

She looked into my eyes, sighed. "I love you in my own mixed up way, Tom. I do."

I kissed her forehead. "I know, Jenny. And if one day you feel like making love to me -- that's fine. But it will be your choice, in your own way, in your own time. And if you want me to pretend to be Mother Teresa or anyone else, I'm there for you."

A few minutes later, Jenny was asleep, beside me. I reached down and spent a few minutes bringing myself off, and if I had my own thoughts of who I was doing it with... that was my business.

Saturday, March 23, 2002

I woke up later than usual, half past seven, and I spent a few minutes looking at Jenny, her face peaceful in sleep. I leaned down and kissed her lightly, and she opened one eye. "Gonna sleep," she muttered. I got out of bed, tucking her in.

I put on jeans and a t-shirt, and went out to the kitchen to find something to drink. My dad was doing the same thing, and he glanced at me. "Want to go for a walk?"

I contemplated that, decided that walking was just part of his purpose, so I nodded. We went outside, hardly 8 am in mid-March in Phoenix. It was only in the low 60's, it had been cool this year and we had yet to punch through to 90 for the first time since Thanksgiving. Dad set a brisk pace, and I concentrated on keeping up.

After a bit, a jogger passed us and I laughed once she was out of earshot. "I remember you telling me about joggers." He smiled; evidently he remembered too. Jogging, Dad said, jarred the brain; it produced these chemicals called endorphins to make it feel better. Runners, he said, were druggies, looking for a high. A brisk walk, he told me, did everything a doctor could want, so far as exercise was concerned.

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

I laughed, "I'm not in that bad of shape."

He shook his head. "I was thinking more of the recent cornucopia of convivial concubines that have taken, of late, to making your life more pleasant."

"Nothing to complain about there, that's for sure," I said with male macho certitude.

"I'm a bit jealous, you know. You're just sixteen; it didn't happen to me until I was twenty," he puffed a theatric sigh. "The top years of my sex life, with only my hand for solace."

I blushed, never having had quite this frank of a discussion with my father before. Funny, I hadn't blushed last night when I'd told Jenny I was going to do that to pleasure myself.

"Once upon a time, a long time ago," he went on, unaware or unconcerned about me embarrassing myself, "I went to college. There I met Craig Summers, and we became roommates. I was an engineering major, he was after an MBA. We became friends, then good friends, then best friends.

"One Friday afternoon in the spring he brought his sister, Ellen, over to our dorm; she was a high school senior and wanted to see life at the big University. We had dinner in a pizza

place, and then he took her back home for the weekend.

"That summer, Craig wanted to move into an apartment; for him, school and expenses weren't a factor. He was smart; his parents were rich. I had to work at my grades, and I had to work, period.

"We made an arrangement; I would do the housework in the apartment, something Craig loathed, in turn, I got to stay in a very much nicer place than I could ever have afforded on my own, for a fifth of the cost, rather than halves.

"We'd been in the apartment less than a week when he told me that Ellen was going to come and stay the weekend. I made some comment about how the couch was pretty comfortable to sleep on and he laughed. 'That's a good thing, Dave.'

"'Why's that a good thing?' I asked him back.

"'You're my friend, right? You'd never rat me out to anyone? Right?'

"'I am,' I told him, 'your only friend.'

"Craig thought that was funny, and shook his head

"'Dave, Ellen is my friend too... and she and I are going to be sharing the bedroom and you're going to be on the couch, deaf, dumb and blind about what you see and hear.'"

My dad paused, looking around at the blue sky. "I thought about pointing out that Ellen was his sister, but I didn't. After a while, Craig explained about her getting pregnant in 7th grade; like him, I wanted to find the creep and pulverize him.

"After that, Ellen spent a lot of the summer in the apartment; her parents had never forgiven her for getting pregnant, they weren't terribly happy about Craig helping her get an abortion.

"Still, life went on. I wished I had a girl friend, but I didn't. I wished for a lot of things. In the fall, Ellen was at the university too, but in the dorm. She was swamped with school, new friends and all that stuff.

"One day I was sitting in the apartment and Ellen came in.

I told her that Craig was in Phoenix, getting something for his car. She nodded, came and stood next to me. To this day, I have no idea what happened or why; I stood up, took her in my arms and kissed her; she kissed me back.

"Afterwards, we lay in each other's arms, and I was incredibly depressed that I had a) screwed my best friend's sister, and b) made love to the girl he was sleeping with.

"Ellen straightened me right out, she was pretty emphatic. Craig didn't own her, I didn't own her. Then she added, 'Kim doesn't own me, Shirley doesn't own me, Keisha doesn't own me,' she told me. Just because I make love to someone doesn't give them more than a place in my heart; they don't own it, they just have a place there.'

"At the time, feeling guilty as I was, I accepted that. Besides, I'd gotten laid for the first time in my life. I was feeling pretty big about then. Later, Craig got back, and Ellen came and sat on my lap and kissed me in a big way. I was never so surprised in my life, Craig just laughed, said it was about time I got something for doing all the chores, and sleeping so many nights on the couch.

"Then, along came Thanksgiving." Dad shook his head, but didn't slow the pace of the walk. "Oh my! There's a reason why in our family Thanksgiving is the big holiday, and we do a very minimalist Christmas!"

"I thought it was because Christmas was too material," I said with a smile.

"That too. But that four-day weekend, Ellen brought her roommates over to the apartment for Thanksgiving dinner away from home, a dinner with all the trimmings that Craig and I fixed ourselves. And that night, they started thanking us." Dad laughed. "By the end of the weekend, it was all either Craig or I could do to get out of bed, we were that worn out. God, it felt good!"

We walked for another few minutes, still at a brisk pace. "To make a long story short, over the years, the six of us have remained close. Very close.

"Now, there is another generation coming of age. And evidently, cut from the same cloth as their parents," he said to



me. I nodded, evidently indeed!

"Craig and Shirley got married, but Shirley couldn't have kids. Ellen and I married, we could have children and did. Kim far prefers her roommates than she does Craig or I, but she's not close-minded. You know Penny is Craig's daughter?" I nodded at the question. Now I did, and why I'd never heard about a Mr. Wells.

"In LA, Keisha has a daughter, a year younger than you. Brandy is her name; Brandy is your half sister. Keisha's life partner is a woman named Leslie Warren, who was married to a black man named Walter, who did as too many black men have done: left his wife and kid. Leslie's son is Lionel, who is two years older than you.

"A few years after you popped into the world, Kim was pregnant with Penny, your mom with Joanna, Keisha and Leslie decided to get pregnant too. So, you have another half sister named Jade, Leslie's daughter, and Craig is Janice's father, Keisha is her mother. They are both roughly the same age as Joanna and Penny. The 'twin twins' everyone calls them.

"Two years ago, Leslie met a girl on the streets; she was not quite fourteen at the time. Donna Emerson had run away from home, lived as a prostitute and drug addict for more than a year, and who one day decided that she had had enough and walked away... she actually started hitchhiking, meaning to come to Phoenix. Instead, she met Leslie.

"Leslie helped Donna straighten out; got her off drugs. Donna had syphilis and Leslie got that taken care of. Donna was malnourished, she'd suffered frequent beatings and those had taken a huge toll on her. She weighed in at 75 pounds when Leslie found her.

"In that respect, Donna and Jennifer will have a lot in common; Donna doesn't like men much either."

I took it in stride, a stride that, if anything, had picked up. After a bit, Dad said softly, "And now for something you maybe won't like. Two some things."

I glanced at him, but I was beginning to feel the strain; we'd been walking for more than a half hour. In Phoenix, all the major streets are even fractions of a mile apart. We had

covered more than two miles, almost three.

"First, the women choose. Never ever push past no."

"I never have," I told him. "After Jenny, I can't imagine ever wanting to."

"I know, and I understand. But, it's important for when you meet your ah, 'cousins' from LA. Part of the responsibility that goes with that right to choose, is that the women are responsible for birth control. In theory, you don't have to worry about it. You are a total fool if you don't worry about it, and a bigger fool if you don't contemplate what you will do if birth control fails."

That was indeed something to think about; I knew in my heart of hearts I was entirely too casual about it. First Marsha, then JR and Penny, Kim, Mom... all had made it pretty clear I had nothing to worry about. Wrong!

"And, the next thing is that next Friday, spring break starts." I nodded, not sure what he meant.

"We've talked, the adults have. Kim had already planned on taking Penny to LA for the week; we've decided to send you and Joanna along with them as well. We're not sure about Jennifer, but probably her too. Almost certainly. You'll leave Saturday morning, early; get there a little after lunch. What happens then..." He shrugged. "That is up to you and them. Maybe nothing, maybe something. Impossible to say. But your parents have been friends for nearly twenty years; we have a vested interest in our children and their friends."

"One last thing. Last week and this week, you dated."

Like this was news?

"There are no rules about dating outside the group. At one point, Leslie suggested we shouldn't bring anyone new into the group without prior approval from everyone else. That was, obviously, a self-limiting condition, and a few years later she saved Donna, and had the good sense to understand that dogma doesn't cut it and has given up on that particular rule."

"Feel free to date outside; we've never believed in owning people, or controlling them. Maybe we aren't the typical family

you thought we were; maybe we're really very different from everyone else. But we seek to make each other happy, not to cause pain or grief; that's another important rule. Maybe not everyone has as many lovers, 'intergenerational' lovers at that, as we do. But that's them and this is us.

"I do know that it seems silly to me that I'm supposed to teach my children all sorts of things, but leave off something that I'm the most proud of: The fact that I can and have loved many women, made them happy, and continue to do so. I love them. Each differently, each in her own way. Leslie can be like making love to a cactus; thorns and prickly at the best of times. Kim is like the earth mother, loving being loved. Your mom more so. Shirley is extraordinarily fond of young people, girls and boys."

We fetched up at the walkway in front of the house. "Now, we'll make sure everyone knows about next week; in theory Ellen was going to tell Joanna and Jennifer when they got up. Of course, of late, everyone has been sleeping in."

He looked at me for a long second. "And you're okay with all of this?" I nodded.

"Me and your sister?" He pressed on.

"You and my sister. Me and my sister. Mom and my sister. Mom and me. Penny and Kim and my sister. Mom, Kim, Penny, JR and Jenny. JR and Uncle Craig. JR and Roger Parker; now that I had a problem with. Since fixed." On the spur of the moment I decided not to include Sue Ellen in the list.

"That's cold," he told me.

"That, Dad, is reality."

He looked at me for a long moment. "Ellen said you'd come a long ways; that you are, in your own way, the most moral person she's ever met." He frowned. "I thought about the numbers and put that down to your mom's preconceptions. You'd think that by now I would know that her preconceptions are the basis of all that follows."

"I'm trying to do what's right," I told him seriously. "Hindered by the fact I haven't met many girls I would kick out of bed. Or women. Not even my own mother."

He grinned then. "Well, I never felt the least twinge of desire towards my mother; you're ahead of me there. But, Tom, I think you ducked the question by changing the subject. What about me and Joanna?"

"What about Mom and me?" I shot back.

"Her choice," he replied, just as fast.

"And that's the answer, if what you said before wasn't self-serving hypocrisy."

He jerked like I'd hit him; then stopped and looked at me. "And here, a minute ago, I was lecturing you about how the women in our family choose." He sighed. "You're right, I'm wrong. Tom..." I looked at him. "All that you say is true; God, I had more butterflies in my stomach when Joanna and I were together than all the other times in my life, combined.

"She's a special young woman, beyond special," he murmured, and I nodded vigorously in agreement. "Yet, if anyone outside the family found out..." He shook his head. "Jail. Ruin for the family. Others do the 'intergenerational' with impunity; it scared the pee out of me."

I stopped and thought for a second. "And it should have scared me just as much; instead, I was only too eager to cooperate. More sex!"

He punched my arm. "Think like that, son of mine, and you're going to find out the definition of pussy-whipped: What happens when they beat you to a pulp." He smiled, "Changed the subject on me again! Damn, you're good boy!"

I shook my head, not sure what he meant. "Suppose you and Jennifer were together?" he asked.

"If it was what she wanted, but that's up to her. Pigs are a whole lot more likely to fly first, I think."

We stared at each other for a few seconds, and then Mom stuck her head out of the door. "You two need to come in."

I smiled, and Dad reached out his hand for mine. "Welcome to the bigs, Tom."

I shook his hand and we both laughed. He'd said that once before, when I'd been laying in the hospital with a bruised elbow; victim of a come backer when I was playing Little League baseball and I'd been pitching. Up to that day, I'd had a future as a jock; after that, I lost my nerve. He'd seen everything, knew what I was thinking; distilled it into five words.

We went inside and Mom nodded at Dad. "I told Tom," he said simply.

"And I told Joanna and Jennifer. Jennifer said, on balance, if Tom is going, she doesn't want to stay." She looked at us. "Is this going to mess up anyone's social life? Besides Tom and his new girlfriend?"

The others were silent; I thanked the good Lord God that JR didn't mention Sue Ellen, Jennifer didn't mention Elizabeth.

"I've started dating Shannon Leary; she's asked me to meet her parents tonight for dinner." I announced into the silence.

"Now that's serious!" JR said with a laugh.

"Joanna," Dad said quietly. JR turned to look at him. "At some point in time, you're going to bring a friend home. Contemplate whether or not you want the rest of us making sarcastic comments -- or not."

JR thought that one over for about a second. "I think I'll pass. Sorry, Tom."

"Good choice," Mom told her. "So, Friday, after school: no plans. You will come home, pack, get a good night's sleep. That's sleep, as opposed to 'sleeping with'. You will, I assure you, need all your energy when you get to LA."

JR looked at Mom as though she was going to say something. "JR," I said, and she looked at me instead. "Chill."

"I don't have enough time for the people I like now," JR said, looking at Mom. "And this is going to make that better?"

"No," Dad agreed, "it won't. It will make it different. How you respond is up to you."

"Tom and I both love you, Joanna. Your mom does, Kim, Penny, Jennifer... who knows, maybe others." I saw JR blush; gosh Dad, that was Sue Ellen you are talking about! And if Tony finds out about JR and Sue Ellen, you're going to find me buried in the Gobi Desert someplace, that's if I'm ever seen again. Moreover, if you remind JR of Roger, she's liable to cut us both off.

We talked for a while about other things, then it was time for chores; afterwards I took a shower, and lay down on the floor in the family room with a good book. JR and Jenny came in, also with books, and they laid down at right angles to me, but JR's head on my thigh and Jenny's on my stomach. It was a quiet, peaceful time and I enjoyed the book and the silent company, the warm pressure of two bodies on mine.

I heard the doorbell; thought nothing of it. A lot of door-to-door salesman came by on Saturday mornings. Mom was polite, but gave them short shrift; Dad was less polite and even shorter shrifting.

After a few minutes, both Mom and Dad came in the family room, a woman I'd never seen before in tow. "Jennifer, could you come here, please?" Mom asked.

Jennifer looked up, and then stood. JR and I did the same. The woman was about five-ten, very blonde, with breasts that reminded me of Sue Ellen. The woman nodded at Jennifer. "I'm Eleanor Johannsen," the woman said. "From the Children's Services Division of the State of Arizona."

I froze, not believing my eyes. Trouble in River City! "I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes, okay?" the woman went on, politely.

"I don't have anything to talk about," Jenny said, her expression like I remembered from a week ago; defiant and afraid.

"Please, Jennifer," Mom asked. "It's okay."

The woman turned to my mother. "I know this is your house, but could Jennifer and I have a few minutes alone, please?"

Dad spoke up, "According the law, you can request a private

interview, but the subject may have a representative present if the subject so desires. You don't have to be alone with this woman, Jennifer."

"Could Tom be there?" Jenny asked, and the woman looked at my Dad.

Dad grinned. "I'm David Ferguson, this is my wife Ellen, my daughter Joanna and my son Tom." He gestured to each of us as he named us. The woman's eyes rested on me for a moment, and then she shrugged. Mom motioned to JR, and the three of them left.

"This is just a request for information, Miss Reese," the social worker began.

"My parents told me I was no longer part of their family," Jennifer said immediately. "I've stopped using the name. Jennifer, plain and simple."

The woman nodded, and looked at me. "I'm here to ask Jennifer some questions; not you."

"Haven't said a thing," I agreed.

"Have you been staying here since you left your parents?" the woman asked Jenny, and Jenny said yes. "I checked with your school, they say you haven't missed any days."

"Mr. and Mrs. Ferguson were quite clear; if I want to stay with them, they expect me to go to school, keep my grades up, and do my share of the chores. When I was with my parents, Mom and I did all the housework. Here, everyone helps with everything."

"Do you have a room of your own?" she asked, and Jenny nodded. "Is there a lock on the door?"

Jenny looked at her without expression. "Unlike when I lived with my parents."

"And why did your parents ask you to leave?"

"They didn't like my friends," Jenny replied.

"Were you having sex with some of those friends?" Jenny

just stared at her without responding.

"Has he," the social worker waved at me, "or anyone else in this household bothered you sexually?"

Jenny lifted her chin. "I don't like boys."

"That wasn't an answer," the woman said, for the first time pressing for an answer.

Jenny looked her right in the eye. "Every night, before Joanna and Tom go to bed their mom and dad come in and tell them they love them, give them a hug and a kiss good night. In all the years I lived with my family, no one, not even once, said they loved me. No hugs, no kisses. Here, I get hugs from Tom and his dad. Hugs and kisses from Joanna and her mom. It is not a bother and it's not sex." Jenny was very emphatic on the word 'not.'

After a second, Jenny went on. "Joanna told me right after I moved in, that in this family love is as common as dirt, and treated like gold. In my house, love was rarer than gold and treated like dirt."

The woman looked at me, and then back to Jenny, "Could I see your room?"

Jenny's eyes went to mine, and I nodded. Up to you, Jenny.

Jenny turned and went up the stairs, I following behind the other two. Jenny opened the door, and the woman just stood outside, looking in. None of us in our family were sloppy; Mom was a fanatical house cleaner. JR and I had long since been told that either we cleaned our rooms, or Mom would. And if she did, a lot of cherished possessions would vanish. We cleaned.

The woman looked around, gestured at the door across the hall. "And whose room is this?"

"Tom's."

I pointed to my bedroom. "This was once a duplex, Mom keeps talking about cutting a door between bedrooms, but has never got around to it. My sister's room is on the other side, my parent's room just beyond it. You have to go downstairs, through the family room, the kitchen, and then up the other



stairs to get there."

The social worker didn't exactly glare at me, but let me know that I wasn't supposed to talk. We trooped back downstairs, and the woman led the way into the living room, where the others were.

"I understand, Mr. Ferguson, that the Reese's gave you some papers?"

Dad nodded, fetched them from the table. "A limited power of attorney to deal with the school, medical treatment in an emergency," he told her.

She read through them, and then looked around again. "Miss Reese..." She stopped, restarted. "Jennifer is close to the age where we give due credence to her wishes. Obviously, everyone is different; some young people are more mature than others. We do try to make allowances.

"Young people being kicked out of their homes isn't nearly as unusual as it should be; we try to reconcile the parties, of course, but that isn't always possible. In this case, the action was started by someone other than Jennifer's parents; I can't say whom. I've talked to her parents, they are quite adamant about not wanting her back.

"When that happens, we try to find the best situation we can; relatives if possible, friends of the family or foster homes as a last resort." She looked at my dad for a long minute. "Do you expect any money to care for Jennifer?"

"It's not a problem," Dad said. Mom simply shook her head.

The woman turned to Jenny. "It is my job to be judgmental about the situations young people find themselves in. I am judgmental about all sorts of things, including life style choices. You would be very wise, young woman, not to make choices that limit your future. You are physically mature enough to enjoy sex, but just because you can do something does not imply that you should."

She gestured at Mom and Dad. "I hope this will be satisfactory; if it should turn out otherwise..." She handed Jenny a card. "You can call me, any time of the day or night.

"I am not an ogre, no matter what you or anyone else might think." She looked at me when she said that, and I decided, why not? I stared at her imposing breasts. Nice!

"Many girls in your situation, Jennifer, do not have happy endings. You have here, I believe, a chance at a happy ending. Do listen to what Mr. and Mrs. Ferguson tell you, and if it doesn't work out..." She nodded at the card. "There are far worse ogres in the world than me." She turned to my parents. "Thank you for your time and patience; many people get hostile and upset when I show up on their doorstep."

Dad gestured for her to wait. "I'm an engineer," he told her. "But I'm not unfamiliar with the law; we have a family lawyer. I talked to him about this. I realize that Jennifer's parents can revoke the papers even faster than they granted them; they can contest custody. Please note that I do not think Jennifer would be better off with them. Still, if that was her choice, we'd acquiesce. If it was not, then we would contest her return to them. No matter how expensive or hopeless."

The social worker shrugged. "That would be an option open to you. I would, were that to happen, reevaluate the situation in the light of any new developments and would render my opinion to the court as to what I believe would be in the young woman's best interest."

Then she was gone. For several minutes we stood looking at each other, then Mom sighed. "That went better than I imagined it would."

"I wonder if she is a closet Republican?" Dad said with a laugh.

"Thank you," Jenny said quietly, after everyone had quieted down. "Thank you all for being so wonderful, so kind. For letting me stay here."

Mom walked over to her, hugged her. Then we all stood around Jenny, hugging her. "And now, I'm the ogre," Mom said. "Jennifer and I are going to make lunch." We laughed, and I went back to my book, JR joining me.

She hugged me, and I hugged her; that led to smooching, which led to touching. We were still at it a half hour later when we were called for lunch.

After lunch, JR and I snuggled down for a nap; Mom and Jenny vanished, Dad went off to a golf game he had scheduled with some friends of his from work.

JR and I hugged and kissed for a while, and then she fell asleep; then so did I. Mom woke me up later, "Phone, Tom."

I nodded, got up and went and picked up.

"Tom," Tony said exuberantly on the other end, "Thanks for taking Sue Ellen home last night!" I gulped, decided that Sue Ellen was unlikely to tell him; I sure wasn't.

"No problem. We stayed and watched a movie. She has a really cool home theater."

"You watched the movie?" he laughed sarcastically. "Not what I heard!"

"Ahhhh..." I gargled. Tony had talked to Sue Ellen! But Sue Ellen hadn't seen what Shannon and I had done, because she and JR were elsewhere. "What happened to Roger?" I hoped changing the subject would work.

"Along about dawn this morning, we let him off near Chinle." I blinked. "Actually, it was a few miles further east of there. There's a road along the south rim of the Canyon; about ten miles or so east of Chinle is a place called 'Apache's Leap' where a bunch of the Apaches jumped off a butte to avoid capture by soldiers. There's a little turnout and a historical marker. We left him there."

"Cool."

"It was," Tony agreed. "Very cool; of course, ol' Roger dodger was bare, so it was really, really cool."

"Bare?"

"Yeah, we shaved him, head to toe. Made a few nicks; he wouldn't hold still. We figured he wouldn't want to bleed on his clothes."

I laughed, and Tony said, "What are you doing tonight?"

"Going over to Shannon's for dinner. Then we were going to hang out together."

"Well, Sue Ellen said you'd be welcome to come over to her place, we were going to watch another movie," he yucked it up when he said that, and I knew we'd not be watching a movie.

"Shannon said her parents were going out, so maybe not," I told him.

"Well, you'd be welcome. What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Nothing planned." I told him.

"Well, maybe we'll come up with something, I really owe you for looking after Sue Ellen."

I winced. "Sure, Tony."

"Gotta run," he said. "Sue Ellen's parents are leaving now. Gotta catch up on my quality time." He hung up and I shook my head. Wow! With luck, he'll never know!

I started getting ready to go over to Shannon's; Mom suggested I stop at the store on the way over and get some flowers as a hospitality gift. I thought that was cool, so I did. A little before six, I presented myself at the door.

My first thought when the door opened was that it was Shannon's older sister; it took a second look to realize that the woman was older than she looked.

She smiled at me, "You must be Tom. I'm Mary Leary, Shannon's mother." She held out her hand, and I shook it, kind of in a daze.

Mary Leary was even more redheaded and freckled than her daughters. She was wearing jeans and a blouse, with the blouse tails tied across her stomach; a very flat stomach covered with golden hairs that vanished beneath her low cut jeans.

I lifted my eyes to meet hers, realized I was still holding her hand. I let go and blushed. Her eyes held mine; gray, lively eyes. She stepped forward, and I took a step backwards, not having a clue, still mesmerized by her eyes.

"Shannon wanted to call you up," Mary Leary said quietly, the door now closed behind her. "And ask you not to come."

I blinked in surprise. "My husband decided that seventeen years of marriage had been nice, but sufficient; he moved out this morning."

"Oh," I said, feeling stupid. Why had I assumed it had something to do with me?

"Shannon hasn't taken it well; Elizabeth is Elizabeth. Who knows what she feels?" Mary's voice sounded down and depressed, quite at odds with her sparkly eyes.

Our eyes met, she stared at me for a second. There was no change that I could see but she abruptly said, "So, ve vill hef dinner! Ve vill hef fun, ja wohl!" She said it with a laugh.

"If you're sure," I said, and she nodded, then led the way back inside. I watched Mary walk, shaking my head in amazement. Wow! Wow and double wow! She was really pretty!

Shannon was in the living room, standing looking out a window over a neighbor's yard. When she turned, I could see she'd been crying; I mentally cursed my hormones that had led me to say yes to dinner, when I should have politely excused myself. "I brought some flowers for the table, Shannon," I said quietly, handing them to her.

Shannon took them, looked at them for a long few seconds. "They're pretty."

"Shannon, if this isn't a good time..." I said, feeling helpless.

"A good time?" she sniffed. "I don't know if there ever will be a good time." She looked at me. "A better time? Don't know about that either. Mom's right; why should I have my life ruined because of that son of a bitch!"

A redheaded blaze of anger; I tried to smile but it was daunting to face.

I saw Elizabeth standing across the room, silent. I remembered from last night, her and Jenny chatting away, having a good time. People, I thought, are so stupid! If I had three

women in my family like these, you'd have to pry me away with tanks and infantry.

What would you say, Elizabeth, if you found out that last night I'd pretended to be Jenny, seducing you? Making love to you? That a minute ago, I was lusting after your mom? That I came over here because Shannon said your parents were going out tonight, and that we'd be alone?

I felt a hand on my shoulder. "We are going to have a good time," that was Mary. "We will, because if we let this spoil our lives, then he'll have had the last laugh. I think he's laughed enough at our expense."

It was a strange meal; Mary talked, mostly. Shannon made a few attempts at conversation; Elizabeth sat mute, talking only as necessary. Yet, for all of that, her eyes were frequently on me, and I was sure that a lot of the time she was deep in thought. Maybe, I thought, she's reconsidering what she'd told Jenny last night about 'not being like that.' That or she's thinking about me... I hoped that wasn't the case because life was already too complicated.

Elizabeth's hair was lighter red, almost a blonde of sorts, I thought. Cute. I mentally laughed at myself. Events had, in the space of a week, completely ruined me! I looked at a girl and the first thing that came to mind was whether or not she'd be fun in bed. I saw that Mary was looking at me as well, and I tried hard not to blush. And it wasn't just girls! I'd watched the social worker this morning; I'd had thoughts about her, too. Mom. Kim. Now Mary Leary.

Finally dinner was over, and Shannon stood up. "I have a splitting headache; I'm really sorry, Tom, I really am."

Mary stood up, and waved at Elizabeth. "Let's give these two a moment alone." They carried dishes out, towards the kitchen. Shannon came up, laid her head down on my chest; not what I'd expected.

"This has been pretty rotten for you," she told me.

"I don't think how I feel is very important just now," I told her. She looked up at me, a faint smile on her face.

"You say the nicest things; I wish things had gone like I

wanted."

"Things happen, Shannon. We have tomorrow, and a lot more tomorrows beyond that." I grinned, knew it was going to hurt. "Like, this morning I was told that we're going to LA over spring break. Won't be able to go out Friday, even."

She looked at me, sighed. "I'll make this up to you! I promise!" She kissed me then, hard and passionate; her hand spent a second on the front of my slacks. I kissed her back, but it was only a second. "I really, really am sorry about how cruddy I feel."

"I understand. Get some sleep, if you can." Shannon nodded, turned and walked out of the room.

A minute later Mary and Elizabeth came back. I picked up some of the dishes and trailed along behind them as they made another trip into the kitchen. "You don't have to do that." Elizabeth told me. I smiled at her, glad that for the first time tonight she'd spoken directly to me, even if the topic was mundane.

"It's no trouble. Some day you can come to my house and do the same. Jenny said to say hello."

Elizabeth nodded at that. "Tell her hi from me, too." She turned to Mary. "I'll clean this up, ok? You don't have to."

Mary nodded, her eyes, I thought, wide in startled surprise. She watched as Elizabeth turned and left as well.

"I'm sorry too how this turned out, Tom." Mary sighed, shaking her head. "I wanted to be able to put it behind us." Her laugh turned bitter. "I guess the same day was hoping for a little much."

"It was a nice dinner, Mrs. Leary."

"Mary, call me Mary. Not going to be Mrs. Leary for very much longer. Back to plain Mary McDowell." I glanced at her again; nothing plain there! Just plain beautiful!

She moved to stand in front of me. "You keep looking at me." Her voice was soft.

"Sorry," I said, fighting not to blush.

"Trust me, it's a good thing! You have no idea how much it does for me to see a nice young man looking at me like that, not more than twelve hours after my husband left saying I wasn't much of a woman. Too short, too skinny, no tits; no good in bed."

I gave a low laugh. "Mary, you can lead an ass to water; you can make it drink. But it's still an ass."

She giggled, more like a young girl. Her eyes met mine, searching. "It's said that boys your age have one thing, and only one thing on their minds."

"Not completely true," I told her, "but not far off."

"I read in a book," she said, stepping closer, "that a stiff cock has no conscience."

"I don't know about cocks," I told her, drowning in those gray eyes, "but I have a conscience. I don't go where I'm not wanted."

"And if you are wanted?" her voice was soft. Her hand touched mine. "What then?"

"If two people want the same thing," I told her, taking her hand lightly in mine, "then I don't see a problem with it. Nor does my conscience."

She wrapped her fingers around mine. "In that case, I don't suppose you know a place, a discrete place, where a middle-aged woman, soon to be divorced, can get it on with a sixteen year old young man?"

I contemplated that; I could if I wanted to, take her home. Later, there would be some comment, but not much. But it would be impossible to obscure the fact that no one was going to mind; which would lead to all sorts of questions. That's when I thought about Tony and Sue Ellen.

"I know a place," I said with confidence. "You would have to trust me."

"I want to make love to you," she said pointedly. "I don't



think I could do that with someone I didn't trust. Probably why my husband Bill has been lonely of late."

She squeezed my hand. "You go make your call, I'll tell Elizabeth I'm going out." I mentally raised an eyebrow, and she grinned. "You'll learn about Elizabeth soon enough. Give that girl a piece of broken pottery, and she can reconstruct ancient Egypt... or what's on her mom's mind on how to spend the evening. Shannon will guess, but won't be sure. It's not like she didn't want the same thing."

In some ways, a lot like my family!

Mary grinned, picked a cell phone off a table. "Here."

I called Tony at Sue Ellen's. "Hey, Tony!" I said, knowing that I was probably taking him away from something he'd rather be doing. "Last week, you said you owed me, then again this afternoon."

"I do, once for Marsha, once for last night for Sue Ellen."

"I'd like to collect all of my past markers." I paused, and then said it. "I'd like to stop by for a while with a friend."

"Tom! Of course! You know you're welcome! Shannon too!"

"Her mom."

There was a considerable pause on the other end. "Oh." Another pause. "That's different."

"That's different, as in that's odd, but ok... or that's too different, forget it?" I asked, not sure what he was going to say.

"Oh, odd. You're an odd person, Tom, no doubt about it. Marsha. Shannon, Shannon's mom."

"Promise me you and Sue Ellen will never tell anyone."

"Tom!" he sounded pissed. "Never! Did I ask you not to tell anyone about what we did to Roger?"

"No, but I didn't do this in the Commons at school,

either."

"Oh. Yeah. Doubt if anyone saw anything, though."

"Probably not," I agreed. "Ten minutes?"

"Sure, we'll leave the light on for you, Tom." I stuck my tongue out at the phone, but of course, Tony was oblivious.

"It's okay?" Mary said, when she came out.

"Yes. A friend of mine and his girl friend. They are going together."

"Discrete?"

"Oh yeah! Extraordinarily good at keeping secrets!"

Mary waved at my car. "You'll drive?" I nodded.

I drove as competently as I could to Sue Ellen's, fighting the urge to go faster. I parked in front, and walked Mary up to the door, knocked.

Tony appeared, Sue Ellen right behind him. "Evening, Tom," he said, a quick glance at Mary. "Sue Ellen and I are watching The Matrix." I wanted to laugh; both Tony and Sue Ellen were wearing robes. We went in, and Tony and Sue Ellen crawled into a sleeping bag across the room, while the movie played.

I led the way to the family room; Mary stopped and looked around; spotted the fur rug. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yes." She looked at me, for a long minute, I wasn't at all sure what she was thinking.

Mary reached out, pulled me to her and we kissed for several minutes, a really hot kiss. I put all the skill I'd learned this week into it.

When we broke for a moment, Mary's eyes went to the rug. "I'm not the first, am I?"

"No," I said, then added, "But not Shannon."

She looked at me, and then sighed. "That's the truth,

isn't it?" I nodded. She leaned close, put her head on my chest, reminding me of Jenny and Shannon. After a minute, she lifted her head, looking at me directly; there were tears in her eyes. More and more like Jenny.

"I lied to you," she said in a small voice.

"Anything important?"

"When I opened the door and saw you looking at me..." She leaned close, kissed me hard again for another few seconds. "I was there in lieu of Shannon, to tell you that we weren't receiving company. Bill has been a bastard for some time; today he showed me I had no idea what a bastard is.

"But there you were at the door, I could see you looking at me. God, how I wanted you! A handsome boy, obviously mesmerized and physically attracted to me! I'd show my bastard husband who was desirable! I didn't care about you, about Shannon... just showing the son of a bitch up! You kept looking at me and before I knew it, all I felt was the itch between my legs."

I touched her cheek. "And you think I don't have that same itch?"

"No. It's been a long time since anyone looked at me like that, I knew you what you were thinking. I decided I felt the same. I was going to show Bill that I wasn't the dog he told me I was."

"You are not a dog; you are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"Oh?"

"Woman," I said evenly. "I also like girls. You're not the only person in the world suffering lust. I wasn't at your front door because I expected to tell Shannon good night and shake hands with her when I left."

"I wanted you; I didn't care if you were my daughter's new boyfriend; I didn't care at all."

"And I didn't care that you're Shannon's mom. I wanted to make love to her; and when I saw you, I wanted to make love to

you as well." I paused, "Not in place of, too."

She giggled, "Ah, to be a sixteen year old! Bill was never like that."

"I am not like your husband, never ever."

"You want me."

"Sure," I told her. "And in that, I suppose I'm the same. Not much else is the same though."

"He's fucked me good," she said, her voice bitter. "Do you know how old I am?"

I looked and shook my head. Sometimes she seemed older, other times younger.

"I am the mother of a daughter who is sixteen years and four months old. Carried her full term, I did. I got pregnant with Shannon two days after my thirteenth birthday. I'm thirty."

I shrugged. "My mother got pregnant when she was thirteen too," I told her. Mary's eyes grew wide. "She had an abortion, paid for by her brother and some of his friends; none of whom were the father. Mom didn't have a clue about sex then. Didn't know how she got pregnant. Then she had the abortion, and only later realized she'd killed her baby. My grandparents learned about it, and nearly threw her out. They did cut her out of their will; my Uncle put her back in."

Mary asked softly, "And what happened to your mom after her abortion?"

I shrugged; I didn't really know why that was important. "Mom finished high school, graduated, went to college, met Dad, fell in love, got married. Had me, even before she graduated."

"I carried Shannon; they kicked me out of high school. Bill's parents and mine forced us to marry. I raised Shannon; they paid for Bill's college. Tom, I'm a high school drop out, who's never worked a day in her life."

"He told me he'd cleaned out the bank account, that I'd never get another penny from him; not for me, not for his

daughters. 'Ungrateful bitches' he called them. He told me that I could have the house, but of course there were the mortgage payments to make. I could keep my car... and the payments." She broke down, crying.

I reached out, put my arms around her, thinking Jenny thoughts. I could do this, I thought. I can. For a long time Mary cried and cried.

"Now I'm feeling sorry for myself," she said, more bitter than ever. "Shannon... Shannon has music lessons, she's an accomplished violinist; going to All-state this year. Was going to go to Juillard year after next. Gone, no money!

"Elizabeth is a genius; she wanted so much to go to Cal Tech and study the secrets of the universe! Gone, no money! In ten minutes, that man ripped our hearts out, left us bleeding. Then turned and walked away."

She looked at me. "And my response? The proud mother of two? Seduce a sixteen year old. My daughter's new boyfriend."

I laughed hard, and she looked at me as if I was crazy. "Silly me, I thought I was doing my best to seduce you," I told her.

She smiled at me, and then hugged me. "I told the girls what we are facing; they are distraught. I went to the ATM, checked the bank balance; I don't know if Bill just screwed up the numbers, which he's good at, or left me a little something. There was an even hundred dollars left in the account. I spent some on dinner, took the rest in cash. I have 78 dollars and 11 cents between the life we once had, and me and my daughter's new lives on the streets. I figure, maybe a week."

She stared at me. "God, I still want you."

"And I want you," I told her evenly.

Mary reached out, put her hand on the front of my slacks. "You do."

"Mary," I said evenly. She looked at me. "Do you love Shannon? Elizabeth?"

She nodded.

"I won't ask who which of your daughters you love the most; what's important is that you love them." I could see the confusion in her eyes. "I want to make love to you," I told her simply, "I want to make love to you more than I've ever wanted any woman in my life."

"But... I still want Shannon." I smiled lightly, nodded at the fur rug.

"Last week, Tony's cousin. A quick, one night stand. If she were here, I'd want to make love to her again. There are others, others I care about. I love each of you, in my own way, in your own ways." I reached out and started unbuttoning her blouse.

The knot in the tail was a bit of a challenge, but I managed it, peeled the garment back; I was right, no bra. Very small breasts, not much bigger than JR's; perfectly huge nipples, covering ninety-five percent of her breasts. I reached inside her blouse, using both of my hands to caress her breasts.

Mary took a shivering breath. "For the life of me, I can't figure out which of us is using the other."

I shook my head. "I want to make love to you; you want me to. I don't want to make you pregnant; I hope that's your desire too."

She looked at me, eyes glittering. "Shannon was an easy baby, popped right out, even though the doctor expected trouble. Piece of cake, she told me when I got pregnant with Elizabeth. I nearly died; Elizabeth took everything of mine with her. A seventeen year old with a hysterectomy."

I smiled, then, suddenly sure where before I'd had doubts. "Mary, you talk too much." I kissed her, full mouth, my tongue going after hers; then my hands were working her jeans.

Mary started on my clothes; in a second we were both on the fur rug, kissing and caressing each other with abandon. When I started kissing down her torso, Mary froze in astonishment. I continued, and she grew tenser the closer to the apex of her legs I got. I kissed and licked her inner thighs like I'd done for Jenny the night before.

Mary was rigid; unbelieving, I thought. I continued as if it was something I did every day. I laughed at myself. True, but only for the last week!

Mary's first orgasm I almost mistook for a simple moan; but unlike any other woman I'd made love to in the last week, her whole skin tone and body language changed in an instant, and I knew it for what it was. I kept licking her, unable to locate her clit, settling instead for putting my tongue deep, deep inside her.

I continued licking and sucking; her next orgasm was more pronounced. She's been suppressing her emotions, I thought, all of this time. No one, I thought, has ever done this for her. I did it again, this time using a finger inside her as well. Her fourth orgasm was a wild wind, sweeping both of us up; I enjoyed it, I thought, every bit as much as Mary.

Then I was hungry for her, to feel myself inside her. I moved like I'd never moved with Marsha, JR, Penny... not anyone, wanting to bury my erection deep inside her.

Instead, Mary held her legs closed, looking at me. "Oh God! For a second there, I was imagining it was your gay sister kissing me!" I mentally sighed, time enough later, I thought, for reeducation.

"A good or bad thought?" I murmured, unable to resist the impulse to talk instead of act.

"Severely radical! God, that was good!"

"What matters," I said softly, "is the person making love to you, loves you. Nothing else."

"Do you love me?" She asked, her hand wrapping around my erection, "Or is this speaking for you?"

"If you want," I told her. "I can do what I was just doing all night."

"And this," she repeated, squeezing me. I nearly shot my wad.

"Can take care of itself," I told her. "I can pretend I'm my sister, making love to you. Whatever you want."

"What about what you want?"

"I want to make you come," I told her. "Just about any way I can figure out how to do it."

Mary giggled, "Are all sixteen year olds like this?"

"Never checked the guys. The girls; some of them."

She giggled again, "But your sister might like it?"

"My sister would like it; her friends would like it. One of her friends has a serious crush on Elizabeth."

I felt Mary reach between us, guiding me into her. "Right now, this is what I want," Mary said, as I slid deep inside her. "Later, I don't know. God, you have a talented tongue!"

We started moving together; I don't know about Mary, but it was really good, really, really good for me. She wrapped her legs around my butt, pulling me even harder into her. I kissed her hard, my fingers stroking her small breasts; I used my thumbs to chafe her relatively large nipples. They didn't get hard like I'd grown used to, but the silky texture was pleasant and Mary was enjoying the attention. In fact, she came a moment later, grunting and writhing under me, as though being tortured; beautiful torture. She kissed me so hard my ears were ringing from lack of oxygen, and I kissed back for all I was worth.

I was close, very close, and I continued stroking into her, no longer very conscious of anything other than Mary and our time together. I came, and I pressed deep inside of her, trying to prolong the moment.

It took a few minutes for me to catch my breath. I was aware of Mary under me, her breathing every bit as ragged as mine. "Tom..." her voice was soft. She reached up and stroked my face. "God, Tom," her breath caught. "Your tongue was good, this..." She bumped my belly with hers. "God, I never knew. I never knew."

Mary kissed me again, brief but passionate. "Bill was the only man I was ever with until today. He'd never been with another girl either; the first couple of times it ranged from painful to awful. Bill got off though." Her voice turned



bitter. "I didn't have my first orgasm until after I was pregnant; and it was an accident. Bill found that if he stayed in me, he could get off again. That's all I ever was to him.

"All these years, wasted." I saw something that might have been a tear, form in the corner of her eye.

"Mary, this is now, not then. Not a history lesson," I told her gently. "I love you, you know."

"You're a sixteen year old in lust," she told me, shaking her head. "I'm old enough to be your mother."

I laughed and shook my head emphatically. "Mary, what I feel about you has nothing to do with how old I am or how old you are. Yes, there is some of this in it." I pushed into her deeply again, and she sighed with pleasure. I did it again. "You like it, don't you?"

"I've never liked sex as much as a minute ago. Or ten minutes ago, or however long it's been since we laid down here," she told me.

"And I like it. But Mary, I don't do this with anyone, not hardly. Yes, you're pretty, but inside..." I reached out and stroked her face. "Now I think I understand something my mom was trying to teach me not so long ago. About love and being loved, about recognizing something in people that goes beyond physical love.

"You have something deep inside of you that I hunger for," I told her. "You have more of it than anyone I've ever met. I don't know if it's possible to meet someone with more. I want you," my voice broke. "I want you to be part of my life."

She looked at me, unblinking. "What do you mean?"

"I want to do this with you again." I stroked into her again, then again. "I want to wake up some mornings and look at your face asleep next to me in bed, then do this." More strokes, she moaned, started lifting to meet me.

"Some mornings?" She asked softly. I nodded. She stared at me, piercing me with her green eyes. "I'm not the only one."

"You're the only one I feel this strongly about. But there

are others I feel strongly about."

She smiled slightly. "So if there were others I felt strongly about... I could spend some mornings with them?"

"Yes," I said it as simply as I could. I could see the doubt in her eyes.

"I could get up and go in there and do this with your friend in the other room, and you'd not go crazy jealous?"

"I wouldn't, no. Sue Ellen... I don't speak for other people, just for myself. I have reason to suspect, suspect, mind you that it wouldn't be the first time Tony strayed off the beaten path, even though they've been going together for more than four years, almost five."

"And if it was your sister I was with?"

I smiled, shook my head. "Particularly not my sister."

For a moment Mary was silent, then you met my eyes. "I was going to ask why in particular not her, but now I think I know."

"I don't talk about friends, even with other friends." I told her evenly.

"I don't think I could handle being your, or anyone else's concubine. A Thursday."

"A Thursday?" I asked, confused.

"The woman you sleep with on Thursdays, as opposed to the ones the rest of the week."

I reached between us, just above her heart. "Right now my heart is here, beating with yours. I don't know how or why it is I feel what I'm feeling right this second, but I want to feel your heart again. Today, tomorrow... any day for the rest of my life."

She snorted. "I don't think we can get married."

"Not now," I agreed. "And maybe in six weeks or six months or six years I won't feel like this. I can't imagine not feeling like I do now, but then a week ago, I couldn't imagine

what this would be like either. But it's how I feel now."

"And if I got up from here, and went to your friend, and say, Shannon came in and wanted to make love to you?"

"It would happen. I care about Shannon, not as much as I care about you, not as much as I care about some others. But, yes."

"Elizabeth?" she pressed.

I shook my head. "I don't think Elizabeth wants that. I don't think I could feel like this with someone who wasn't sure about wanting to be with me."

I started moving in her again, deliberate and strongly; she started to move with me. Then with deliberateness, I rolled over, somehow managing to stay deep inside Mary, until she was on top. I lifted her so that she was sitting up on my midsection, then I started chaffing her breasts again, those lovely huge nipples on such a small base. She started rocking back and forth, her movements growing stronger, more confident.

I reached down and used my thumb, trying once again to find her clit. I wasn't sure where it was, but there was no doubt in my mind that I was doing something right. She came again, much quicker than before, a smile wreathed Mary's face. She redoubled her efforts and I was surprised when a few minutes later I shot off again, followed seconds later by Mary.

When she sank down against me, she leaned close, lightly blew in my ear. "In all the years I was with my husband, he never went down on me, not once. Never, ever was I on top."

"Change is good," I quipped. I saw the sudden hurt in her eyes, understood what I'd done wrong. I lifted up, kissed her lightly. "Can be good." Mary hugged me very tightly.

"God, my brain tells me this is all teen-aged hormones; my hormones just don't care, they want to go again and again."

"And your heart?" I asked. She shook her head. "I can't imagine making love to someone who wants both me and my daughter. Other women. It seems licentious, evil."

"Making love like this isn't evil," I said. "Its a lot of

things, including lusty and licentious, but not evil."

There was a soft knock on the door to the room, a knock I knew. "Tom," Tony murmured from the other side, "it's after twelve."

"Curfew?" Mary whispered and I shook my head.

"Sue Ellen's parents come home around one or so, most nights. Tony doesn't want to ruin a good thing."

Mary sat up, looked at the door. "No, we wouldn't want to ruin a good thing. God, was it ever a good thing!" Her voice was bright with mirth, like it had been earlier; her eyes sparkling and alive. I wanted to pull her down and make love to her for the rest of the night. It must have shown in my eyes, because Mary giggled like a teenager.

"Hold that thought! Right now, I need to get home, try to explain this to my daughters."

She reached over and grabbed some of her clothes, then stood. I stood too, reaching out and pulling her too me. I stroked her body, as much of it as I could reach, kissing her hard. She moaned, and then looked down at my latest erection.

"God, Bill had trouble keeping it up once!" she said, and then she reached out and touched my cheek. "Tom..."

I smiled and nodded. "Whatever you want."

Mary laughed, "You don't know what I want."

"Doesn't matter," I said, smugly.

"My hormones are beating down my brains, at least for now. I want to do this again. I don't care about anything else, right this second, but extracting a promise from you that you will call, that you will come over... and we will do this again."

"That is the easiest promise in the world to make; and will be the easiest in the world to keep," I told her. "Tomorrow?"

She shivered. "Oh God! I guess! Yes! In the afternoon. God, I don't know how to look Shannon in the eye."

"You love Shannon, don't you?" I asked softly, and Mary nodded.

"And you love Elizabeth. Do you have trouble looking Shannon in the eye because you love her sister too?"

"It's not the same kind of love." Mary was shaking her head.

"That's what people say; they also say love and hate are close to being the same thing. I dunno, seems to me as different as love and hate are, maybe people are flat out wrong about both."

"People used to think the earth was flat and at the center of the universe," Mary said, grimacing. "God! I have so much to think about!"

I gave a heartfelt thanks to Sue Ellen and Tony, before I walked Mary out to the car. The night was clear, a little on the cool side; I wondered for a second how Roger Parker had fared. I smiled a little, hoping it was either very chilly or very hot where he was right then.

We drove the short distance to Mary's, I got out and held the door open for her, walked her to the door. Shannon opened the front door as we got close, looking at us. "You did it, didn't you? Slept with my mom?" Her voice was disbelieving.

I touched Mary's shoulder, turned her slightly around to face me. I leaned close, kissed her gently on the lips. "Good night, Mary. I think I should talk to Shannon for a few minutes."

Mary's eyes met mine, yep, that's what I'm thinking, Mary.

Mary sighed, turned to her daughter. "You can think what you want, Shannon. I wasn't out to take your boyfriend away. Bill said those horrible things to me, I, I, I wanted to prove that they weren't true." She looked at me, "And I found something else, something wonderful."

"Shannon, please come here," I asked softly. She looked at me, at her mother, then stepped out outside. I put my arm around Mary's waist, then around Shannon's. "Mary told me that

she wasn't sure if my wanting to be with both of you was my hormones talking or something else. She's right about one thing, I'm not sure if it's my heart or brains talking; I have trouble thinking this is smart, just like anyone would. But I do know my heart.

"I care about you, just like I care about others. And there are others and there always will be others I care for. I never expect to become the only person in anyone's life; it makes me uncomfortable thinking about it. We are our own persons; we can share part of ourselves with others, but I don't think we should subsume who we are in someone else, no matter how strongly we feel about them.

"Maybe this is all just sixteen year old bull shit, aimed at doing what ever it is I have to, to get into as many girl's panties as I can. I tell you it's not, but then those are just words. You, Shannon, you have to decide. Just as Mary decided, as others have decided. Others who know about each other, others who don't know about each other.

"At school, they tell us that being judgmental is wrong; but that's flat wrong. We have to make decisions about our lives, and we have to use our judgment to make those choices. Heart, brains, lust... no matter what is providing the input, we have to decide.

"This morning, a social worker came to the house to talk to Jennifer. That's what she told us: it's her job to be judgmental about kids and how they are forced to or choose to live. She told Jennifer she was free to stay with us, that choosing the streets was a really, really bad choice. So Jenny lives with us."

"Another of your conquests?" Shannon said, a trace of bitterness. "Even if that's not what you told me yesterday?"

I shook my head. "You know the rumors at school, Shannon; you told me about my sister yourself. Jennifer was kicked out of her family because she's gay; and she's gay because her brother has been molesting her since she was five or six. Most women would consider it traumatic in the extreme to be raped once; Jenny was raped several times a day for years."

There was abject silence, both Mary and Shannon staring at me. "Jenny doesn't have much use for my gender. Somehow, she's

decided I don't count as a boy; I hug her and maybe a little kiss on the forehead, that's it. My dad gives her hugs before bed. Until this week, no one ever told her they loved her, no one ever hugged her, or kissed her good night; none of that.

"I count Jenny as a very special, very particular friend. I don't care about whether or not I ever make love to her; I am happy, pure and simply happy, to see a smile on her face, each and every day. Where she finds happiness, who she finds it with... I have no more say in it than anyone. Sure, if she took up with someone like Roger Parker, I'd tell her it wasn't a good idea. That would be my advice, my judgment, as her friend. But when she chooses, I'll support her judgment, even if I didn't think she made the right choice. I could be wrong. I could easily be wrong about a lot of things.

"Here and now, Shannon, I'm telling you I care about you. I want to be your friend, and yes, I want to be your lover. But it's your choice."

"And if I told you that I picked you because I wanted someone, anyone, to sleep with because I'm so horny, I'm nearly going out of my mind?" Shannon asked back, her voice muted with pain.

I grinned. "There are a lot of other boys at school, who would gladly trade places with me. Just tell them, they'd line up for the chance. But I asked you out yesterday night, and tonight you asked me over. We made our choices, you and I.

"My family has a history of rescuing kittens and stray waifs. Mary was hurt by your father, just as you and Elizabeth were. But my feelings about you, about Mary, aren't based on pity or sympathy; I'd do what I did tonight over again, in a second whether or not everything was like it was this time last week."

I hugged Mary, and then kissed her lightly again. She smiled at me, leaned close and kissed her daughter on the forehead. "I never meant to hurt you, Shannon, I promise."

I felt the rigidity and tension flow out of Shannon, like the air going out of a tire. "I know," Shannon said softly, "I know."

She turned to me. "I saw you, a stranger I know only

slightly, stand up for me against Roger when he was bothering me the other day." I could see that was news to Mary, but Shannon went on. "He came after you wanting a fight, but you brushed him aside; unimportant, irrelevant, not worth fighting with."

Her eyes met mine. "If we'd have been alone right then, you'd have had a tough time fighting me off."

I shook my head. "Wouldn't have wanted to, even a little."

"Then Friday, Roger came back, this time with friends. And you stood up to them. For Jennifer, for me, for the others. Then your friend showed up, and explained to Roger that he was a deader; then they took him away. All of those guys. They didn't even look at us. I hope they beat the shit out of him, and dumped him in the garbage dump!"

I laughed. "No, they didn't hurt him. Shaved him bald... all over bald. Dropped him near Canyon De Chelly early this morning. Didn't think he needed clothes, all alone out there in the middle of the desert."

Shannon blinked in astonishment; Mary chuckled too. "Never liked that boy," Mary said.

"What's to like?" I said, before turning to Shannon. "You were saying?"

"Last night, at Sue Ellen's, I couldn't believe what happened. Your sister and Sue Ellen going off. Elizabeth and Jennifer. I didn't know what I wanted. So I decided to wait; by the time we said good night, I decided I'd had enough waiting. It was going to be tonight.

"Then Dad said those terrible things about mom; walked out. Oh my God!" Shannon was crying, and I hugged her a little tighter. "We don't have a dime, Tom! Not a dime! What are we going to do?"

"Something will come up, I'm sure," I said neutrally. At sixteen, I might not be the oldest, most experienced kid on the block, but I was pretty sure how much financial help would be permitted to me: zilch. Why promise something you can't deliver?

"I felt awful, I just couldn't face you; I didn't want you



to come, to see me like this. Mom said she'd tell you we were having family problems, that you could come back another time. Then you came in, and I could see the way you were looking at each other. I couldn't believe it! I felt sick, didn't want to be with anyone right then.

"And you left with Mom and I started kicking myself, over and over. I wanted it to be me you were with; I kept telling myself, you and she were just going to talk, like Elizabeth and Jennifer did last night. Just talk, that's all. And when I saw you just now..." She shook her head in misery. "I knew. I could tell you'd done it."

"I still like to be friends," I told her. "Friend or lover; that's up to you. Both." I hugged her a little more tightly; leaned close kissed her gently on the lips.

"Boyfriends aren't sweaters," Shannon said, "you don't share them."

"You share friends with others," I told her. "You have a sister, you don't mind that your mom loves her too. I know some good families; the parents love their kids. The kids love both their parents and each other. Yeah, some families aren't like that; they are the sad ones, the ones that don't work. I want my life and my family to be one of those that work, Shannon."

Shannon was silent for a moment, then Mary hugged me a tighter. "Good night, Tom. Shannon. I love you Shannon, I do." She let me go, went through the door into the house. I kept my arm around Shannon, who stood looking at me, trying, I thought, to make up her mind.

"If I came on to you right now," she murmured, "you'd want to fuck, wouldn't you?"

"If you wanted, I'd want to make love to you, yes. Fuck is, to me, a lot like the word 'love,' overused, and used in places where you don't really know what someone means. I don't like 'fuck' very much as a word; I don't think loving and fucking are the same. One implies, to me, care and concern, something more than just sex. Fucking implies sex without any concern or love. Just sex. Not what I want."

"How about commitment? Does making love to a girl imply a commitment, in your little world of screwing everyone you want

to?"

"Commitment, Shannon is a series of promises people make to each other. Mostly not explicit, but implicit. Not even spoken." I met her eyes. "Honestly, I haven't thought about commitment in big terms. Right now, my idea of commitment is being kind, loving, and considerate. All sorts of things. Long term promises about life?" I shrugged. "I'm sixteen, I don't even know what I want to major in, in college. I had enough trouble deciding on college prep in high school. Making a promise about how I'm going to live my life five, ten, twenty, fifty years from now? I'm not ready."

"You could use that as a cop out, forever. Some people are never ready."

"Are you ready?" I asked. "Really? You want the traditional boyfriend, going steady commitment, don't you?"

"Yeah," Shannon said.

I shook my head. "I can't. It's like a miniature marriage, a practice run at the real thing, with none of the real commitments."

"That's certainly convenient for a horny boy who wants to have his cake and eat it too," Shannon said, her voice bitter.

I sighed, I've lost her, I've lost her. The words ran over and over again in my head. "I'm horny. I'm a boy, you're a girl. I'm promising to care a great deal for you; maybe you think it's just wham, bamm fuck till the sun comes up, then go back and do it again; that's not how it is with me." I felt a little angry.

"Go ahead, find a steady boyfriend, if that's what you want. Roger comes to mind, there's a lot more like him out there. And he'll stay faithful, maybe, until one or the other of you decides it's time to break up. Then you go your separate ways, and it's as though it never was."

"Not with me. You mean something to me. Something more than that. I don't ever want to go my separate way from you, not if it means never seeing you again. Yeah, I feel the same way about everyone I sleep with." I waved at the house.

"What happens to families, Shannon? You share, you care. At some point in time, you'll go to college, your sister will go to college, and you will go your separate ways. Yet, when it's holiday time or spring break or whatever, you'll get back together and celebrate being a family again. And you will still love your mom, your sister just like you do now. Is that such a bad life? Such a terrible future to look forward to?" I decided I had to say one more thing, it was hard, awful, but I had to say it.

"You going to invite Roger to Christmas dinner? Have him over for Thanksgiving?"

She didn't react the way I expected. Shannon looked at me like I'd suggested something unthinkable. "No, I guess not." Her expression was one of thought, not anger. "I've never thought about it like that." She looked at me, smiled. "I don't think anyone has."

She gave a half-hearted laugh, "God, hormones so mess you up!"

"Hormones messed me up tonight," I told her. "I never thought about doing something like I did. My dad told me before I went to my first dance, 'Make sure, Tom, you go home with the girl you brought to the dance.' I saw your mom, I could feel something inside me..." I reached out and touched Shannon's cheek. "I swear to you, that if you'd wanted me, if you hadn't left, I'd have left with you, not Mary. But your mom is a powerful woman."

"Not according to my father," Shannon said.

"I told your mom earlier, you can lead an ass to water, you can make it drink; but it's still an ass."

She looked at me and shook her head. "And what does that pithy bit of wisdom mean?"

"It means he's your father, was your father and will stay your father. But he's an ass, first and foremost."

Shannon nodded, looking thoughtful. "All my life, he's been there. Gruff, curt, anything he did for any of us, seemed like it was a great imposition on him. And now he's gone."

She looked steadily at me. "He chortled with glee; he laughed about abandoning us. Mom, he said, was useless in bed, useless as a mother; she only existed because he did everything for her. Now, he told us, we'd see who was important, him or her. Get a job, he told Mom. You can be a waitress, maybe. Maybe a bag boy at the supermarket. Don't try to be a prostitute, he told her, you'd starve. He laughed and laughed and laughed, said one hateful thing after another, then he left."

"I'm sorry, Shannon," I said, feeling the pain in her, as I'd felt it earlier in Mary.

"Elizabeth came in for the worst, after Mom. He said if she was so bright, why didn't she have friends? God, it was awful for her. And me, he told me, if nothing else, I could probably earn enough on my back, fucking one boy after another to keep the rest fed."

"You have to consider the source," I told her, trying to do anything to make her feel better. "Be judgmental about sources, too." I tried to smile.

She sighed, shook her head. "I did want you, you know. Like I've wanted other boys before you."

"And I wanted you," I told her, "Like I've wanted other girls before. Still do want you."

She looked at me, searching my face. "Mom said she was confused? Me too."

"Shannon, next week, for a week, I have to go to LA on a family trip. I wish, right now, it wasn't so. The world is confused for me too, just not confused in the same way as yours."

"My father accused me of being ready to spread my legs for any boy that walked past me."

I shook my head. "That's not true."

She met my eyes. "Maybe. I don't know any more. I know I want you so bad, I can taste it."

"And if I was someone like Roger or Keith or Sam about now,

I'd grab you and do it," I told her. "Except I'm not those people, I'm me, Tom Ferguson."

She put her hand on the front of my slacks. "You're hard," Shannon murmured.

"I never said I was perfect," I told her. "That part of me has its own agenda." I tapped my forehead. "However this part of me is in control, and this part of me," I tapped my heart, "tells my brain that now's not a good time."

She shivered, looked at me. "God, I want to feel a hard cock inside me, right now! God I want to be fucked! God, it would be such a bad idea!" She moved her hand from my slacks, stroked my cheek. "Good night, Tom."

"Good night, Shannon." She started forward, like she was going to kiss me. I looked at her steadily, and she giggled.

"Yeah, probably couldn't stop if I started. I want to see you again."

"And I want to see you."

"And my mom?"

"And Mary, yes."

She sighed, smiled, turned and went through the door.

I walked back to my car, drove the five minutes home, I walked upstairs, saw Jenny was snuggled up in my bed. I smiled at her, undressed and crawled in next to her. She opened one eye, smiled at me.

"Elizabeth says hello," I told Jenny, and she smiled so pretty. "I told her hello from you, too."

"Joanna and your dad went to Kim's tonight." I nodded, and then Jenny added, "Your mom helped me get to sleep."

I hugged her, and she smiled at me. "Did you have a good time?"

I sighed, "Yes and no. Not at all what I expected."

"Hug me, Tom." I hugged her again, and she was asleep again. I kissed her forehead, fell asleep myself.

I'd never dreamed about any of the girls in my life, at least not this week. What did I need wet dreams for when the waking versions were so much better?

I knew I was dreaming. Marsha walked up to me, put her arm around me and hugged me, then kissed me hard. "Love you, Tom." Then JR did the same thing. Penny, Kim, Mom. Jenny did it, then Mary and Shannon. Mom waved a few feet away, and I looked where she'd pointed. Aunt Shirley, and a black woman I barely recognized; I'd seen her once, two or three years ago. A group of shadowy faces, the others Dad had talked about this morning. As many as there were around me already. I blinked, startled by the number.

Mom smiled at me, touched my face. "So Tom? Who's first?"

I looked around, mentally gulped. How many times can you say 'too much of a good thing', real fast?

Then Mom kissed me hard, then Marsha, then Kim and Penny, Jenny smiled shyly at me, blew me a kiss, eyes sparkling. Shannon kissed me, felt my boner, and grinned. "Never forget me." I shook my head, mystified.

Then looked at Mary. I walked to her, held her. "You're first in my heart. Now, always."

She shook her head. "You have a year and a bit of high school left; then college. Maybe grad school. Anything else, and you're cheating yourself. I couldn't let that happen, Tom. Wouldn't. How would we live? My income as a waitress? A check out clerk at the store? Do you know how many years in jail I'd get if I moved in with you? Or you with me? You're half my age, Tom."

"Mary, you and me. Not only you and me, but me and you. Always. I don't want to get married just yet, and there might be a little surprise if we did. But, I promise you, you will always be in my heart. Always."

"I don't accept charity, Tom."

"And what did you accept from your husband all these

years?"

"Too much, I think. Too much. Now I have nothing."

"Mary, you're wrong. You are wealthy beyond imagination, it's your husband who is poverty stricken. You have people who love you. Unless he has that, what could he possibly have that's worth more?"

It was a dream; I knew it was a dream. My mind made the mental leap; something Dad had mentioned a year or so ago when he was talking to me about my personal finances. Yes, Mary, I do have a little surprise for you. Just a little. And it's true, you have much more than you think.

Sunday, March 24, 2002

I woke up, then went downstairs to the family room; dug out a newspaper, and went through the want ads. I knew enough about Phoenix to know which were good neighborhoods; I wrote down a list of twenty apartment rents, for three bedroom apartments. I added them up, came up with an average rent of \$975 a month. Doable, I thought.

I went in the kitchen, found the little ledger book Mom kept of the household expenses. I'd been curious a few times, looked at it, but it hadn't interested me, and I didn't pay it much attention. Now I did. Four people, we averaged around five hundred dollars a month for food, probably going to go up now that Jenny was here. About fifty a month each for clothes; Mom and JR liked to dress up, now and then. So did Dad; not me. So, a little more than a hundred dollars a month per person for food, fifty dollars for clothes, maybe a bit less. Two hundred for utilities, for everyone.

Maybe two thousand a month, for everything, for three people. Twenty four thousand dollars a year, after taxes. I smiled at myself, grinning foolishly. There was a question I'd wished I'd asked at the time, but I hadn't known then what I figured now. I sat staring at the numbers for quite a while.

A little after seven, I was still sitting there thinking, when Dad and JR returned from Kim's. JR hugged me, yawned and headed up to her room.

"Up early," Dad said. "That doesn't bode well for your

dinner date last night."

"Feel up to a walk?" I asked, and he laughed.

"You rather mixed the metaphors there," he told me, but nodded. "I've got another golf game this afternoon, a warm up would be nice."

I led the way, setting a very brisk pace, at least as fast as he'd set yesterday. Mary and her family lived about three miles away; I walked steadily, silently.

We were almost there when Dad spoke. "Yesterday, we walked about four miles. I hope you noticed that when we got done, we were home."

"I noticed. Not today," I told him. "I think I need to do this more often."

"Even at your age, it wouldn't hurt," he told me.

I stopped in front of Mary's place. "You told me last year what Grandfather's plan was for us, JR and me."

"Yes. Craig's administering everything, but it's his father's plan he's working from. The old man never forgave your mom for getting pregnant. Still, it's better to skip a generation in leaving inheritances; you save a lot on taxes."

"So, twice a year Craig puts money into your investment portfolios, you and JR. Into his own."

"I never liked the old man, but I'd never wish Alzheimer's on anyone."

"So, the contributions are about a half million each, each time. Craig could easily do a lot more, but there are tax reasons on both sides why this is the best for now."

"And you're in charge of investing it for JR and me?"

He nodded. "I supervise Craig, anyway." He looked curiously at me, standing in the early morning sun.

"You told me, you believe in diversification," I said.



"That's correct. Stocks, bonds, real estate. Even some gold in a vault in LA."

I pointed to the house. "What do you think that house is worth?"

He looked around, spent a second thinking. "Probably two-forty, two-fifty. Nice house, nice neighborhood, but not new."

"I want to buy it," I said flat out. "Or at least make an offer."

He looked at the house, then back at me. "I don't see a for sale sign. Why this house? What's wrong with ours?"

"Nothing's wrong with ours, nothing at all." I nodded at the house. "Shannon Leary lives there, her mom and sister."

"The girl and her family you went to have dinner with last night?" I nodded. "And you want to buy their house? Then what? Turn them out on the street?"

I nearly lost my temper; that hit me hard and low, it was all I could do not to say something stupid. Instead I clenched my jaw shut, willing myself to stand still, not say anything.

"Just stepped in it big time, didn't I?" Dad said, embarrassed. "Tom, we all say things from time to time that hurt people or piss them off; the least you could do is tell me where I stepped in it, so I can miss the mess next time."

"Yesterday, Shannon's father left them. Cleaned out their bank account except for a few dollars and left. Walked away from his family. Mary Leary got pregnant with Shannon when she was thirteen, carried the baby to term; dropped out of high school, eventually got a GED. But she's never worked a day in her life."

I saw gray bleak wilderness behind his eyes. "God, Tom! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to imply you're like that... even if I did say it. I really am sorry."

"There are some despicable scum in the world, Tom. Pond scum, so low there are no good words to describe them."

"He said hateful, hurtful things to Mary, Shannon, and her

sister Elizabeth. Nasty, hateful things." Dad nodded, looking at the house. "One thing Mary said to me, last night. He told her he was leaving her the house and the payments, her car and the payments. I think he meant that she couldn't make them, that she was going to lose them."

"Sounds like."

"Mary could sell the house."

Dad blinked, realizing now where I'd been coming from.

"I bet with an offer to buy, the bank wouldn't foreclose; it would give her time to find a job, figure out something. I don't know how much she owes on the house, but if she did sell it, Mary would have money in the bank, a cushion, enough to live on for a few years," I continued the thought.

He looked at me for a long stretch. "I was thinking, you must like this girl Shannon quite a lot. Yet, you keep talking about Mary." I met his eyes; I wasn't going to say anything, but it wasn't something he was going to have to think very hard about.

"Would you talk to Mary?" I asked softly. "We don't have to tell her about trust funds, and the like, at least not now."

"You didn't mention to her that you are a filthy capitalist, worth millions, and going to be worth tens of millions?"

"No. I have a feeling if I did that, she'd never talk to me again."

"Or you'd never be rid of her, ever," he said evenly.

This time I kept my temper. "Mom's not like that, you're not like that. Neither is JR. Uncle Craig and Aunt Shirley aren't like that. Kim's not like that, nor is Penny."

He held up his hand in self-defense. "Okay, okay, okay! I'll talk to her, okay?"

"Okay," I said, and we both laughed.

Then I went up to the door and rang the bell. It was Mary

who answered, obviously tired, obviously having spent a great deal of time since I'd last seen her, crying.

"Dad, this is Mary McDowell, formerly Leary. Mary, this is my dad, Dave Ferguson."

Mary nodded, looked at her wristwatch. "It's early, I know," I told her. "Please, could we come in and talk to you?"

"About what, Tom?" Mary asked, on the edge between hostile and curious.

"You, Shannon and Elizabeth. The future." She was hesitating, and I said simply. "Please."

Dad spoke softly, "Tom told me a little about what happened. I'm an engineer, but I have some background in law and financial matters. He thinks I can help." He looked at me fondly, "I don't know if I can, but won't know until I try. Please."

She looked at him, then at me. "Last night, Tom and I," Dad shook his head, but she went on, "were together. Sexually."

"If you don't have a problem with it, and Tom doesn't have a problem with it, then I don't have a problem with it. Neither will my wife."

"My daughter had a cow," Mary said bluntly. "Yet, Tom talked to her last night; right now she's hoping he comes over later today. Of course," Mary's face sparkled with inner laughter, her smile was the most beautiful work of art in all creation. "Shannon was assuming it would be when she was awake."

Mary stepped back from the door, "Sure, come in. I don't think there's anything you can do to help, unless you've got a job I can do. A job for someone with zero skills and zero experience."

"We'll get to that," Dad said as we came in. "Tom's description of the events tells me that you are in immediate financial trouble."

"Bill left me a hundred dollars; I think that was a math error on his part, he was always overdrawing our checking

account."

"How long have you lived here? Tom says the house has a mortgage, that you're not renting."

"We moved here right after Shannon was born, the down payment was a wedding present from Bill and my parents. They co-signed the loan, too. In 1998, my parents died within a few months of each other. We refinanced then, got a lower payment, lower interest, and didn't have any cosigners."

"Twenty or thirty year mortgage?" My dad asked.

"Ten; but it's moot. I can't make the payments, even if it's got less than six years to go."

"Is the mortgage current, ie, are you in arrears in the payments?"

Mary shook her head, "I don't know."

"Could you get the papers, and check please?" Dad said to her.

A moment later she was back, crying. "All the bills for the last two months! He put them in a drawer instead of paying them! Oh my God!"

I went to her, put my arm around her, hugged. Shannon appeared, wearing a long nightgown, Elizabeth was just behind her in jeans and a t-shirt.

"Why's Mom crying?" Shannon asked me belligerently. "What are you doing here? Who's he?" She gestured at my dad.

"Tom's dad," Elizabeth answered. "You can see it in their faces."

"Shannon, this is my dad, Dave Ferguson. Dad, Shannon and Elizabeth."

Mary pulled herself together in the few seconds the introductions took. "Shannon, Bill didn't pay the bills for the last couple of months."

"Ms. McDowell," Dad said.

The girls all looked at their mother, Shannon laughed.  
"I'm going to have to get used to that myself, aren't I?"

"It's up to you," Mary told her. "You too, Elizabeth."  
She looked at Dad. "Sorry, I'll call you Dave if you'll call me Mary."

"Mary, I know things, right this second, don't appear to be very good."

"I've got seventy odd dollars to my name, hundreds, perhaps a thousand dollars worth of bills past due, more coming due -- and no income. Not very good is a not very good way to describe it."

"And things really aren't very good; but while your options are limited, they aren't non-existent."

"First, your husband. What did he take when he left?"

"He just walked out, I didn't have any idea, any idea at all that he was unhappy or about to do it. Now, his closet is empty, his personal effects are gone. He must have gotten up early to get some of it, moved other things Friday night when I went out shopping and the girls were out. Everything else, the TV, the radio, that sort of thing, he left behind."

"Did he say where he was going?"

She shook her head. "No. He said I'd never find him, and if I did, I'd have to take him to court to get another penny out of him."

"Legally, you have been abandoned; that's a crime, but not a serious one and they don't really enforce it," Dad told her. "As soon as we leave, call the police and tell them your husband is missing; explain that he took his things, the same things you've told me. Get the report on file; you'll need that later."

"There are any number of groups, women's groups that will help you with some of the legal affairs, if that's what you want. Or, I have a personal attorney, you could see him."

"I have no money."

Shannon broke in; "Yeah, money. He took it all. Including what we'd saved for college, for Elizabeth and me."

"Eighty thousand dollars," Mary said.

Dad blinked. "That is simple theft; they do take that seriously and they do prosecute."

He went on, "The lack of money is why I suggested the women's groups first. Tom said you are unlikely to accept charity; I don't really believe that that sort of thing is charity, but I understand your hesitation. No, for legal advice, I don't have a problem with it. Beyond that? We'll cross that bridge when it happens.

"Your husband is a man of plots and designs. I suspect he's very weak on execution," Dad went on.

Mary looked at Dad in surprise.

"He's made a very serious mistake here, one that you are perfectly free to capitalize on." Dad waved around us. "This house. You have perhaps two hundred thousand dollars equity in it. While in the great scheme of things, not a huge amount of money, it would be enough to give you a considerable cushion, were you to sell the house."

"Bill's name is on it."

Dad smiled, but it was the smile of a cat, spotting a mouse. "You said your husband told you it was yours?" Mary nodded, "Well, then it's yours. Proving it, of course, will be a little more of a chore, but trust me, a lending institution, faced with a foreclosure, has ways to get around that. The court will help too. You can go to court, get a judgment against your husband, and the court will take the money from your husband's share of the proceeds from the sale of the house for child support and alimony, restitution for thieving your daughters' college money. Even male judges, hearing about a woman abandoned as you have been, will be generous, quite generous, in their terms. You'd be foolish not to find the most rabid feminist judge on the family court bench."

"You can pick judges?" Mary asked, confused.

"To an extent," Dad said, "To an extent. Further, if your

home is in escrow, you can stay until the escrow closes; you can write all sorts of things into escrows. Like paying back mortgage payments, this that or the other bill; the buyer doesn't have to be privy to those arrangements, usually isn't, in fact. You can take out a bridge loan from a bank, secured against the sale price, for living expenses for you and your daughters until the sale is complete."

"To be honest, I look around this house and see too many things that remind me of my husband; I wouldn't mind leaving. I have no idea why he did this, none at all."

Dad looked at Shannon and Elizabeth. "I'd never have asked this, but for some recent experience of my own, with someone near and dear to my family. But do either of you have any idea why your father did this?"

Now it was my turn to be surprised. Dad thought Shannon's dad might be like Sam Reese? That was a terrible, terrible thing!

They both shook their heads. I searched Shannon's face; I didn't see anything other than the truth. I couldn't read a thing at all from Elizabeth.

There was a moment of silence, and then Mary looked at me, then back at Dad. "You're saying this wouldn't be a good time to throw myself and my daughters off a cliff in despair?"

"That's what I'm saying." Dad nodded to me. "You have Tom to thank for the idea, but I'd like to think, that if I'd learned of the circumstances another way, I'd have done the same thing."

"So we have some time to think, we have a way out, by selling the house? It might take a while, but we won't end up bag ladies, walking the streets?"

"Yep," I volunteered. Mary looked at me, her eyes gray and somber. I much preferred them to sparkle, but then, that was what this was about, putting the sparkle back for a long time to come.

"It's a little hard to say no, not to this," she said. "I'd do anything, anything at all, to protect my daughters."

"Even to getting a job?" my dad asked gently.

"Staying home was something I did at first because I loved my babies with all my heart; I wanted the best for them. Then it simply got easier and easier to do, as time went on. Too easy; I was too vulnerable. I need a job, yes."

"Tom said you dropped out of high school."

Mary met his eyes. "Yes, when I was pregnant with Shannon; looking back even a few years later I knew I'd messed up. When I was pregnant with Elizabeth, I took my GED, passed it."

"Can you type, use an adding machine?" Dad continued, "Do you have a computer?"

"Shannon and Elizabeth share a computer, I've done a few things on it. I write letters, mostly. I can type, a little. I know how to work an adding machine, but I'm not practiced. I can work a calculator. Bill said I could get a job as a waitress or bag boy."

Dad shook his head. "He didn't use physical punches, your husband, I'll give him that. But his words were meant in the same way as a punch; he was out to hurt you as badly as he could. Going to work in a restaurant would be a bad choice; there is virtually no future in it, and the money will be good enough at first to seem a godsend."

"And this is bad?" Mary asked.

"If you want to live in a small apartment for the rest of your life, if you want that life for your daughters, it would be fine."

"And what else am I equipped to do?" Mary said, her eyes flashing.

"You have a brain. You have quite adequate verbal skills. How much pride do you have?"

She shook her head. "Right now, I've started to think humble."

"That'll do until you start to hold your head up high again. Would you be willing to work in an office? Doing



routine office work?"

"As long as it pays minimum wage, yes."

Dad grinned. "We have a terrible time with that, actually. You get ten dollars an hour now to start at some of the fast food places, like McDonald's and Burger King. So, we pay about \$9.50 an hour to start. Ninety days later, you'd have health insurance."

Mary blinked, opened her mouth and then closed it again. "I don't know if we're still covered on Bill's company policy."

Dad smiled slightly. "After you file the police report, make sure you write down the report number. Call his employer tomorrow and see if he's there. If he is, call that information in to the police; don't try to go see him or talk to him. Most likely not; I suspect he's quit." Mary nodded.

"And," Dad went on, "in the off chance he should call, ask him to call back in a minute. Get anyone, anyone at all, even a neighbor, Tom or I, anyone, to come and listen. Try to get him to repeat the offer to give you the house in front of a witness. Then, don't chortle if he does. If, perchance, he should show up here, don't let him in; call the police."

Mary shook her head, "You think he's pretty dumb, don't you?"

"Pretty much," Dad said.

"It's amazing," Mary said, looking at me. "I hear Tom's voice in yours, his ways of thinking. Except, now I know it's the other way around, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation.

"And if my wife Ellen was here, you'd realize we've both learned a lot from her, too," Dad added.

"I guess thanks doesn't even begin to cover it, does it?"

Dad shook his head. "Thanks is enough, as much as I'll ever ask. Tom's his own man."

I blushed, when Mary looked at me.

"Tom." It was Elizabeth and I turned to her. "Thank you." She met my eyes. "I wasn't sure about you, I thought I was, but I wasn't sure." Her voice was whisper soft, but clear. "Now I know why Jennifer sleeps with you."

There was a moment of silence and I mentally cursed the rest of my family, who just talked entirely too much about these things.

Elizabeth waved her hand at me in the silence. "Jennifer is gay, she used to hate men. Tom, she says, is a man, a real man, not like the others she's known in her life. With him, she says, she is safe, protected, and comfortable.

"I saw Tom stand up to Roger and his friends, the other night at school. All by himself; Tom's friends came a second later, but at first it was just Tom. By himself, against three of them. Jennifer says she can sleep with Tom, knowing that he will be there to protect her, keep her safe.

"And Tom doesn't mind that she doesn't want to have sex with him or any boy. She just wants him there, to know that the demons of the night have to stay away. And that's what he does; just that." She was crying, I saw. "And now he's here, helping us. Thank you, Tom."

My dad spoke softly too. "When Jennifer came to us, the first night she cuddled with my wife. Tried to sleep; couldn't. She trembled and shook, all night long. She would wake and start, looking around for her brother; sure he was hiding some place close. We didn't know about him then, thought it was something else. The next night she spent with Tom, the nights since. Tom is, she says, the only person she feels truly safe with, because all he wants from her, is her happiness and for her to be safe."

"That's all any of us want," Mary said. "It's proving much harder than I thought."

"It's worth the struggle," Dad told her.

"Yes," Mary replied, "it's worth the struggle: particularly when you have people who are willing to help."

"It makes it easier," I said, feeling relief. Jenny wasn't

likely to have talked to Elizabeth about her fantasies. My life, I thought, is too complicated. I really, really didn't need any more women in my life. I really, really would rather spend the weekend with Mary, than a week with my Aunt Shirley, Uncle Craig and a cornucopia of convivial concubines.

Dad went over the high points again, gave Mary our phone number, address, the name of someone to see at his office.

Then Mary asked if I could come back later. I knew she and Shannon had been trading glances, I wasn't sure what that was about, but I agreed to come over in the afternoon.

We walked back home, going slower; it was half past ten when we got back. "A father has an easy time, being proud of his son," Dad said after we'd been walking for a ways. "I've always been proud of you, Tom; but never more than right now." He waved behind us. "That was a kind, wonderful, decent thing to do. Mary didn't say much, but it was pretty obvious he attacked her as a woman."

"Yes."

"There's nothing like a sixteen year old to buck up a woman's spirits," he said with a smile.

"That's pretty much what Mom and Kim said too." I was a little smug.

"Don't get cocky, boy! You're doing fine being yourself; get smug and you won't be able to keep your eye on the ball. Lose track of this ball, and it could have serious consequences for all sorts of people."

"I'm sorry."

"Like I said before, I'm jealous. Kim brings home a stray kitten; Leslie brings them home and now you. Three at once! Awesome!"

"It's not something I set out to do."

"I know."

We went inside and everyone was sitting in the family room, reading. Dad explained where we'd been, what we'd done, leaving

out a lot of the unnecessary details, like telling everyone I'd slept with Mary.

Afterwards, I got a big hug from Mom, JR and Jenny, before going up to my room to see if I could catch up on a little sleep. After a bit, JR and Jenny both joined me, cuddling up to me. It was much easier this time to sleep; and I did just that.

Much later, Mom shook my by the shoulder. "Phone, Tom. A girl."

She handed me the portable, and I said hello.

"Tom, this is Sue Ellen."

I blinked in astonishment, never ever had I imagined Sue Ellen calling me. I'd been expecting Mary or Shannon.

"Good afternoon, Sue Ellen," I said, almost gargling in disbelief. I saw JR sit up, perk up. Down girl!

"Could I come over and talk to you?" she asked.

"Half an hour?" I said, not knowing what else to do. I knew Tony's birthday was in August, Sue Ellen wasn't likely to be planning a surprise party!

"Sure. Thanks, Tom, I appreciate this."

"Sue Ellen, Tony's girl friend, wants to come by and talk," I told Mom when I hung up.

"Your dad and I were thinking about going over to Baskin-Robbins for some ice cream, after you got up. Now, it's getting late, I don't want to spoil appetites for dinner."

"I don't know how long Sue Ellen wants to talk; why don't you go without me, and if it's not long, I'll join you."

Mom nodded and I went and got a shower, was downstairs when Sue Ellen came to the door.

"Could we walk?" she asked, her voice pitched a little low.

Not low enough, I thought, for my dad not to overhear, and give me a sardonic grin. Well, I was the one who'd said I

should do more walking.

"Sure." I went out, and we walked much slower than I did with Dad.

"Tony's really fucked up," she said after a second.

"Roger?" I asked, curious and concerned.

"No."

"You and JR?" I asked nervously, but she laughed.

"Tony has his own little escapades, I have mine. Someday, I'll tell you about life as a cheerleader and why I quit."

"Not for me!" I said with a laugh, "How is Tony messed up?"

"The coach called him this morning; Tony tested positive for steroids. They're going to suspend him from the team."

"That's not good." Tony doing drugs? Almost, but not quite, unbelievable.

She made a little gesture of dismissal; "It's just bull shit, like who's playing football in March?" That was true! "He can reapply in three months, get right back on. It's all fixed; they do it all the time.

"No, Tony's father flipped out. His dad wants to kick Tony out; that, at the least, he's going to be grounded. No football next year, no Sue Ellen this year. No kid of his, he told Tony, is going to be a druggie."

"Then my old man got into it with his old man; told him Tony could move in with me, might as well, since he and I have been doing it since forever." She shook her head in amazement. "Would you believe Tony's goofball dad never even noticed we were going steady? I was just the 'tramp next door.' My dad punched out Tony's dad, who said he was going to get his gun. We all beat a hasty retreat, then he came banging on our front door.

"The cops came, and busted Tony's dad." Sue Ellen sighed, "What a bunch of fuck ups!"

"Who?" I asked innocently.

"Tony, for not handling his dad better, his dad for being such a moron, my dad for being a fuck up who thinks he can solve any problem with a good swift punch in the face, me for living with these jerk balls. Everyone. Jeez! This is going to be like the Capulets and the McCoys."

I didn't think that was right, but didn't have the courage to correct her right then, either.

"I'm not sure what I can do to help," I said carefully.

"Help? God, we're beyond help! I just wanted to come over and talk to someone whose head I didn't want to rip off. Someone who will nod, say meaningless bull shit trying to make me feel better."

I laughed, and she looked at me. "What's funny?"

"Tom Ferguson giving advice; pretty soon, I'll be able to take over for Dear Abbie."

"Better not be Dear Blabbie," she said with a growl.

"Sue Ellen, when have I ever talked to you about anything before? Have you ever heard Tony talk about my blabbermouth?" I shook my head. "My lips, Sue Ellen, are sealed." I zipped my lip, figuratively speaking.

"Janey Sussman told me once, the best lovers are the shy, quiet ones, who think a lot about it, before they do it for the first time. Guys like Tony, she told me, never learn any technique; it's 'let's get it on, baby!' and roll around grunting and moaning. Not that I don't like that, mind you, but it's getting kinda old." She looked at me. "Bet you'd be even better than Joanna, in bed."

"Ah, I've got enough complications, just now," I told her.

"What, Marsha, Tony's queer cousin? Shannon 'Hi, let's fuck!' Leary? And Shannon's mother? That last, by the way, was cool. Marsha was cool too. She still had a big shit-eating grin on her face when she got back from Sedona. Like Janey said, you shy guys spend a whole lot more time thinking about what you're going to do in one month, than guys like Tony will

spend in their entire lives."

"Really, I mean it," I said, which brought a gale of laughter.

"Tell me true, you never looked at these and wondered what it would be like?" She gestured at her breasts; easily an order of magnitude larger than Marsha's.

"I looked at them, then considered Tony and decided how much better life is, my head screwed on where it should be, rather than unscrewed and shoved up my ass." Why was it, I wondered, that I could cuss when I was with Tony and Sue Ellen, and I couldn't at any other time?

Sue Ellen smiled. "I guess." She waved around us. "It would really gross people out, you and I, doing it here in the middle of the sidewalk."

"Not going to happen," I told her.

Sue Ellen laughed again, "Sure, Tom. Sure." She flounced her breasts. "You're not watching now, right?"

"Sue Ellen, I'm a guy. I have hormones. You're a girl; that gets the hormones going." I glanced at her breasts; no doubt about it, they got the hormones flowing in buckets!

She grinned sardonically, but I shook my head. "You're right, I've spent a lot of time thinking about it. More so than you think, particularly in the last few days."

We took a few more steps, and then we stopped because Sue Ellen reached out and took my arm, tugged on it. "Tom." I looked at her. "You're really a decent guy, aren't you?"

"I try to be," I told her.

"Tony would never believe I offered and you declined." She laughed. "You know what, Tom?" I hadn't a clue, and shook my head. "Tony's wrong; always has been. You too, in your own way. Girls like me, we know what we want, we're willing to pay the price. We look at guys like you, and secretly wish it was guys like you who wanted us, instead of guys like Tony. Only thing we understand, I think, is lust. Ours and theirs." She looked at me. "You know what I mean, don't you?"

I nodded. It wasn't as though I didn't understand about lust.

"I could strip naked, jump your bones; and if you didn't feel like it, it wouldn't happen, right?"

I nodded and she went on. "And doing that, that wouldn't get you interested, would it?"

"Sue Ellen, you're a beautiful girl. I've looked, believe me, I've looked."

She smiled at me, laughed. "Looked and did nothing. How do you spell 'resistible', Tom?"

I blushed and she shook her head. "It's nice, really. I'm not really your type, and I know it. I'm not your sister's, either. Do you know why I quit being a cheerleader?"

I shook my head.

"We had this big party, when I was a freshman. Those of us trying out for the squad. Everyone had to go down on their sponsors; suck their whatever, mostly pussies. Gross, eh?" I shook my head and Sue Ellen grinned.

"Then, we drew names out of a jar, which of the returning football players we were to give blow jobs to. At the time, it made no sense to me; queer girls sucking dick. Stupid."

"Tony was really happy when Suzy Jones did him; said he didn't care at all that I sucked Doug Marshall off. He didn't understand why I didn't like it. But you know, don't you?"

I nodded, and Sue Ellen jerked her chin in agreement. "Yeah. You know. Joanna knew, too. That's how she got inside my guard." Sue Ellen sighed. "I told myself that I'd never do it again with a girl; God, guys do it so good!"

"Joanna came from the side, appealing to my lesser drives; convinced me that what others think isn't important." She shook her head, "Imagine that, someone my age, seduced by a thirteen year old!"

"My experience isn't all that vast," I told her, "but it



tells me that you don't get seduced unless you want to."

She laughed and shook her head. "No, you start out not sure, wanting to be careful. Then you find out more and more about what it's like, and have second thoughts. Lots of girls have gotten messed up over the years by those second thoughts. I made a vow right after I realized I wanted to do it with Tony. I might have second thoughts the morning after; I might have regrets, but wasn't going to have big regrets. I make my choices, and I am going to live with them." She waved at me. "Which is why I think I'm glad you said no just now."

"Thanks for nothing, Sue Ellen," I said with a laugh.

She glanced around, "This really wouldn't be a good place to get it on. Everyone's over at the jail, trying to get Tony's dad released. Want to come over for a while?"

"I thought you were glad I said no?"

"I am; like I said, this isn't a good place. The way I feel right now, if you said yes, I'd jump your bones right here."

I glanced at her, focusing on her breasts. God, Tom! You're crazy! All that shit you've been spewing to Mary and Shannon about love -- and here you are, seriously considering going with Sue Ellen just for the hell of it!

Sue Ellen saw where I was looking, pulled her shoulders back a bit, sticking her chest out. "A quickie, maybe?" Her voice was soft.

I stood mesmerized, my cock rock solid. Sure Tom, make her day! Say yes! Make Mary's day, say no! As I watched, I saw Sue Ellen's nipples poke up, visible even through her sports bra and t-shirt.

"Why don't we go back to my house," I said, knowing I was temporizing, knowing what I wanted to do when we got there.

We walked a little faster; I was hoping it would take the edge off my horniness; it seemed to work the opposite way. Sure enough, my parent's car was gone.

"Come," I told Sue Ellen, and went around to the back, to

the patio. Ours was screened in, maybe ten degrees or more cooler than outside. Sue Ellen didn't say a thing, just lifted her t-shirt over her head, then a second later, pulled her sports bra off the same way, spilling out her breasts.

I'd seen a few porno pictures of girls with big chests, but I'd never seen so much bosom, personally, in my life. Marsha's breasts had been two grapefruits; Sue Ellen's were more like large eggplants, oval rather than round, nipples that were larger than I'd seen yet. She pressed her hands under them, lifted them up.

"You've wanted to see these for years, haven't you?" she said with a giggle.

"Sometimes," I said, admiring the view. Not really my cup of tea, not really. But this wasn't tea, and I leaned closer, running my hands over her nipples, chaffing them. Sue Ellen's nipples were already erect, they got more so.

"Oh yeah!" Sue Ellen breathed sibilantly as I brought her points up to a sharper peak, "Oh yeah! Use your tongue, Tom!" I did as requested, leaning down and kissing her nipples.

It was, part of me was thinking, silly and stupid. A big pair of tits; the common wisdom was right: more than a mouthful is wasted. On the other hand, I wasn't able to break the lip lock I had on one of her nipples, sucking on it, laving it with my tongue.

"Yeah, that's it! Go, go, go, Tom!" she whispered to me as I worked. I went, that's for sure, crazy. I used my tongue on one of those whopper mammaries, my hand on the other. Sue Ellen got more and more excited, and so did I.

After a second, she pushed me away, grinning. "You do that like a girl," she said, giggling. She worked on unsnapping my jeans, pushing them and my shorts down at once, rubbing my butt as she did.

"Can't take much of that, or I really will be like Joanna and her friends." She pushed me back on a couch, and pushed her own shorts off, revealing the weirdest patch of pussy hair I'd ever seen or imagined. It was a single vertical stripe about an inch wide, from between her legs and running up a couple of inches towards her belly button.

She straddled me, guiding me into her. "Tony hates having me on top," she murmured. "I love it!" She started bouncing up and down on me; I started pushing deep into her. Sue Ellen reached up, started squeezing her own breasts; I reached down, started thumbing her clit. She started really going, that set me to going; it was incredible sex. Sue Ellen started gasping, panting, but didn't change the pace, if anything went faster.

I went faster as well. Eventually, she gave a little shriek, and I felt her pussy clamp down on my erection. "Oh Tom! That was so good!" I kept going, hardly slowing. She looked at me, grinned, "This is even better!" For another few minutes I kept surging into her, lifting her up, keeping pressure on her clit as best I could. This time her shriek was louder, and I pressed hard, shooting into her.

"Oh baby!" Sue Ellen said, leaning down and kissing me for a quick second. "Janey was right! Oh, have I ever been barking up the wrong tree! Football players think size is the only important thing!" She giggled, "I'm here to tell you, it ain't so!"

With that, she pulled off, standing up next to the couch. I was surprised to see her start dressing. I stood and did the same thing; neither of us speaking. She finished, and turned to me, grinning. "If I was to kiss you," she told me, "I'd end up tearing off your clothes again. A girl could get addicted to you." She touched my cheek. "Neither one of us wants that, I bet."

"Probably not a good idea," I agreed.

She smiled at me. "Our secret?" I nodded. She looked at me, smiled. "And no second thoughts, no regrets." The last was a command. "I'm not going to have them, you won't either. I don't know who your girlfriend is, or even if you have one. This was just sex between two horny friends, ok?"

She's trying to convince herself, as much as me, I realized. "Nice sex!" I agreed.

"And who knows what the future might bring?" Sue Ellen giggled. "I might get horny again some day. Like tomorrow!" I walked with her around the house; she got in her car and drove away.

I went inside, sat down in the family room, staring at the wall. You despicable son of a bitch, Tom Ferguson! You just diddled your best friend's girl! Instead of going over to Mary and Shannon's, where you were hoping to score with both of them! You have a serious problem, Tom! You spout a line of love bull shit a mile deep; yet you just fucked someone for no better reason than to do it!

Was there something wrong with me? Was I an insatiable satyr, who's only thought was to get a girl on her back, her legs spread? Or on top of me, behind her... whatever worked? I snorted in derision; I was still hard. I knew that if any of the women I'd made love to walked through the front door, I'd want to do it with them!

Did I mean any of the things I'd told Mary and Shannon? Did I really, truly, believe them?

I shook my head; at the time I thought so. Sitting here, looking at the wall, the faint smell of Sue Ellen lingering on me -- I wasn't sure. What in the hell was I supposed to do? I couldn't go through life making love to most of the women and girls I met; if I thought life was complicated now, do that and it would spiral out of control and I'd crash and burn.

I heard the car pull up, then another. Odd, I thought. Probably Kim and Penny. A second later Dad came through the door, saw me. "You'll never guess who we ran into at the ice cream parlor!" I shook my head, but coming through the door was the rest of my family, plus Mary, Shannon and Elizabeth.

"I decided we'd had too down a weekend," Mary said, seeing me. "Either we're sunk like a stone dropped into the ocean, or it's not as bad as it seems." She nodded to me, then Dad. "Thanks to you, I hope it's not as bad as it seems."

"We invited them over for dinner," Mom said.

"I brought you a chocolate malt," JR told me, handing me a bag.

"Gosh, thanks JR!" I glanced at the clock on the wall; not much after four. We didn't usually eat until six or so on Sunday.

"Parcheesi!" Dad said, "We're going to play Parcheesi!"

Mom looked at him and grinned. JR ran off to get the board, and we found that it wasn't designed for eight people. Dad asked JR to bring the Monopoly game, and we used hotels and houses for extra pieces.

It was a hoot; with so many people, it was hard not to get picked off. Jenny was lucky; one of her pieces missed all the bullets, made it towards home. Elizabeth got one through; the rest of us kept bumping each other. Then Jenny got another piece through, and JR and Elizabeth raced neck and neck, finally after more than an hour, the game was done. Jenny, Elizabeth, JR, Mary, Mom, Shannon, Dad and last but not least, me.

We sat at the table afterwards; Mom and Mary talking about the best mulch for roses, Jenny and Elizabeth talking with JR about school.

Mom and Mary got up, went in the kitchen, brought back more drinks for everyone, chips and dip as well. The conversations continued, people swapping in and out of groups.

Mary looked at Mom and Dad. "Yesterday was the worst day of my life." She smiled at me, and then looked back at Mom. "Then Tom came and brightened it for all of us, particularly me. This morning, he and Dave showed up early with advice; offers of help and assistance. Now this, here." She shook her head. "Yesterday I thought about killing myself," she said softly. "Today I want to live forever."

"Tom is a very special person, Mary," Mom spoke with quiet pride. "He's brightened my days too. Not just today, but many others."

Mary looked at Mom; it sure looked and sounded to me like Mom was telling her we'd been together.

JR spoke up, "We're going up to my room. I want to show Elizabeth my CD's." Mom nodded, and the three younger girls vanished upstairs. Dad caught my eye, and looked at Shannon. Was I supposed to vanish with Shannon?

I stood up, and asked Shannon if she'd like to see the family room. We went in and sat down on the couch, talking for a few minutes. After a minute, she reached out and took my

hand. "You know what my mom and I were going to do, when you came over today?" I shook my head.

"We were going to be naked together in bed. We both want you. Any way we can get you."

I smiled and decided to pull her leg. "That would have been a bad idea." She looked at me, surprised. "I'd have stood there, unable to make up my mind. Probably never could."

She lightly punched me on my arm, shaking her head. "No silly, it was my turn!" I looked into her eyes and put my arms around her waist, pulling her lightly to me.

"I really do care about you," I told her.

She nodded, "You said that. You also said you liked Mom more."

I could only nod. "You're right about that."

Shannon spoke quietly, "Yesterday, I cared. Today it doesn't seem important."

I kissed her, gently at first, and she kissed back. We'd gotten to the point of trading tongues when Jenny and Elizabeth came through on their way upstairs.

"I'm going to show Elizabeth my room," Jenny told me, her eyes bright. I hid a grin; nothing wrong with dreams, you never know if one will come true.

Shannon's eyes followed them as they went up the steps. "They're gonna do it," Shannon said, her own eyes bright.

"Possibly. Jenny is still wound pretty tight," I told her, and it was true. Jenny would never press someone; I was as sure about that as I was about the sunrise tomorrow.

I was aware then, that the house had gotten awfully quiet; all sounds of conversation had vanished. Was everyone preparing to get a little afternoon loving in? I blinked in surprise. Who was Mary with? Hardly seemed likely to be JR, so Mom or Dad? I thought back to the afternoon; Mom and Mary had been talking all afternoon; Dad only a little.

I realized Shannon had come close, was now standing inches away. "Do you want to show me your room?" Her voice was soft, her eyes more like her mother's than I remembered, gray and sparkling. I nodded, reached out and took her hand and led her up the steps.

Jenny's door was open, and when I passed she was sitting on her bed, facing Elizabeth, the two talking animatedly, hands waving for emphasis. I opened my door, and Shannon went ahead, I closed it behind us; although the temptation was there to leave it open. I pulled Shannon close to me, kissed her gently, my arms going around her waist, pulling her towards me as I'd done down in the family room.

Shannon looked at me, then started to talk, "When I was in eighth grade, I met Scott, my first boyfriend. He was a freshman then. A month of eighth grade, all summer, all of my freshman year. We went from handholding in the spring, to kissing, to everything, by Christmas. The next summer, his parents moved to Chicago; since Scott left, he's neither called or written. Not once."

I sighed, and she went on. "I liked the sex, don't get me wrong. After Scott moved, I met Josh; he was a junior to my sophomore. In the summer after my sophomore year, we had a fight. He wanted me to go down on him four, five times a day. I didn't.

"Last fall I met Roger, we dated three times in two weeks; I did it with him on the second date. After that, he thought he owned me. He tried to tell me what clothes he wanted me to wear, who I could see and talk to..." Shannon shook her head in anger. "That lasted just a couple of days before I told him to get lost." She grinned, knowing I would laugh, and I did.

"Except, Roger is a turd. He started spreading the word around school that I was an easy fuck; guys started calling up, sometimes half a dozen a night. Mom said about the only way I was going to get my reputation back was not to accept any dates. You were the first in four months; I said yes on impulse after you stood up to Roger."

"Sue Ellen has heard the stories about you," I told her softly. "I should have told her they weren't true."

Shannon smiled, shook her head. "They must be true, or I

wouldn't be about to go to bed with a boy I have been on exactly two dates with. Just like Roger."

"Not at all like Roger," I told her.

She looked at me. "True, Roger didn't do it with Mom first. Or sleep with another girl at night."

"Shannon, I do want you," I told her, waving her down on the bed. She sat down and started undoing her blouse. I reached out and held her fingers for a second, shaking my head. "Right now, I think we should talk."

She reached out, undid my jeans. "Tom, I realized something about myself last night. I have urges too, just like you. And when they get to a certain point, I want it every bit as much as any boy. And the truth is also, that if you like the person you're doing it with, that makes it ten thousand times better.

"I want this, you want this. I don't think talking is going to change things, except make me even more frustrated." She reached out, took hold of my zipper, pulled it down. "I'll do this for you, if you want."

I contemplated that not so long ago, I'd been buried up to the hilt in Sue Ellen's pussy, and I'd not had a chance to shower; I smiled and shook my head. "How many of your boyfriends did it for you?" I gestured between her legs.

Shannon giggled. "None, I'm not sure I want to. Reminds me too much of Joanna and her friends."

"It's just another way of making love; kind of like masturbation to the max."

"I do that," Shannon murmured. "Sometimes, in the last few months, I think it's the only thing that kept me from going nuts."

Now I reached up and started on her blouse, then Shannon reached behind her back to pop her bra, and I slid that off as well. Then I undid her jeans, pushing them down, and she stepped out of her panties. I pulled her to me, me still fully dressed except for one unzipped zipper, and I kissed her hard, using my tongue for several minutes. Then I sat down on the



bed, positioning Shannon to sit on my face.

I started kissing her inner thighs, using my tongue occasionally to trace wet trails along her leg, each stroke getting closer to her pussy. It was no longer a surprise to me that Shannon's pussy anatomy was different than any other girl that I'd been with; a long thin clit that protruded, easily reachable. And unlike most of the other girls I'd done this with, she didn't rub her own breasts; so since I didn't need to hold her pussy lips apart to get at her clit, I rubbed her breasts too.

And, unlike some of my partners, most of them, Shannon was silent as I worked; no helpful hints, no words of encouragement. After several minutes of serious sucking on her clit, a lot of breast rubbing, she gave a little grunt; I decided that was encouragement enough, and I started my tongue inside her. After a moment, Shannon shivered, and a sibilant 'Ahhhh!' escaped her lips.

For the first time, Shannon began to move on her own, moving her hips side to side, as if unsure how to make it better, but wanting to. I put my hands on her bottom, pulled her more tightly to my mouth, burying my tongue deep inside her. After a couple of seconds, Shannon moaned, then a moment later did it again. I redoubled my tongue movements, running my hands over her bottom, until suddenly Shannon turned to stone; her body rigid.

"Oh, Tom!" Shannon said a second later, her voice quivering. "Oh, my God!" She shook for a second, then whispered, "God, I have no right to ask you... but, God! Do it again! Please!"

I giggled, blowing lightly on her pussy as I did. "This isn't the problem for me that you think it is!" I told her, going back to what I had been doing. This time I reached up and took her hands, led them to her own breasts, then spread her pussy lips with my fingers, so I could reach even deeper still. Every few seconds her breath would catch; not loud, but enough to tell me that she was more excited than before. I pulled hard now on her butt, driving my tongue deep, deep inside of her, my nose pressing hard against her clit. Shannon shivered, moaned and in mid cry, the moan cut off, and instead, she sat trembling on top of me.

"Lay down on top of me," I asked softly, and Shannon slid down, cuddling into the crook of my arm, instead of lying on top of me as I'd hoped. Well, still not that far, I thought. I'll get there eventually.

"I think I figured something out about you," I said with a smile.

Shannon looked at me, her eyes misty. "Oh yeah! God, Tom! That was..." She shook her head, "awesome!"

"You're too afraid of making noise," I told her, lightly kissing her nose. "You hold back, reluctant to really get with it."

"Oh, I was with it!" Shannon said, a small giggle.

I nodded, and then mildly contradicted her. "But not as much as you could be. Don't be afraid to make noise," I told her. "No one else in this house is going to notice or care. Sweet Shannon, relax and enjoy it."

I pulled off my shirt and jeans, then when I was ready to lay down again, Shannon had her legs spread. I really wanted her on top of me, so I laid down next to her and then lightly pushed and pulled her to get her in the position I wanted.

"Me on top?" Shannon murmured, and I nodded. "I've never done it like that."

"This weekend has been a lesson for all of us," I told her, "some things good, some bad, some worse. Relax, enjoy, and if you want to make a little noise, do it!" I starting moving against her, even though I wasn't inside of her, just rubbing my erection on the outside of her pussy.

At first, I wasn't sure if it was doing anything for Shannon, even if it was doing something for me. Then I heard Shannon go, "Oh." Then a moment later, "Oh, oh, oh!" I pressed against her harder; she pressed her hips down harder.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" The sounds she made were coming more and more quickly. Then she gave a startled, "Oh? Oooh? Ooooooh?" A soft shriek, and she pressed her hips down heavily on my midsection, "Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!" It wasn't so much loud, as simply unforced, unhindered.

After a second, she looked down at me. "My God! I've come three times and you're not even in me yet!" She lifted up her midsection, fumbled for a second with my erection, then I slid inside her.

"Sit up," I said softly, as she started to make love to me, as if she was me, still lying down. I saw the look of question in her face, but she did as I asked, and I used one hand to rub her clit, while the other worked on one of her breasts, then after second, I switched breasts. She started moving frantically, and I promptly popped out; it took a second to get back where I'd been, and she was growing more and more frantic.

I left off my delicious tittilations and clitilations, and put my hands on her hips, holding her solidly to me as we made wild love; as different from any girl as I'd experienced before. Shannon was noisier now, but I really wasn't listening, more intent on making my own sounds. Then I spent myself into her, and again she turned rigid as stone, clamping, it seemed, every muscle in her body into a single unit. I'd thought myself spent before; found there was still some left.

Shannon collapsed atop me, and I wrapped my arms around her, more sure than ever that of all the women in my life, Shannon and Mary were the most special.

I heard a sound, and I looked past Shannon, and saw Jenny and Elizabeth standing in the open door to my room; Jenny had a hand on Elizabeth's shoulder, it looked more like someone restraining someone else, rather than a friendly gesture. Jenny tugged again, and they vanished.

In the mean time, Shannon looked at me, her face glowing. "Tom..." She shook her head, wiggled her hips. "You're still hard!"

I giggled. "I might be hard, but I'm not hardly ready yet to do that again!"

Shannon kissed me hard, her tongue going nearly down my throat. "I love you, Tom Ferguson." I ran my hand down over her back, winding up familiarly on her bottom.

"And I love you, Shannon," she smiled, kissed me again.

"I don't care how many I have to share you with," she went on. "This was..." She shook her head, "God, Tom I never knew what it was like to be made love to like this."

For a long time, we lay there like that, my hand resting lightly on her bottom; she laying on top of me. My fingers started to wander, eventually, lightly down the crease of her buttocks; Shannon moved atop of me.

"Tom, dear," Mom's voice was understated from the hallway. "You left your door open." I grimaced; no, actually, I hadn't.

"Sorry," I murmured.

"If I'm not interrupting too much, could I come in?"

"Sure." Mom, my erection is buried deep inside Shannon, what could you possibly be interrupting?

She came in, and I was surprised to see she was nude. Shannon looked at her and blinked in surprise as well; more so when it was Shannon that Mom spoke to.

"A second ago, I asked Elizabeth if she'd mind if, for a while, the rest of us went around undressed. She didn't have to, you don't have to. In fact, we've never done anything like this before." A smile flitted across Mom's face. "We're not all sex fiends, running around nude so we can drop everything and make love again, it's..." She shook her head. "Some people think being undressed is the same as being helpless, defenseless. I think it simply means you're free to be your inner self. Or so I tell myself."

"If it's going to bother you, we won't. And you don't have to participate, although you should get better at closing doors, if you don't like others to see you undressed."

Shannon looked at the door, at Mom. "Tom closed it when we came in. I saw him."

"I imagine," I said quietly, "Elizabeth was a little embarrassed, even before she saw you," I told my mom.

Shannon rounded on me. "My sister was peeking at us?"

Elizabeth appeared at Mom's side, with Jenny just behind

her. Both were undressed. "I'm sorry, Shannon. I thought he was hurting you; Jennifer said you weren't in that kind of pain, but I wanted to be sure, anyway." Her expression was one I couldn't place. "I was wrong, Shannon, I'm sorry."

Shannon giggled then. "Do you know how often it is Elizabeth is wrong about anything? And when she is, usually she gets all huffy and says it was someone else's fault." Shannon smiled at her sister. "So, yeah, I don't have a problem running around starkers, if it can get Elizabeth to do that."

Elizabeth, blushing before, went into blush overdrive. Jenny touched her arm, whispered something into her ear. Elizabeth smiled slightly, nodded.

Shannon surprised me by getting up, leaving my erection waving at flagpole position. "I don't suppose I could impose upon you for a shower?" she asked Mom.

Mom smiled and shook her head. "No imposition, Shannon. Please, you're part of the family now. Come, I'll show you where things are."

They went down the hall, and I saw Elizabeth staring at my erection in fascination. Jenny noticed and giggled, "Go ahead, if you want, sure looks like Tom's ready!"

Mom's voice drifted back from down the hall. "Fifteen minutes and I'm going to start supper! All hands will be on deck!"

Elizabeth was still blushing, but was still looking. Jenny looked at me, then grinned. "Close the door, Elizabeth." Elizabeth looked at Jenny, but did as she was asked.

Jenny came up close to me, and then looked at Elizabeth. "Tom is way different than other boys, Elizabeth." She turned and kissed me, kissed me as hard as I've been kissed, and I put my arms around her and kissed her back.

"He can do that, Elizabeth," Jenny said, waving at my midsection, "and even though he really, really, really wants to make love to me, he won't."

I wasn't sure if I was comfortable with being held up as a paragon of virtue, but I tried not to let it show.

Jenny smiled at Elizabeth, stepping back from me. "And he's really nice to talk to, too."

I smiled at Jenny, shaking my head, laughing. "Elizabeth," I said, looking at her. Small breasted like her mom and sister, the faintest wisp of red hair between her legs, a visible clit, like her sister. "Jenny is important to me, so are your mom and Shannon. So are others. This," I gestured at my now not-so-hard member, "only goes where it's wanted. You don't want it." She nodded, but was still staring, fascinated. "So, please, trust me. Trust everyone else here; no one wants you to go someplace you don't want to."

"Even if Mom has been with you? Shannon has been with you? Others?" Elizabeth asked.

"They chose, I chose. What you choose is your choice. I think Jenny is maybe pushing a little hard for you to choose." I met Jenny's eyes and she looked down. "Elizabeth, it has to be from the heart, from your mind, as well as your hormones. When you are ready, completely certainly ready, go ahead; but don't let anyone rush you, Elizabeth." She nodded, and I reached out and hugged Jenny. "Ok?"

Jenny nodded, looking sad. "I'm sorry," Jenny said in a small voice.

"Now, let's go do Mom's crazy idea," I said with a laugh. "Do you know how much fun it's going to be in a kitchen filled with hot pots and pans and more than a half dozen people bare people?"

They both giggled. "You guys go down and get started, I'll get a quick shower after Shannon's done." They turned and went downstairs; I went to wait outside the bathroom.

It was an interesting meal; it really was a traffic jam in the kitchen. I got mashed potato duty; scrubbing, then peeling, then slicing and dicing, boiling, mashing; all of that.

Mom and Mary collaborated on two main dishes, JR was working on a salad with Jenny's help; Shannon and Elizabeth were bubbling some cut corn. We ate nude too, talking and having a good time; with so many people, with Dad washing dishes, cleanup was a breeze as well.

"I could get to like this," Mom said, her eyes on Mary.

Mary blushed, looked at me. "I've had as much sex in the last day as I've had in the last year; you folks, all of you..." Her voice faded away. "I think I'm going to be able to put Bill into the dustbin of history with a lot less effort than I thought."

"And now," Dad said with a grin, "I'm going to turn into an ogre." He gestured at JR, Jenny and I. "There have been all kinds of distractions this weekend. If one of you has opened a school book, I'd be very much surprised."

Well, there was that.

"So, all good things come to an end, kiddos," he said, smiling at us. "I want us all to get dressed, and you munchkins to get some study time in. Mary and her family need to get home, have some personal time. I imagine they've been a little distracted themselves."

There were titters, and Mary nodded. "I know for a fact that Shannon hasn't touched her violin all weekend; I don't think I've seen Elizabeth with her nose in a book more than two or three times." Elizabeth blushed, but Mary went on.

"Words don't begin to express the gratitude I feel towards you, all of you. In less than two days my world went from normal to destroyed, then back to hope again, hope for a bright and possible future for my daughters, for myself." She smiled slightly, "Even if it means I have to work. Maybe particularly if I have to work; I think I was taking life for granted and that was a prescription for long-term disaster. Sure, Bill walked out. But what would be different now if he'd been hit by a truck on the way to work?"

Mom and Dad both nodded. "So, I'm grateful, very grateful for the help, the advice." Mary waved at the dining room. "Dinner, everything." She smiled at Dad, the sparkly smile that I loved so much. "And tomorrow, I will be there, job application in hand."

They left; there were hugs and kisses, hugs from Elizabeth to Jenny, hugs from Shannon to me, hugs from Mary to Mom, Dad and me. And, at the end, Mary kissed me, and I kissed her and I

seriously wished I could spend the night with her.

Then it was schoolwork, more schoolwork. Finally, it was time for bed, and the good night kiss; once again it was an all hands event. Mom hugged and kissed me solidly, held me tightly. "You've done so much," she murmured, "I'm tempted, sorely tempted to ask you to spend the night with me." My eyes widened, and she giggled. "Except we'd not sleep, and tomorrow is work and school. One of these days, I promise." Then she was kissing JR, and Dad nodded at me. Then Mom and Jenny, Dad kissing JR, and Dad's hug to Jenny.

Then me and JR, and me and Jenny, then JR and Jenny; bed time. Jenny snuggled up to me, and for a while we kissed, before she fell asleep; then I followed her into dreamland.

Much later, I awoke to Jenny lying next to me, crying softly, I reached out and stroked her cheek. "What's wrong, Jenny?"

"Wrong?" she said with a sigh, "Nothing's wrong. It's like Mary said, my life has gone from as bad as it ever was to as good as I could ever have hoped. And it was because of you, you and your family."

"Jenny, I'd do it for anyone in trouble."

"I know, you did it for Mary, Elizabeth and Shannon. God, Tom, you've been so wonderful."

"And this makes you cry?" I asked gently.

"No, what makes me cry is that today I kissed you, felt you up. And it was mean, wasn't it? I wasn't trying to hurt you, but I did, didn't I?"

"Well, I wasn't wildly happy about it," I told her truthfully, "but it didn't hurt a bit."

"You've given me so much, you've given others so much..."

"And I got something back from all of you," I interrupted. "A lot back."

"But from me, you get teased. That's what I was doing today; I didn't mean it that way, but that's what it was. I



kissed you, touched you, trying to get you all hot and bothered, and then I smiled and said you were too nice to touch me."

"Jenny," I started to say, and then I stopped before going on again. "Jenny, I mean this. I seriously mean it. Your life has been an unmitigated hell; I can't even imagine what it must have been like, I don't think anyone decent could. So, I might get all hot and bothered, I might not be the coolest guy in the world when I kiss you and hug you, watch you walk around nude. But I can live with that a lot easier than you lived with what you had to go through. It's not a big deal, Jenny."

"But it's wrong," she said, reaching out and touching my face. "You are the one, Tom; not Kim or Penny or Joanna or your mom. You were the one who stood up to Sam, who knew about him. You put your arms around me and promised to keep me safe; oh, the others did too, but it was you who knew."

I kissed her lightly on the forehead. "The other day, I told you that it was like being sick or having a broken arm. It's going to take a while to heal; may well never be perfect, because what happened to you was really, really bad. But you are getting better, and things are better, and you're safe." I smiled and kissed her forehead again.

"Knowing that, plus the occasional kiss and hug," I grinned, "will suffice."

I paused, "You know, sometimes my mom pisses me off, my dad... even JR has done it a bunch of times. It happens; I know I've hurt them or made them mad at me, too. I'm sorry, and I know they have been sorry... when it was something we could help. Sometimes though, it just happens."

"I went out of my way today, to make it happen," Jenny said. "And I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted," I told her.

She kissed me, this time on my mouth, and almost at once Jenny's tongue came after mine; then I felt her hand cupping my balls. Considering the content of the last few minutes of conversation, I was surprised. More surprising still, was when she wrapped her hand around my suddenly burgeoning length, and started to pump.

I reached down and put my hand on hers. "This isn't something I want in way of apology," I told her gently.

"Don't you want to do it with me?" Jenny asked.

"Sure, Jenny. But it has to be both of us wanting it, not just me. Doing it because you think you have to..." I shook my head, "That's too much like your brother." Her hand stopped moving, and she looked at me.

"I never thought of that." She closed her eyes for a bit, then opened them; her hand moved away from me. Suddenly she hugged me, before kissing me on the cheek. "Thanks, Tom! You're the best!" With that, she rolled away from me, turning over. She reached up and asked me to take her hand, and when I did, she pulled it around her, safely removed from her breasts and pussy.

We both slept.

Monday, March 25, 2002

When I awoke, Jenny was gone. I walked down the hall and found the bathroom free, so I hopped in the shower. Mom had, I thought, done something very useful yesterday; it was going to be very convenient going bare between bedroom and shower rather than having to be dressed.

I returned to my room, saw Jenny was now in hers. She smiled when she saw me bare. She was already dressed and was headed downstairs.

When I got to school, almost at once I ran into Tony. He didn't look too down, and I waved to him. He came over and said, "What a mess. Sue Ellen told me she told you about it."

I nodded, remembering what else had happened as well. Me and Sue Ellen, JR and Sue Ellen... "Your father get home ok?" I asked, interested in changing the subject.

"Oh yeah. But he's got a court date; lucky for him, he never actually picked up a gun." That wasn't exactly what I'd heard from Sue Ellen, but I knew enough not to tell him I'd heard different.

"You hear anything about Parker?" he asked, and I shook my

head. "The team has a pool for the first day he comes back to school. I have next Monday."

"You're off the football team?"

"Suspended," Tony said. "It's all crap, really crap. Coach is the one who gives us the shit. It's not something you can go down to South Phoenix and buy on a street corner, or drop in to your local pharmacy and plunk down a prescription for. The worst is, I decided I didn't want to use it; the stuff makes you look all weird. Coach told me I had to use it or lose my position. I told him, so long as I was making catches, running the ball in... he'd be pretty damn stupid dropping me from the team. So, I'm suspended until mid-June. Just in time for football training camp. It's all bullshit." He waved towards school, "I gotta get going, see you later!"

At lunch, Shannon came and sat with me, and we held hands under the table. Tony and Sue Ellen joined us. "Parker didn't come today," Tony said smugly. "I'm still on track to win the pool!"

I explained to Shannon, and she laughed. "I'd have bet my heart! I never want to see him again!"

Just before the bell was going to ring, Tony gestured to me, and we got up and walked towards the main building. "My old man had a major cow about Sue Ellen and me. Sue Ellen and I had been talking anyway about maybe broadening our horizons." I looked at him, curious. "So, we're kind of thinking, maybe like going our own ways for a while."

"I sorry to hear that," I told him, speaking neutrally. And hoping that it wasn't an idea I'd help put in Sue Ellen's head. Or wherever the idea had gotten put.

"Oh, we're still gonna fuck, just not be like, going steady. At least for a little while." Tony said. "I wanted to say that if you wanted to go out with Sue Ellen... I'd not freak out or anything."

"Tony..." I shook my head. "I'm just not a fan of big hooters, okay? It's not that I don't like Sue Ellen as a person; but jeez, the thought of those bouncing around in the throes of passion! You're used to getting beaten on the head. Me, I'd probably get knocked out."

He guffawed, clapped me on the back. "Oh, they're big, sure! But they don't bounce around that much!" He dwelled delightedly on the word 'that.' Then the bell rang, and we both headed to our afternoon classes.

After school, Shannon had asked me to meet her, and I did. "Come over tonight, would you Tom? After dinner?" I nodded, and she left, saying she was going to meet her mom, and then they'd go pick up Elizabeth.

I drove to the junior high, picked up JR and Jenny, and we went back home. There was a car parked in front of our house, and when I pulled up I saw Ms. Johannsen get out, along with a man. They walked to meet us before we could get inside.

"Jennifer, we'd like to talk to you," the social worker told her. "This is Detective Harris."

She turned to me. "I left messages for your parents; they haven't returned them yet. This has come up rather quickly; ideally, they should be here. Yet, it was you Miss Reese asked to have by her side Saturday." She turned back to Jenny. "Does that still hold true, Jennifer?"

"Yes, ma'am," Jennifer said firmly. "I want Tom Ferguson at my side."

We went inside, and JR promptly vanished, the detective was the one who spoke first. "There is no easy way, Miss Reese, to give someone bad news. I'm sorry to tell you that your mother was found this morning by your father; she's been badly beaten. And, it turned out, raped as well. She regained consciousness shortly after noon, and told us that your brother had done it.

"We looked for him at school, but couldn't find him."

"I know I'm not supposed to talk," I said, watching Jenny and not the government people, "but Sam is friends with Keith Driscoll and Roger Parker. He might be with one or both of them."

The detective started writing a note. "You know where they live?"

I shrugged, "I could find out, quickly enough." I went to

the phone, called Penny, and she told me Roger's address, and while she didn't know the street address, knew which house was Keith's. I didn't tell her why I was asking, went back and relayed the information to the detective. He excused himself to use the phone himself.

Ms. Johannsen looked steadily at Jenny for a minute; Jenny looked down and away. "Tell me, Jennifer, was there another reason you left home? Besides the differences with your parents about who you were friends with?"

Jenny looked up at me, and I decided in a flash. "You can't get Sam in more trouble than he already is, Jenny. And he could hurt someone else. You have to tell."

So, when the detective was back, Ms. Johannsen asked the questions, and Jenny reluctantly answered them. It was painful, several times Jenny nearly broke down; did when she was talking about her cat. Ms. Johannsen was patient, polite, and above all, non-judgmental; the detective even more so.

I saw Mom, standing a few feet away, right after that; her face pale. I'd been so wrapped up in things, I hadn't heard her come in. Mom went over and sat down next to Jenny, put her arm around her.

Mom looked at Ms. Johannsen. "I think Jennifer's had enough for right now," Mom said levelly.

The social worker looked at the detective, who nodded. "Obviously," Ms. Johannsen murmured, "this isn't going to stop here."

Mom nodded. "I'm sure Jennifer will cooperate; but please, let her set the pace." Mom looked like she was going to cry. "This is hard enough to listen to. To have lived it..." She shook her head, "I have trouble imagining what it would be like."

The social worker sighed. "There are a million more questions I could ask, I'm afraid the detective or one of his people are going to ask most of them at some point in time. Jennifer," Jennifer looked at the woman. "I know you never meant to hurt your mother; there is blame enough for all here. It is important to speak up when wrong is being done, no matter how painful it might seem to be. But that's the judgment of

those of us who weren't there, who didn't have to endure."

There was a tone from the policeman's radio, he got up and went across the room. When he came back, I wasn't sure what his expression was. Not a happy camper, I thought.

"You will read about it in the newspapers," he said abruptly, then held out his hand to me. I shook it, mystified.

"Your information led officers to the home of Keith Driscoll. There, three young men had a fourteen-year-old girl they'd kidnapped earlier. They'd beaten and raped her and were getting ready to kill her."

The silence in the room was profound, then Jenny was hugging Mom and crying. I reached out, touched Jenny's shoulder.

"Who was the girl?" I asked the policeman, and he shook his head. "We aren't going to tell anyone Jennifer Reese's name, we aren't going to tell this girl's name either."

I silently prayed it wasn't someone I knew; then realized that was stupid. Someone was hurting, and I wished whoever she was, that she would recover. And if there was any way I could help her, I would.

I also needed to talk to Tony; this was almost certainly going to bring to light the weekend escapade with Roger. Even if they'd only mentioned Jennifer's brother and Keith Driscoll; Roger just had to be number three. "I need to make a phone call," I told them, then walked quickly to the phone.

Tony wasn't at home, wasn't at Sue Ellen's, but she gave me a number of one of the football team players and he was there. I explained to Tony what had happened; there was a long silence when I finished. "He really was a shithead, wasn't he?" Tony said levelly. "Stupid bugger didn't learn a thing."

"Yeah, but it might look like you guys triggered him to go off the deep end, Tony. You could be in trouble, big trouble."

"Well, thanks for the heads up, Tom," he said, then hung up. At first, I was a little angry at his abruptness, then I realized he was at the house of one of the guys who'd left with him Friday night; odds were, they were going to try to come up

with something of a plan. I silently wished him luck; odds were that he was going to need it.

Then I called Shannon, made sure she and Elizabeth were safe; I explained what had happened to her. When I got back to the living room, Ms. Johannsen and the detective were getting ready to leave.

"We will talk to Jennifer's parents," Eleanor Johannsen told us. "It is likely they will want to continue the arrangements for their daughter; if that were to change..." She met my eyes, then Mom's. "I'd have to recommend that Jennifer not be allowed to return home. In that event, we would have to do due diligence, in regards to your suitability as foster parents, because Jennifer would have to become a ward of the state. Would you be willing to undertake that process? It is intrusive, there are a lot of personal questions, visits... some of them unannounced."

"Oh," Mom asked dryly, "like we knew in advance Saturday or today? It's not something we would seek out, but if necessary, will gladly undertake." They left, leaving us to cuddle Jenny; JR came down and joined the group hug; when Dad got home, he did too.

"I'm sorry," Jenny said at last.

"Don't ever be," Dad said, kissing her on the forehead. "Life isn't always a smooth, easy ride. For some of us, the bumps can be particularly nasty. We love you, Jennifer, we do. The good and the bad. I mean, like Ellen should be fixing dinner about now, but I don't really blame her for not getting right on it."

He was grinning, so we all laughed. "I think," Mom said, "the budget will survive going out to eat tonight." She grinned at us. "Then we can come back and hit the books, right?"

JR and Jenny groaned, I merely shrugged. "I want to go over to see Shannon later."

Mom huffed a sigh. "If we invite them to go with us, they'll be upset."

"Mary's going to start Wednesday at the firm," Dad said. "Junior assistant clerk or some such. She has the drug test to

pass, but that won't be a problem."

We went to dinner at a seafood place, rather nice. I got dropped off at Shannon's; Mary had promised to bring me home later.

Mary hugged me when I came in, then Shannon; I was a little surprised when Elizabeth did too. "This is for helping stop those boys," Elizabeth said. "Thanks."

"It's been on the news; they didn't say anything about you or anything, but that Sam had been arrested; he's old enough so that they are going to try him as an adult." Mary went on. "It's lucky Jennifer got out when she did."

I couldn't meet her eyes, and Elizabeth gasped, and said, "Oh no! That's why she's gay! How long, Tom?"

I knew they were friends, I knew how much Jenny wanted to be closer. Would this help or hurt? The truth isn't always a good idea, I thought. What was this going to do? "Please," Elizabeth repeated.

"Five or six," I replied.

Mary turned pale. "Five or six years?"

I shook my head, "Since she was five or six. Call it all of her life, just about. All that she can remember." I looked at them. "I know you all want to give her your sympathy, but that's not right. She's dealing with it; not always well, but she's dealing with it. One day at a time." I grinned, "And in her own way. Being gay isn't the worst of all possible worlds."

Mary blushed, and I remembered she'd spent yesterday afternoon with Mom. Elizabeth noticed, and gave one of her rare smiles, breaking the somber mood.

"Why don't you two run along. Elizabeth can read; Shannon you are behind on practice hours," Mary said to her daughters.

I met Shannon's eye, and she grinned and then nodded.

Mary tugged me by the hand, led me down a hallway. "This is Shannon's room," she said, when we were inside, holding hands. "I'm terrified Bill will change his mind now and come



back." She sighed.

"I called his work today; they said Friday had been his last day. Later, I got a call from a woman, she wouldn't tell me her name. She said she worked with Bill. Said that he and a young woman there had been pretty friendly; she thought that they had been sneaking out at lunch for quickies. The woman quit at the same time as Bill."

"That doesn't much sound like he'll be back any time soon," I told her.

She nodded, "I passed the information on to the police. The officer was very polite, but said that I couldn't expect them to do anything about it.

"Later, I talked to the lawyer Dave sent me to." She shook her head, "He said pretty much the same things Dave told me. That I could hire investigators, or do it myself if I wanted, but what was I expecting to accomplish? Did I really want him back?" Mary looked at me.

"God, Tom! What I want is for you to make love to me! Your mother... Oh my God! Ellen is as wonderful as you! And when I figured that if you were with Shannon, and Elizabeth was with Jennifer, where your dad was. And Ellen doesn't mind! And a little later, I didn't mind either."

Mary giggled like someone her daughters' ages. "Ellen told me not to feel guilty about who makes love to who; what's important is that the people love each other. Not who they are; not how they're related. Except, when it comes to babies, and then it's a woman's job to be careful with her babies."

She grinned at me suddenly. "I talked with Shannon last night after we got home. She showed me how to do something."

She reached down, unzipped my jeans, and then pushed them down. Then my underpants. She knelt down in front of me, fisted my erection, and then leaned close to take me in her mouth. Mary used her tongue to lick up and down my shaft, while using one hand to hold me in place. It was lovely and exquisite. Her other hand cupped my ball sack, more exploration than anything else, before her fingers trailed down my leg. I nearly shot off; Mary seemed to realize I was close, and she took more of my erection into her mouth, her tongue dancing on

the head. I did shoot off then.

She stood up, her eyes bright. "In all my years with Bill, not only did I never do that, or imagine doing that -- I don't think he ever did either."

"Imagination is good," I agreed, starting to unbutton her blouse. I pulled it out of her slacks, before sliding my hand inside her soft bra to cup her small breasts and large nipples. I pushed her bra; it slid easily out of the way.

I leaned down, kissing one of her breasts, sucking on her nipple. Mary's fingers ran through my hair, and she groaned with desire. "God, Tom! You have no idea how good it is to have you want me!" She reached down between us, took my now erect again organ in her hand. "I want this, Tom! I want this as deep inside me as you can get it!"

I undid her slacks, and she helped me push and pull them down. She pulled me atop her in the bed, and I pushed inside her. Mary had been the tightest adult I'd ever been with, and this time I was expecting a little trouble; but she was almost as wet as if I'd eaten her out. I slid inside and she pulled me more tightly into her.

I started rubbing and kissing her breasts, while I began to move into her. She reached down, tugging on my head, and kissed me, hard and furious. I kissed her back, and for the longest time we moved together, until I came at last; a moment later Mary came, while I was still pressing deeply inside her.

We kissed more gently, while I lay lightly stroking her breasts. Mary's eyes regarded me gravely. "A month ago, I would have told you love was holding onto my husband, raising my daughters and being content," Mary whispered. "It took my husband not a quarter hour to prove to me that I had no clue what love was; that my life was a shell, and I had hardly any understanding of him at all, even over all those years.

"And as bad as these last few days have been, we're infinitely better off than Jennifer or that girl those boys attacked.

"And above all, there is you." She kissed me gently. "All of us have you in common, and are better off for it. I still wonder at times, if you are driven by this," she lifted her

midsection against me, and I knew what she was talking about. "Or something more. I think it doesn't matter, does it?"

"It matters to me," I told her. "It matters to me," I repeated.

She smiled and nodded. "It's hard, right now, not to have doubts." I nodded in turn and Mary went on. "And, I think, when I've worked through everything, the doubts will have turned to new beliefs, and maybe I'll have a firmer grip on my life. And hopefully Shannon and Elizabeth will have learned something as well."

I nodded, and she smiled. "Time, I think, for us to get on with the mundane chores of living." We stood and dressed, although I was more interested in watching. Mary laughed, and shook her head. "I love you, Tom Ferguson! I have no idea why, but I do."

Before we went back into the main part of the house, she tugged on my arm. "The girls and I have been spoiled for a long time. I built my schedule today around the fact I wanted to take them to school and pick them up. I'm not going to be able to do that much longer. Adults have to spend more hours at work than kids do in school. I'll have to be at my desk by 8 am every morning; I'm not going to be able to leave until 4:30. I'm not sure if I'm going to have time to drop them off. I definitely can't pick them up."

"I already bringing JR and Jenny home; Elizabeth and Shannon won't be a big deal."

She smiled. "I feel so guilty, asking for favors like this."

"You never have to feel guilty for asking. It's only a problem if you start taking favors for granted."

Mary nodded. I said good night to Shannon with a long kiss, then surprised her. "See you in the morning, 7:30," I said to her.

Shannon looked at me, and I bowed slightly, "Tom Ferguson's limousine service, ma'am."

Shannon nodded in understanding.

When I got home, Mom and Dad were cuddled on the couch in the family room, Jenny and JR on the other one.

"Pretty big day, hasn't it been?" Mom asked as I came in.

I nodded. "Following a big weekend, a long week..." I shook my head.

"Well, next week is Spring Break, you can rest up in LA," she told me.

"Mom, do I have to go?" I asked bluntly.

"Yes," she replied equally firmly. "It's important to more than just David and me, it's important to all of us. You don't have to sleep with anyone you don't want to, but you need to know them better than you do now."

I sighed, wishing it wasn't so.

I went up to my room; both JR and Jenny were in it, half asleep. I told them I had to study, and did for an hour, until I was nearly falling asleep. I got up, undressed, and hit the light before joining them. JR was lying closest, so I spooned up behind her. She reached out, took my hand, and pressed it against her breast; I don't know about JR, but I was asleep a second later.

Tuesday, March 26, 2002

When I awoke, I had a hard on buried in JR's ass crack; I'd have done something about it, except my alarm was already going off. I reached up, turned it off, and grimaced. Already five minutes late getting started.

JR moved and lay on top of me, pinning me to the bed, and started to tickling me. "JR!" I said, trying hard not to giggle. "We're already late."

She rubbed her bare pubes against my boner. "And I am dying to have this in me," she told me. "But Penny's period is done, and I told her, unless someone else drops in after school, you and she..."

I found I could rub her clit with my rod, and I did;

causing JR to go all dreamy and limp. "Oh... you... rat!" She gasped until I stopped.

"You're the one teasing me, sauce for goose," I laughed at her. She laughed back, and then she and Jenny were off for their shower. I contemplated what watching that would be like; my boner went into overdrive.

Mom appeared at the door, while I was like that. She giggled, and smiled at me. "The girls left you a bit bothered this morning?"

"A little," I shrugged, give me a minute or two in the shower, I thought, and things will be right as rain.

She smiled slightly, pushed the door closed, walked over to the bed and sat down next to me. Without a word, she leaned over, took me in her mouth and started going down on me. I was wrong about how long it would take; I spurted in much less than a minute. Mom sat back up, grinning. "There now, better?"

"Oh yeah!" I eyed the clock, then looked at her, Mom shook her head and laughed.

"Is there ever enough time?" she said. She leaned down, kissed me lightly. "Never, not really." I cupped one of her breasts, massaging through blouse and bra; not very satisfactory for either of us, but God! I was hot and horny!

She smiled at me and shook her head. "Not now, Tom... " She kissed me lightly again. "Friday night. You and me. All night."

I nodded, wishing it was magically Friday night instead of Tuesday morning. She left, and I went and showered; picked up Penny, Shannon and Elizabeth, then dropped off the two younger girls at the junior high and continued on to school.

At lunch, I was startled when Sue Ellen and a number of girls came and said they wanted to talk to me, while I was sitting with Shannon and Tony.

I got up and we walked a few feet away from the tables, out onto the playground. "You're the one who ratted on Keith, Roger and Sam, yesterday?" That was Janey Sussman, captain of the cheerleaders.

I couldn't tell from her tone if she was a happy camper or not; the words tended to make me think not. "The police asked me if I knew any of Sam Reese's friends. I told them their names and addresses."

"Sam beat up his mother, raped her," Sue Ellen said, "They beat up Keith's sister Dawn, the three of them. Broke an arm, her nose... They really worked her over. They all raped her. They were debating which of them was going to get to kill her when the police broke in."

"Dawn was the girl they took?" I asked, and Janey nodded, her eyes on me. "The police didn't say who, just that they had someone."

"I talked to Dawn for a little," Janey said. "She's my cousin, so they let us see her. She won't talk much about what happened; just that she's ever so grateful someone came. She says they were going to kill her, so there'd be no evidence."

I gagged, suddenly faint. "Shit." Could there really be people that stupid?

Janey looked me up and down. "Dawn's a freshman, going out for cheerleader. She and I are friends. Particular friends. Like I hear your sister has friends." Her eyes were drilling into my head. "I hear, you don't think it's any of your business to butt into your sister's business."

"Joanna is a big girl; she can make up her own mind who her friends are, and how close they are," I told her.

"And it doesn't bother you, girls doing girls?" Janey pressed. I glanced at Sue Ellen, kind of wondering why she hadn't mentioned that no, it didn't bother me.

"No, it doesn't bother me."

"Get you all hard and horny, thinking about it?"

"Thinking about girls gets me all hard and horny," I said, and the gaggle of girls giggled.

"We talked about it," Janey went on. "You can have one of us for a little quality time, our way of saying thanks. This is

like totally off the record, doesn't count, no one will know what happens. You and her, or him if you're like that."

"I'm not like that, nothing like that. I appreciate the thought, Janey, I do. But I mean, I'm not Roger or Sam or those other bastards. I didn't do anything for a reward." My eyes lit on one of the girls, Gloria Rodriguez. Her eyes held mine only for a second, and then she looked away. She sure seemed to me to be saying, 'Please don't pick me.'

What had my dad said to Mary on Sunday?

"Janey." She looked at me, and I smiled at her. "Hold out your hand, Janey." She blinked, and then raised her arm slowly; I reached out and shook her hand. "Now, simply say, 'Thanks, Tom,'" I told her as she looked at me.

"Thanks, Tom," she said, her voice uncertain.

"That's why I did it, Janey. The only reward I want. Okay?"

Janey nodded, then one of the other girls held out her hand. "Thanks, Tom. Dawn and my sister are friends." After that, one after another shook my hand, until Gloria Rodriguez and Sue Ellen were left. "Thanks," Gloria said, and then smiled. "Cool."

Sue Ellen stepped up, grinned at me. "If you think I'm just gonna shake your hand," she said forthrightly, "you're out of your fucking mind." She stepped close, hugged me tight, grinding those imposing mammaries into my chest for a long few seconds, before letting go.

"You're welcome," I told her, and everyone cracked up.

"No PDA's," a voice interrupted. I looked up and saw Mrs. Jenkins, the sixty-year old woman I'd had for English Lit the year before.

Sue Ellen turned to the old bat and grinned. "That was a display of personal gratitude. If I was displaying affection, I'd really have gotten in trouble." That brought more laughter from the other girls, and Sue Ellen went on, waving at me. "Tom Ferguson helped the police rescue Dawn Driscoll from being raped and murdered yesterday." With that, Sue Ellen turned and walked

away, followed in quick order by the rest of the cheerleaders.

I glanced at Mrs. Jenkins; decided I was glad I'd had her last year, because if I was in her class this year, my grade would have just gone in the toilet. I nodded to her, and walked back to Shannon and Tony.

"What was that?" Tony asked.

"The cheerleaders being grateful for my help getting Dawn free."

"Shaking hands?" Tony laughed, "Wow! I could have thought of something better than that!"

"Actually," I said, not sure why I felt so sure about it, "they offered me my choice of them. For a little quality time. I said no."

I saw Shannon looking at me, and I shrugged. "It didn't seem right."

Tony shook his head. "Doesn't seem smart to say no to an offer like that."

I looked at him, and reflected on what Sue Ellen had said. At least once, he'd had an offer like that, one he hadn't refused. Yet I had. Weird.

"It wasn't hard at all to say no." I was puzzled, inside. Why had I said no? I hadn't even contemplated saying yes. I'd meant it when I said I didn't do anything for a reward; at the time, I didn't even know about Dawn, or what they were doing to her. I wanted the police to find Sam and put him in jail. That was all. So he couldn't hurt Jenny or anyone else, ever again. And I'd almost been too late. But it wasn't me who rescued her, it was the police. All I had done was tell them where to look for Sam.

Shannon put her arm on my shoulder for a moment, and I was grateful. A lot to think about.

The bell rang, and Shannon zipped off to her next class, Tony and I walked slowly towards ours. Tony waved at where Shannon had gone. "Maybe she's giving you enough, so it doesn't matter, eh?" He laughed.



I rounded on him, angrier with him than I could ever remember being. "Last fall, Shannon dated Roger Parker a couple of times. Not even three weeks; she decided she didn't like him and broke up. All the stories you've heard about Shannon putting out were from Roger. Consider the source, Tony, consider the source!"

He held up his hands. "Chill!" He looked at me for a second. "You're different, since you and Marsha. Way different."

"You bet," I told him.

"But you've been in Shannon's pants. I know."

"No you don't," I said firmly.

"Look me in the eye and tell me I'm wrong."

I looked him in the eye. "Tony, the first time Shannon and I went out we kissed, I touched her breasts. Second time, I got a hug and a quick kiss. It wasn't wham, bamm, let's fuck! Okay?"

"Third time lucky, eh?" He saw me start to wind up and he backed up a step. "I'm being an asshole, aren't I?"

I didn't say anything at first, working on holding my temper in check. "Tony, from last fall until the other night at the basketball game, Shannon's been refusing to go out; not that she doesn't get lots of offers, sometimes five or six guys a day ask her out."

"Lamers," Tony said. Abruptly he held out his hand. "I'm sorry, Tom."

It was such a microcosmic reversal of the cheerleaders, I wanted to laugh. I shook his hand.

"Speaking of lamers, we're both late for class," I told him, and we grinned and split.

I spent a lot of time during the afternoon staring into space, until finally, the last bell rang. Instead of seeking out Shannon and Elizabeth, I headed for the girl's PE room,

found someone going in and asked if she'd tell Janey I wanted to talk to her.

After a minute, Janey came out; now dressed in her cheerleading outfit. Not a bad looker, long slim legs, dark blonde hair. Breasts probably about Marsha-sized, not the huge wealth of Sue Ellen. She saw me looking, smiled slightly. "Change your mind?" she inquired softly.

"Ah, no. Doesn't mean I'm blind, though," I told her, getting a grin back.

"I've been thinking about what you offered at lunch. Not how you'd expect." I hurried on, knowing I was going to piss her off. "I think what you're doing with the cheerleaders is wrong. Today was wrong. Yeah, you said everyone agreed, but really? It didn't seem that way to me. There were girls there who agreed because they didn't expect to be chosen. Didn't want to be chosen. They agreed, but it was peer pressure." That dark monster our parents and teachers were eternally invoking, and we never discussed amongst ourselves.

I was right; I could see it in Janey's eyes.

"And what," Janey said, her voice tight and angry, "gives you the right to tell me that I'm wrong? We're wrong?"

I shook my head. "I gave you my opinion, Janey. I'm telling you that I, Tom Ferguson, in my opinion, think you aren't much better than Sam and Roger and Keith. That you use coercion to get the others to do what you want." I held her eyes. "Including sex."

She started to turn away, and I called after her. "Tell me Janey, why did Sue Ellen quit the squad?"

She glanced back at me, but stopped. "Her grades were hurting. Tony, the squad, school, she was having trouble keeping up." She looked at me. "Her parents would have made her quit if her grades dropped any more."

I shook my head. "I've never talked about someone's sex life before," I said quietly, "and I'm wrong for doing it now. Janey, Sue Ellen likes sex, but I don't think girls are her first preference."

"But even more than that, Janey, what she really doesn't like is sex potluck; with football players or cheerleaders or whoever, picked at random. She decided to quit because she didn't want to do it except with people she knows and likes. How many others have dropped out or quit because they didn't want to do the things you do?" I pressed on, "How many of the people still on the squad do it because they want to be a cheerleader, and while they don't like what they're made to do, go along so they can be part of the squad? Doing things they'd have never done without being forced?"

"What gives you the right to be judgmental? To tell me what's right, what's wrong?" Her face was red, her voice angry.

I shook my head. "I told you my opinion, Janey. Like a friend would do at Thirty-one Flavors if you were wondering if you wanted two scoops or three of super duper chocolate on your ice cream cone. 'Take two Janey,' 'Take three Janey, we can burn it up at practice.'" I shook my head. "This is just my opinion, Janey. That's all." I waved towards the parking lot. "I have to go, you think about it."

I turned and left, found Shannon waiting impatiently, Elizabeth patiently waiting; I picked up JR, Jenny and Penny.

We dropped off Shannon and Elizabeth first. I walked Shannon to the door, and Mary greeted us. "I start tomorrow," Mary told us, grinning. "Thanks for being a chauffeur."

"No trouble, Mary."

"I told Ellen we'd come over tonight for some Scrabble, after dinner," Mary went on. I grinned, nodded.

"Kim's going to pick up Penny at our place after work." JR said before I got the car going. I nodded, remembering I was scheduled for a little quality time of my own with Penny. We drove home, JR smiled and led Jenny away towards her room, and Penny and I went up to mine.

We sat on the bed, talking for a bit, then Penny wanted to make out, so we did that for a while. It wasn't really passionate at first, just soft and gentle; it was nice.

She smiled at me. "I'm sorry I was such a bitch, Friday." I shook my head.

"You weren't."

"Yes I was." She kissed me a little more hotly, "God! I was so horny I wanted to climb the walls!" The kiss picked up a little more steam. "What's the point of having a boyfriend, if you can't do it with him?"

I put my tongue in her mouth, and she sucked on it, and when I started rubbing her breasts through her blouse, she moaned, and started working the buttons on her blouse. This was, I learned, not a good use of resources, I spent a few seconds fumbling with her bra; only to learn that it undid in front. But then we were both bare, kissing and stroking each other.

Penny was very much more into touching me than any other lover I'd had; her hands ran up and down my back, my sides. She cupped my balls, stroked my rod, touching everywhere and missing nothing, while I did the same thing to her. Like so many of the women I'd been with, she wanted to be on top; I was getting so I really liked the position. If I was on top, it was difficult to reach all of the places I wanted to reach; when the girl was on top that wasn't so. Penny, in particular, loved having her clit rubbed, and the two of us moved together for a long, beautiful time before I came.

"Oh, how I needed that!" Penny murmured. "I like Joanna, Jenny. Your dad is like wow!" She giggled. "I suppose I shouldn't compare people." She looked at me, smiled. "You and Dave have spoiled me."

I raised an eyebrow, and Penny went on. "I thought Roger was a great lover, but even the first time with you, I knew he wasn't even mediocre. Dave is a lot like you; he makes love to you, focuses on your pleasure, letting his own come when we're both ready for it. Roger was fuck, fuck, fuck; get off. 'Wow baby, that was good! Really good!' Even if I hadn't gotten off at all." She kissed me lightly. "You want me to come as much as you want to."

I nodded, "I'm figuring it out. When I'm going down on someone, that's what I pay attention to; I'm not counting minutes and seconds until I can get off. My partner is who I want to make happy. But when we're like this, both of us together..." I shook my head. "God, that's good too!"

"But you aren't focused on getting off to the exclusion of the everything else," Penny said. "It shows."

"Oh," I replied, "when someone's going down on me; trust me, that's about all I think about. Actually, about not getting off in the first few seconds."

She giggled, and that felt odd, wonderful on one particular piece of my anatomy. "And you like to lay here, in me," Penny said, wiggling atop me. "You have no idea how nice that feels, warm, loved; knowing that you're still horny. Me too."

I glanced at the clock, four twenty-five. Penny saw my glance, laughed. "Rules suck."

"Yeah, but if we didn't have a time out, this is what we'd all be doing, all the time. We'd starve, flunk out of school." She got up, and we dressed, kissing once again, before going out into the family room.

A few minutes later, JR and Jenny appeared, both of them nude, both with smiles. I laughed, but Penny shook her head. "I couldn't begin to concentrate with you two like that. I'd have one thing, and one thing only on my mind."

JR walked over to Penny, kissed her hard; I saw JR's hand start towards Penny's pussy. I cleared my throat loudly, and saw the movement stop.

"I was performing a service," JR said, looking at me, unabashed.

"It shouldn't be a public service, and we really haven't been hitting the books hard enough lately. I, for one, want to spend some time with Mary and Shannon tonight, with something other than a school book in my hand."

"We're all a bunch of sex fiends," JR said, shaking her head. "I mean, me and you, me and Jenny, me and Penny, me and Dad, me and Mom, me and Kim," JR sighed. "It's like I can never get enough."

"But not now." I chided gently.

"Spoilsport!" JR said with feeling, but Jenny walked over

and hugged me briefly, keeping her lower body from mine. Then she vanished, followed a second later by JR. Penny and I got out books, settled down. JR and Jenny joined us a few minutes later when they were dressed, and we put in some good study time.

By six, Mom was home, followed a few minutes later by Kim. Dad got home just as dinner hit the oven; he motioned us all to sit together in the family room.

"First, Tom, I've heard some more details about what happened yesterday, with those boys."

"At school, I found out it was Dawn Driscoll that they hurt," I reported. "The rest of the stuff I don't think everyone needs to hear."

"Well, there was supposed to be an arraignment hearing this afternoon. The newspapers got hold of it somehow, learned that the city was requesting a very low bail, a few thousand dollars. There was a furor about that. Two brutal rapes, one where they told the girl they were going to finish and kill her -- well, that small amount of a bail didn't go over well.

"It didn't go over with me, either. I talked to Bill Carstairs, our attorney; he got right over there, filed an amicus brief on behalf of Jennifer."

"What's that?" Jennifer asked.

"That's a legal motion, filed by a party interested in a court case, but not directly involved. You, Jennifer, may in fact, be involved. That was what the interview the other day was about; to see if there might be additional charges to file against any of them. In this case, your brother. You described some pretty awful things. The police are going to investigate; if it comes to trial, you're going to have to testify in court."

All of us looked distressed. "Bill Carstairs says the odds are against it. Your brother would have to have a complete moron for a defense attorney to not plea bargain this.

"At any rate, the arraignment and bail hearing have been separated; a two minute court appearance, they all pled not guilty."

"Not guilty!" JR erupted, "Not guilty! How can they plead not guilty? The police caught them hurting Dawn!"

Dad shrugged. "It's all legal stuff. It's a tactic that lawyers use, not to close out options. Bill Carstairs was quite adamant about warning us, all of us, that sometimes the results of the legal process defy rational explanation. Rodney King was beaten by police, bystanders caught it on film. The police were acquitted. A drunken man, zonked on drugs who was so scary to twenty-some odd cops, all armed, that they beat him every time he moved. O. J. got off; others have.

"So, while Bill doesn't think these guys are going to get off, it's always a possibility. And, there is a chance that one or more of them might get out on bail."

"They should call it the injustice system," Mom said, obviously angry herself.

Dad nodded. "And, as unpleasant as those things are to think about, please consider us here. Kim, Ellen, Mary and myself. Frankly, if the police had a tape of who we've been with in the last week, we'd be in jail as well, and the charges would be similar."

There was a sudden silence. "As far as the powers that be are concerned, there is little difference between Sam or I; Sam used violence and I didn't; it was rape, though, in their eyes.

"It is going to be impossible to escape notice in this," he went on. "In fact, I'm seriously considering taking all of us off to California this weekend." He looked at me.

"What rumors have you heard in school? You, Joanna, Jennifer, Penny?"

I sighed. "JR and Penny, well known lesbians; although they had a brief fling with Roger, both of them found him to be 'inadequate.'" I hung air quotes around the word; no one laughed. "By association, Jenny as well. The word on Shannon is that she's a slut, putting out for anyone who asks. Boys, anyway," I amended. I took a mental deep breath.

"I am reasonably certain that Tony has told others about me and his cousin; they know about Shannon and I dating." I mentally crossed my fingers. "I don't think Sue Ellen has told

anyone about her and JR; me and Mary or me and her."

There was a short silence, and then JR giggled. "You and Sue Ellen?"

I nodded. "I kind of got a hint from Janey Sussman today, that maybe she knows about Sue Ellen and me; but I don't think anybody else knows."

I met Dad's eyes. "So far as I know, that's it. Nothing intergenerational."

Dad nodded. "Anyone else have anything?"

JR nodded. "A couple of girls have made what they think are hilariously funny remarks about Jennifer, Penny and me. Nothing about anyone else."

There were murmurs of agreement from the others.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door; Mom went, thinking it was Mary and her daughters; instead she was back in a second. "TV reporters who want to talk to Tom."

"When's dinner?" Dad asked, and Mom grinned.

"Ten minutes."

"Cool." He looked at me. "Given everything, can you deal with this?"

"Yes," I told him simply. I was going to tell them to take a hike and not bother us.

"Ten minutes."

We went out; a woman with a handheld microphone like you see on TV was there, along with a young man with a large video camera on his shoulder.

"Tom Ferguson?" The reporter asked and I nodded. "I'm Melinda Carter, KPHO. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions. Would you mind if we taped it?"

"I wasn't expecting company," I told her. "And we are about to sit down to dinner. Just a couple of minutes." I met



the woman's eyes. Cute, if a little too much makeup. Down Tom!

She smiled at me, exuding what I thought was supposed to be charm, but came across as oily unctuousness. In the space of about ten seconds, mostly by body language, she'd brought about the desired result; mine not hers. I was no longer even slightly interested.

"Do you know Sam Reese?"

I shook my head. "I've seen him exactly once, at a dance. I asked him to leave, he was bothering a friend," I told her.

"And the friend would be Jennifer Reese?" I nodded.

"Are you aware that there are allegations that he molested her? As well as raping his own mother?"

"There are allegations that the earth is flat," I said quietly, "There is a proper place for listening to those allegations and for determining their truth. This isn't the place."

She pursed her lips; I noticed that the camera was now on me, not her. "Do you know Roger Parker? Keith Driscoll?" She asked, holding the microphone a bit closer to my mouth. I'd done something she liked, what? The joke?

"Roger Parker was bothering a girl at school; I didn't know her or him. I asked him to stop. Another time, he was with Sam and Keith. Roger was bothering my sister and a couple of her friends. I asked him to leave as well."

"Was there bad blood between you and any of the three? Driscoll, Parker or Reese?"

"I didn't much like them," I told her, glancing at the camera.

"Did you ever get into a fight with them?"

I considered that for a moment. "Roger took a swing at me once. Missed."

"And did you?" the reporter asked. "Swing? Miss?"

"No swing. We were at school and I didn't want to get in trouble. He was sent to the office, I wasn't."

"And at the dance? Were you a party to what happened to him?"

"Roger was a party to what happened to him." Obviously she knew what happened, the question now was did she know who? Someone was certainly going to tell what happened; they might be willing to lie, but not to the police or standing in front of a news camera. It was surprisingly intimidating. Not everyone was going to toss off jokes. "Hitting on girlfriends of the varsity football squad isn't very smart. Hitting on the cheerleaders isn't much smarter."

"So it was football players who kidnapped him from the dance?"

I realized abruptly that I wasn't paying enough attention to the local scene, being too intent on explaining history just so. She might be the one asking questions, but the real audience was the camera. I looked into it. "I didn't see Roger leave. I didn't see Sam or Keith leave the dance. I did hear that Roger wasn't in school, yesterday," I paused for effect. "Anything that might have happened, was, at worst, a high school prank."

"A prank that might have set off a tragedy a few days later."

"I think Sam Reese, Keith Driscoll and Roger Parker are the people you should ask about what set off a tragedy. Frankly, I wish they'd never been born. The rest of us live our lives without rape and murder; we meet people we grow to like, to care for. We spend time together, we have fun, we live. Those three..." I shook my head, "They don't have a life." I smiled. "At least in my opinion."

Dad added, "Tom, dinnertime."

The woman smiled at me, and I smiled back. "Thank you, Tom Ferguson."

I smiled back and stepped back into the house. Dinner was rather a quieter meal than most, all of us lost in our own thoughts. Afterwards, Mary, Shannon and Elizabeth came over and

we played Scrabble then Parcheesi; no one, it seemed, felt sleepy.

Afterwards, we hugged each other and then we spent a while talking about events, before the three of them left for the evening. Mom and Dad came by to say good night, the kisses were shorter, less passionate.

Jenny went to her room to get undressed, then turned off the light, and came into bed, curling up next to me; for a change, she was behind me, wrapping her arms around me. "You're not angry with me, are you Tom?"

"Heaven's no!" I said, "It's just that there's so much to think about."

"I know," she sighed. "Tom?"

I reached up and put my hand on hers, squeezed lightly. "What, Jenny?"

"Do you want to do it with me?"

I wanted to say no. "Yes," I said instead. "But not unless you want to. Really want to."

"I was thinking, today, that if you and I made love and I liked it, it would mean that Sam didn't ruin my life; not any of it. That I could be a normal person, doing what I want to do, not something he made me do."

"You are a normal person, Jenny," I told her, squeezing her fingers again.

She gently moved her fingers, slid them down my stomach, under the waistband of my shorts and gripped my erection. She began to fist me.

For a few seconds, I felt sad; Jenny did it well, probably better than any other girl I'd met. And the reason? More experience than anyone else. Unwanted experience. Go slow, Tom! Let her do what she wants! Not that big of a deal, whether or not you get off!

I remembered Mom's mouth on my cock this morning. Even as I thought that, I felt a surge of passion and I shot off in

Jenny's hand.

Behind me, Jenny giggled. "Gosh, Tom! You must be really horny, to shoot so quick!" She started pushing my jockey shorts down, and I helped as best I could, then she surprised me by wiping her sticky fingers on them, and then using them to clean me too.

"Now," Jenny murmured, "do it to me."

I rolled over and looked at her, decided that she was talking about finger fucking, so I slid my hand down to her pubes, sliding along until I found her entrance; a moist entrance, I couldn't help notice. I started working my finger in and out of her, my thumb rubbing her clit. It didn't take much to get Jenny into her 'Oh! Ah!' stage; I found my face just inches from her breasts; in spite of my earlier vow not to push Jenny, I leaned a bit closer, tongued one of her nipples. Her arm came up around my head, pulling me more tightly to her, jamming my mouth against her breast. I licked and sucked with abandon then, while pistoning my finger into her pussy. She began to hump her hips against the pressure between her legs. Jenny let out a low moan, her hand dropping to press mine tightly into her.

"Tom, oh Tom!" Jenny murmured, "You are so wonderful!" She moved then, pushing my hand away from her middle. She pushed me so I was fully on my back, "Everyone says you like the girl on top, best."

"Yes," I murmured. She sat up, swung one leg over me, and started to press me into her, hard and fast. I reached out, held her off me.

"No, not like that," I whispered. I moved her with my hand, slowly lowering her down towards my blazing erection. When her pussy was close enough, I started moving my erection through her pussy lips, lightly stroking her with it, from near her butt hole to her clit.

"Tom!" She hissed, "Rub my clit like that!" I concentrated on it, then she put her fingers on my cock, rubbing it harder against her clit; Jenny let out a series of short, sharp, 'Ohs!' and then came again.

I put my own hand between us, moving my cock head so it

barely penetrated her pussy lips, then slowly penetrated her, moving a fraction further in, then back until I was out, rubbing her clit. For the next ten minutes, I slowly, ever so slowly, inserted my cock into her pussy, a millimeter at a time, punctuated with clit rubs.

The expression on Jenny's face was one of wonder, and when I was buried completely, pressing deep inside of her she looked down at me. "It's never been like this, Tom! Oh thank you! Thank you!" She giggled, "You can't imagine how much nicer it is to be loved, than fucked."

"I love you, Jenny. Now and always."

She leaned close, pushing me deeper as she did. Jenny reached out and stroked my face. "You'll always be the first boy in my heart, Tom! I promise!" I smiled, and she moved on me, and I moved against her. It took a while, quite a while, before we were going at it like jackhammers, hips pounding against each other. But we did, and Jenny came twice, before I did.

For a long time, we lay together, me buried in her. Finally Jenny lifted up, grinning. "I heard you like to stay in a girl." She paused. "All night."

I grinned back. "You guys trade secrets, notes. Not fair, you know all my secrets."

"I'll tell you a secret, I'll tell no one else." She moved slightly against me. "Right now I can feel your sperm inside me, it moves and tickles things." I wondered what it would feel like, shook my head, a feminine mystery I'd never know. "Until a week ago, I associated that feeling with evil and pain; I hated it, I hated my life."

"Now, it's one of the nicest things I've felt in a long, long time. Tom." She pushed her hips down against me, I pushed back. She smiled again. "One of these days, Tom, we'll both be older. And on one of those days in a few years, I want you to get me pregnant. I want to have your baby. And I hope he's a boy, so we can teach him the things you've taught me."

I felt a drip of a tear on my chest; I put my arms around her. "Jenny, when that day comes, I promise to do my best."

She started giggling, "Thank you, Tom. For making me feel the way I do, for making love to me... for everything." This time when she started to move against me, there was no uncertainty for either of us. I put my hands on her bottom, pulling her onto me; it was as if I'd just entered her. I had a great deal of difficulty not coming; I wasn't able to hold out for very long at all. We reached happy completion in just about the shortest time it had ever taken.

"I love making you happy," Jenny murmured, putting her head down on my chest.

"I've never been happier," I told her, stroking her hair. There was a soft sigh, and I felt her body relax. I stroked her hair again, then fell asleep myself.

Wednesday, March 27, 2002

I awoke because Jenny was moving on top of me, sitting up when she saw my eyes open. "Again!" she said with firm determination.

So we made love again, this time I rubbed Jenny's breasts, and she thumbed her clit; she came twice in five minutes, then I came again.

Jenny leaned down and kissed me. "This morning, you and I get to shower together," she said with a big grin.

It was a pleasant shower; the first I'd ever had with a girl. She washed me, and I washed her. It was sexy, but not erotic sexy; for one thing, we had a deadline.

We dried off, and when we were done, went back to our bedrooms; standing nude in the hall, Jenny leaned up and kissed me. "Will you be jealous, Tom, if tonight I go with your dad?"

I shook my head; feeling bolder with Jenny than I'd ever felt, I ran my hand down her side, along her hip. "You know where to find me; you know I'll be there whenever you are ready."

She smiled prettily, kissed me, and then went into her room to dress.

It felt good seeing Shannon and Elizabeth when I picked

them up for school; the three younger girls all sat in the back seat, chattering away, Jenny and JR got out of the Camry, still talking.

Walking into school, Elizabeth performed her ritual vanishing act, and Shannon and I walked slowly towards the building. "Poor Elizabeth is so confused. She likes Jennifer and Joanna; Joanna's not hit on her like Jennifer has, and Jennifer only did it the once. Elizabeth says it's pretty clear that Jennifer is still interested, and she thinks Joanna is too."

"Probably," I agreed. "But neither one is going to want to go any place they aren't wanted; unless Elizabeth changes her mind, they won't push it."

Shannon nodded. "I think that's what's confusing her. My problems, and other kids that she's heard about at school make her wary, and I think she's expecting you to make a pass at her, since you're sleeping with Mom and me."

I shook my head. "Maybe if she crawled into my bed and did lascivious things to my body," I said with a laugh.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Shannon laughed too.

"I would." I was silent for a second, and then I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye. "Shannon, I know it probably sounds corny, but from my very first time ever, it was the girl who wanted it. Not that I didn't want it too, but until the girl said, 'Yes.' nothing happened. You are the closest I've ever come to trying to seduce a girl who didn't want to."

"Well, you didn't seduce a girl who didn't want to; my problem is with competition. I'm still not comfortable with it. The things you've said; they've made me think. Made my mom think; shucks, even Elizabeth is thinking about sex now." We laughed, but it was late, and we had to hurry. When it came time to part, Shannon said softly, "This afternoon, after school. You and me," Shannon murmured. "Please?"

I nodded and we parted quickly for our classes.

At lunch, my table was crowded; Shannon was there, so were Sue Ellen and Tony, although they weren't sitting together.

Janey Sussman was there as well, plus Gloria Rodriguez.

Janey told us that she'd gone to visit Dawn the evening before, that she was doing fine and would probably be out of the hospital by the end of the day. "She has a broken nose and a broken arm," Janey told us. "Bunches of cuts and bruises." She looked at me.

"I told her what you said about our way of saying thanks." Janey's eyes flashed, and I could tell everyone at the table knew what she was talking about. "Dawn says thanks, too. And she thanks you again, because she would have been pissed if we'd done what we wanted to do." Janey grinned at me.

I shook my head. "I didn't even know I was saving anyone, much less who."

Janey, I thought to myself, not only would I have done it for anyone, I did it for anyone; I've never met Dawn Driscoll.

Janey give me the finger. "I know if the cops asked me the time of day, I'd tell them wrong," she said. "And probably give them the finger when I did."

Janey turned to Sue Ellen, "Sue Ellen and I had a long talk last night. I think I'm maybe growing up a little."

Sue Ellen giggled. "I know it's called intercourse, I didn't know it was called talking, too. If it is, I guess we did talk all night."

Janey stuck her tongue out at Sue Ellen and everyone laughed.

I could see a startled look on Tony's face.

What did you expect, Tony, when you decided to go your separate ways for a while? You aren't likely to be celibate; you must be crazy if you think Sue Ellen is going to be. And what part had I played in Sue Ellen and Janey getting together? I'd told Janey yesterday that Sue Ellen preferred guys. Evidently JR wasn't the only girl who could seduce Sue Ellen.

Eventually the bell rang, and the rest of the school day ran its course. We drove to the junior high, picked up the other two, and I told them that I wanted to study at Shannon's.



JR and Jenny wanted to go over there too, so we went to Shannon's.

Shannon called her mom, and then I called mine. I was a little surprised again. "You're at Mary's? Good! Don't go home! The neighbors called earlier, it's a zoo, reporters everywhere. You were on the twelve o'clock news."

I blinked. "I didn't think they were going to use it." That and I'd prayed they wouldn't; I'd said too many things wrong.

"Welcome to the world of film editing, Tom. They only used parts of it, with parts of other people talking as well. It makes you sound like a big hero."

"I'm not a big hero. I wasn't any kind of a hero."

Mom agreed, "I know, but they are making out like you are. You did the right thing, we all admire that. But they are blowing it seriously out of shape."

I nodded like I understood, but I didn't. "Stay at Mary's, we'll come there tonight after work. Dave convinced Mary that we can afford to go out to eat, we'll go home much later," Mom told me.

I told the others what was going on, JR and Jenny thought it was cool that I'd been on TV; I wasn't so sure. The three younger girls then went to Elizabeth's bedroom, leaving Shannon and I to ourselves. She took my hand and we went to her room and shut the door.

We stood for a while, kissing each other; the passion of the kissing slowly rising. I reached down and undid her jeans, then pushed them down, along with her panties. I gently moved Shannon back, until she was sitting on the edge of her bed, then I knelt in front of her and started kissing her inner thighs, starting halfway to her knees, working my way up one leg, then down the other.

Shannon undid her blouse, tossed it away, then her bra; by the time I reached the apex of her legs the second time, she was rubbing her breasts with both hands. I contemplated her pussy, and then licked it with my tongue, as if I was eating an ice cream cone.

She murmured with pleasure, and I focused on her clit, licking it with my tongue as I'd been doing before. "Oh God, Tom! You are so different than any other guy I've been with!" She giggled softly, "Mom says that when girls do it, it's all they do. I can't hardly imagine what that's like."

I licked her clit again, then this time lightly applied suction to the area. "Mom or JR or Jenny would love showing you what it's like," I told her.

"I still can't believe everyone is sleeping with everyone else," Shannon whispered. "Except you and Jennifer."

"Everyone is sleeping with everyone," I confessed, sure it was going to hurt. But I wasn't going to lie.

"You and Jennifer?" Shannon asked, obviously surprised.

I nodded, and spread her pussy lips, and used my tongue to moisten the entrance to her pussy hole. I felt Shannon quiver; at first I thought it was excitement, but she whispered, "God! I can't get the image out of my head! A girl doing to me what you're doing!"

I lightly blew on her pussy hair, Shannon trembled again, this time I was sure, from excitement. "It would take just a second, JR would love to do this to you," I told Shannon, looking up at her. I saw her pull on her nipples, and then I felt her tremble again.

"God, am I a pervert?" Shannon asked, talking to herself. "I just want sex, sex with whoever." She looked down at me. "You'd just get up, go fetch your sister, and then what? Watch?"

"I've never watched," I told her, "But yes, if you'd like it, I know JR would like to kiss you like this." I put my tongue more fully into her hole, and Shannon trembled.

"Tom, oh Tom! I'm so confused!" Shannon said, and then she giggled. "God, I want to try it!"

There was a quiet knock on the bedroom door, and I blinked; I'd been a half second from standing up and going to get JR. "Go away!" Shannon called out, but the knock came again.

"Please, Shannon, I need to talk to Tom," that was Elizabeth.

Shannon opened her mouth to say something, and I reached up and lightly laid my finger on her lips. Shannon blinked, looking daggers at me now. I got up and went towards the door; Shannon pulled the covers up on the bed, and crawled under them. At a guess, Shannon hadn't liked the weekend nudist binge as much as Mom thought everyone had.

I went to the door and opened it, just a bit. Elizabeth looked at me, a pale and drawn expression on her face. "Jennifer says if I have a problem, I should talk to you. If anyone can help, you can."

I nodded, and Elizabeth looked past me, to Shannon. "I'm so sorry, Shannon."

Shannon raised her bird finger, and as I had a second before, I realized that Shannon and her sister were nowhere as close as JR and I were, even before last week. I wanted to run back and hug Shannon and tell her I loved her, but I needed to see what was bothering Elizabeth.

Another epiphany. I was one person; keeping one other person happy and satisfied was nearly a full time task. How many women/girls was I dealing with now? Almost ten? How do you spell prescription for failure?

"Please talk to me," Elizabeth pleaded.

I consigned myself to the fates, and stepped through the door, closing it behind me. Why on earth would Shannon give me the time of day after this? What would happen if I sent JR in there to cheer her up? I saw JR standing a few feet away in the living room. I could do that; Shannon had all but said that's what she wanted. But the fact was, she hadn't said it.

"What do you want, Elizabeth?" I asked softly, not really wanting to think about what would happen if I talked to JR about Shannon.

"Could we walk? I feel odd, weird, antsy," she said softly.

I resisted the temptation to smile. Two walks with my dad, one with Sue Ellen. Why not another? Odds were, Elizabeth wasn't going to threaten to tear my clothes off and do it there in the street.

"Sure." I could see that something was upsetting Elizabeth; I hoped it wasn't Jenny.

We went outside, and Elizabeth stood for a second on their porch, looking around. "I know you're going to think I'm strange, weird," Elizabeth said, "but I'm not."

"I don't think you're strange or weird," I told her.

"I've come out this door ever since I can remember when I was little." She looked around as if seeing it for the last time; at that thought, it was me who shivered. "I can't ever remember feeling like this." She started walking and I followed along.

"From when I was little, I knew when Dad was going to come home. I'd be standing at the door, just before he'd pull up in the driveway. If he came to my room, I'd be at the door, waiting for him. I knew. I always knew."

She turned towards the main street ahead. "The other day," she continued, walking briskly, "you asked us if any of us knew why Dad left. I didn't answer because I didn't know why Dad left, but yet..." She shook her head.

"Last year, the phone started ringing off the hook. Boys calling Shannon, after she'd been out with Roger."

"She told me about that."

"She didn't tell you about Dad, I bet," Elizabeth said, but without heat. "He got mad; not just a little mad, but storming, raging mad. He would yell and scream at the boys, and still the phone calls came. He changed our phone number and for a few weeks the calls stopped, then they started up again."

"Shannon had given our phone number to a girl in one of her classes, they had a project they had to work on together. That girl gave it to someone else, pretty soon everyone had it again."

"I didn't know when Dad was coming home any more. It was

like a blank wall where before, there had been something I knew. It frustrated me; I got angry with Shannon too, it all seemed like her fault. Mom tried to keep everyone from killing each other. I love my Mom more than anyone else in the world." She stopped talking and looked at me. "Weird, huh?"

"Well, weird in the sense it's not something I've heard a real live person talk about; read it sometimes in books, though."

She smiled slightly. "This afternoon; it's like I can feel something from Dad again. Except," she frowned, "it doesn't make sense."

She was silent for a few moments; we had reached the main street, and she turned right on it and we walked along the busy street. "Now I feel like there's someplace I have to go, someplace I have to be. I feel scared, I feel like I'm constricted; I feel all hot and sweaty, even sitting down at home, where it's cool." She shook her head. "I think I'm going crazy."

"I think maybe you've had too much, too fast." I waved behind us, towards her house. "I think I've done too much, too fast. I don't think any of us, particularly me, has thought enough lately about what we're doing."

Elizabeth made a frustrated sound. "I really don't think this has anything to do with that. This is about my dad and me. Dad wasn't the nicest or easiest person to get along with. He and Mom had been drifting apart for as long as I can remember. He and Shannon never liked each other, and after last fall, he was just plain mean to her; screaming and shouting at her, for anything wrong, anything at all.

"But he and I..." She shook her head. "I think I was the only one he liked, and then not a lot. I feel so strange right now."

Elizabeth stopped walking, had a very odd expression on her face. "I'm so scared." Her voice was low, almost inaudible. "I want to run, and I can't. Oh God! Oh no! Please, no! Don't! Please! I'm sorry!" She screamed then, grabbing her chest with both hands.

The scream was loud enough to hurt my ears; I caught the

motion as she simply crumpled. I tried to catch her, but Elizabeth went straight down to the sidewalk, moaning. "Oh God! It hurts! It hurts! Please God! I don't want it to hurt! Oh God! What..."

I was leaning over Elizabeth, heard her breathing catch. Then her chest stopped moving, her body wilted like I'd never seen before except in a cartoon.

I had no idea where they came from, but tears were streaming down my face, as I leaned over, trying to remember the CPR lessons from last year. I pressed down on her chest; felt nothing, no pulse. No lift of her chest. I pressed down, again, hard. Again. Harder, frantic. I leaned down, breathing into her. More chest presses; breath, press, breath, press.

The only thing in my universe was Elizabeth, lying there on the sidewalk. It took one of the firemen physically pulling me away, before I could stop. Even then, I wanted to go to her. "You did good, son!" a voice told me. "Now let us take over. Please, relax. Take a breather."

I tried to focus, but all I saw was Elizabeth, pale, limp and unmoving on the sidewalk, a ghastly blue pallor to her skin. Two men and a woman were attaching things to her, working swiftly, efficiently. I felt a hand touch my sleeve, and I turned to look.

My breath was racing, I felt like I'd run a million miles.

An older woman, in her sixties or maybe even older, stood a few feet away from us, staring at me as if I was a ghost. "Ten years ago, I was walking with my husband on the beach," she told me. "He died of a heart attack, one second alive; the next... well, maybe if I'd known CPR he wouldn't have died. But he did." Her eyes went to Elizabeth. "I saw her, it was just like Ralph. I called 911." She leaned close, kissed me on the cheek.

"I wish you'd have been there, when it happened to my Ralph. There's no quit in you, none."

A policeman came up to me. "Are you her brother?" I shook my head.

"She lives just down there." I said pointing; praying that

someone was still dressed to answer the knock on the door. I saw the woman who'd spoken to me had a cell phone in her hand.

"Please," I said to her, "let me call her mom, her sister."

The woman nodded, so did the policeman. I called Dad's number; I told him, and he said he'd tell Mary. "What hospital?" He asked, so I asked it myself.

"St Joe's." One of the EMTs told me.

I repeated that, then called Shannon. It took forever for someone to come to the phone, but finally it was Shannon. "Shannon, Elizabeth collapsed. They think it's a heart attack. Have JR call Mom, she'll come and get you. They are going to take her to St. Joseph's." I hung up before Shannon had time to do more than sputter in shock.

I handed the phone back to the woman, and thanked her. She smiled at me. "What's your name, young man?"

"Tom Ferguson, ma'am. Thanks for helping, for calling 911."

She smiled at me. "You don't have to thank me, Tom Ferguson." She waved at Elizabeth, who was no longer blue, but pink again. They had her on oxygen; I could see Elizabeth's chest rise and fall. When I saw that, I felt like I was floating. "She needs to thank you, her parents need to thank you."

I nodded, simply mesmerized by the vision of Elizabeth breathing. I took a deep breath, held it. Swallowed.

I turned to the policeman. "Can I ride with her to the hospital?"

"If you were family, no," one of the firemen standing next to me said. "If you were the President of the United States -- still wouldn't happen." He was different than the others, black pants, white shirt and tie.

One of the policemen smiled. "I'm going that way." There were chuckles from the assembled emergency workers.

I looked the boss fireman right in the eye. "Thanks,

thanks for coming, for helping."

"Our job." He nodded to Elizabeth, now being loaded on a flat board, lifted up to a stretcher. "You did your job, too." I saw him look at me closer. "Saw you on TV earlier." The policeman sharpened his interest in me. "You're having a good week."

"TV?" The policeman asked. The fireman looked at me, saw I wasn't going to speak.

"You remember the dramatic rescue of the rape victim, Monday?" The fireman asked. The policeman nodded. "That was this young man."

I shook my head. "I keep saying it, I didn't do anything. I didn't even know there was someone in trouble. The detectives asked me if I knew where they could look for Sam Reese. I gave him two names and one address. You people," I gestured at the policeman, "did the rescuing, not me."

The policeman snorted in derision. "Guy, do you know how many kids your age give us the time of day?" I remembered Janey Sussman's comment about giving them the wrong time of day, and the finger as well.

I shrugged. Was it really that big of a deal? I didn't do anything, not really. Tell a policeman where a scum bag like Sam Reese might be? Oh, like that had taken any thought! Help Elizabeth when her heart stopped? Like what was I supposed to do? Stand there? Kiss her goodbye? Not fucking likely! I lifted my chin. "Do it all again, in a millisecond," I said under my breath.

The ambulance doors closed, they edged out into the traffic. More policemen were there, holding up cars. There were a lot of people, I thought, having to wait. Tough shit! That was my friend, Elizabeth, going to the hospital! Where, God willing, she'd live.

The policeman waved at a patrol car. "If you'd like a ride." I nodded, and he started walking towards it.

I turned to the older woman. "What's your name?" I asked her.



"Edith Hall." She gestured at a house there on the street. "I was in the yard, watering my flowers when I saw her go down."

"Thanks for what you did, Edith," I told her, and then followed after the policeman. It felt right and good.

I was a little surprised when I was shown the back seat. I looked him in the eye. "Am I in trouble?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, but it's policy, like riding in the back of ambulances." He waved after the ambulance, now turning south at the next big intersection. "I am going to have to ask you some questions."

I looked at the little plate on his uniform blouse. "J Moss," I said, reading from it.

"Joe." He got in and we started forwards. "And you're Tom Ferguson?"

"Yes. I talked to a Detective Harris the other day, and Eleanor Johannsen from CSD," I told him. "So you can compare notes."

He grinned. "What is the young woman's name?"

"Elizabeth Leary. Her mom works at the same place as my dad, our families are friends. I called my dad and he's going to tell Mary, Elizabeth's mother. This afternoon I brought Elizabeth and her sister home after school. Along with my sister and Sam Reese's sister, Jennifer. She's staying with us, with my family. I talked to my mom when we got to the Leary's; she told me that there were a lot of reporters camped out at our house, that we should stay where we were, and that later we'd all go out to dinner together, then go home late.

"Elizabeth said she was feeling funny. Antsy, weird." I sighed, "I swear, I had no idea she was about to have a heart attack. She was talking about her dad when it happened. He deserted them last weekend." If Elizabeth wanted to tell them the particulars of the conversation, that would be up to her. I didn't think it was germane.

"How old is she?"

"Fourteen, I think."

"Well, fourteen isn't considered to be in the heart attack risk zone," he said dryly. "But in fact, heart attacks can happen to anyone, any time. My cousin's baby boy had one, and he was just days old."

"It scared me more than I've ever been scared before," I told him honestly.

Officer Moss nodded. "When I was a rookie, at my first TA -- There was a guy, all broken and bleeding; calling for his mom." He shook his head. "We did what we could, but he died there at the scene."

"My partner talked to me for hours, later. I was thinking about giving it up. 'We can't save all of them,' he told me, 'but now and then, we save one. And that's why we're here, for the ones we can help.'" The policeman was silent. "It's not easy; it's never easy."

I was silent for a while, and then we were at the hospital. Officer Moss sat with me, asking more questions, finally when Mary and Dad came, left to ask Mary questions. The policeman didn't ask her very many questions, and then he came back and shook my hand before he left.

Mary had vanished into the bowels of the hospital; Dad stood next to me, looking around. "What happened?" he asked softly.

I explained it as best as I could; I didn't go into what Elizabeth had said about the feelings about her father to him, either.

Then Shannon and the others were there with Mom; I went over it again.

We sat patiently, but nervously waiting for something to happen. After about an hour, Mary came out and saw us. She walked over to me, hugged me more tightly than I'd ever been hugged before. "Thank you for my daughter," she said, stepping back.

Mom reached out, and put her hand on Mary's shoulder. "Tom said something about her heart."

Mary nodded, looking at me. "Elizabeth's had a heart attack, her heart stopped. She stopped breathing. Tom gave her CPR until the EMTs got there. Brought her back from the dead. I don't even know how to say the words to you, Tom. Thank you, dear God, I thank you so much..."

She smiled at Mom. "Elizabeth is resting, the doctors tell me her heart is returning to a normal rhythm. They don't yet know for sure what caused it, they are going to have to keep her here for a couple of days, to check her out.

"They let me see her for a few minutes; she's pretty stressed out," Mary sighed. "The first thing she told me was that Bill's dead." Mary shook her head. "Like that matters any more."

"It does to Elizabeth," I said quietly. "That's what she was talking about, just before it happened." Did I really want to tell everyone about this? I decided, no. "Mary, I promise you, when we have a minute, I'll tell you about it. But not here, not now."

As I said that, I saw someone come out of the elevator. The woman from the TV station, her cameraman in tow. She should make him wear chains, I thought. She was that sort of person.

She marched right up to me. "Imagine my surprise, hearing your name again today, on the police scanner, Mr. Ferguson."

I looked at her, contemplated drowning kittens. Decided that I was not now, nor was I ever going to be able to drown a kitten. Or step on a bug. On the other hand, I had absolutely no compunction about teasing her.

"I know I should remember your name," I spoke to her with a straight face. "I don't." I saw the look on the woman's face, slightly startled. I'd forgotten her already?

"Melinda Carter, KPHO," she said, preening slightly. "I understand you performed CPR on a girl this afternoon; saved her life."

I saw the camera was on me. "You should talk to Edith Hall," I said quietly, "the woman who called 911 when she saw Elizabeth was in trouble. To the firemen and EMTs who came to help, who did their jobs, got Elizabeth to the hospital, still

alive. Officer Joe Moss, Phoenix Police, who is doing the investigation."

"Investigation?" The woman perked up, interested.

"Certainly," I said with equanimity. "When someone collapses on the street, there is a need to make sure what happened." I nodded to the others standing there. "Right now, Mary Leary is just getting used to the fact that her daughter nearly died this afternoon. Maybe in a day or two, she'd be willing to talk to you. I too, would be willing to talk to you, at length about events. But not now."

"Please," Mom added.

The woman looked at Mom. I saw a slight change in the reporter's eyes, saw her eyes move down Mom's body. I stifled a giggle. Like that, are you? I met the reporter's eyes with mine. I swear, I saw her mentally blush.

"I'll get back to you," the woman said, turned away, going back to the elevator.

"Please and thank you aren't her long suit," Dad said crossly.

Mom smiled slightly. "Don't worry dear, I think I can deal with it."

I grinned. So, Mom had noticed too! I wondered if anyone else had?

Mom turned business-like. "Dave, I want you to take the kids out for a bite of dinner, then take Shannon to her place. Shannon, get some things for Elizabeth, including a few good books; some things for yourself. Come back here. Later, Dave will take the girls over to Kim's; I talked to her and she has a spare bedroom you can use. There's always room for Joanna and Jennifer. Tom can fetch his car from Mary's and drive home. Tomorrow..." She sighed, "Mary's too new at her job to miss much, no matter how serious the need."

"I'll take care of it," Dad said. "No one will say anything, don't worry about it, Mary. Take as long as you need."

Mom nodded. "Now clear out of here, get something to eat. I'll stay with Mary."

We ate in silence at a small restaurant, not far from the hospital. Afterwards, Dad drove everyone to Mary's house. Shannon went inside to get things for Elizabeth; I got into my car and headed home after hugs from everyone.

At home, there was a strange car in the driveway; I contemplated that. Who was it this time? Another reporter, determined to get a story? I sighed, parked on the street, so I didn't block them in the driveway.

I walked towards the front door of the house; no one got out of the car. It was dark; I couldn't see anyone sitting in it. I contemplated Sam Reese and Roger. What if they were out? Dad had said there was going to be a bail hearing today; things had gotten a little busy, I hadn't heard the result. I gulped, then decided that before I panicked, I should check out the car.

I walked towards it, finally looked inside. I hadn't seen anyone inside for the simple reason that whoever it was, was slumped across the front seat. A mental vision of Elizabeth crashing to the sidewalk was forever burned into my mind; this looked like a girl. I opened the door; the raw smell of booze washed out, and I almost choked.

I reached down, shook the dark form on the seat. Then again.

She sat up; Gloria Rodriguez, from school. I saw her eyes widen, it looked like she was going to faint. Instead, she hastily got out of the other side of the car and was sick on the neighbor's roses. After what seemed like an eternity of retching, she stood back up, noticeably wobbly.

"Oh, I feel ever so much better now," her voice was slurred and she looked like she was about to be sick again. She looked at the car, reached out and slammed the door shut on her side.

"Invite me in," she told me, waving at our house.

I stared at her. "Why?" I asked.

"Pretend I'm a fucking vampire," she said, angrily. "I'd like a chance to wash my face, clean some of this shit out of my

mouth. God, I'd kill for a shower." She waved at the house.  
"Invite me in."

I contemplated just how much I wanted more complications.  
Not! "Are you a vampire?" I said, thinking I was kidding.

"Don't be stupid!" She said, even more angry. "Sue Ellen said you were cool, that you'd make sure I was okay."

Gloria drew herself up. "Look, I'm not going to puke again, at least no time soon. Please."

I shrugged. I was crazy. I led her towards the door; found that I had to almost carry her through. "Show me the bathroom," Gloria demanded. The stairs were almost more than she could manage. The only way she did manage was to hang onto me for dear life.

When I got her to the bathroom, she was only barely conscious. She fumbled with the buttons on her blouse, couldn't manage them. "Too fuckin' drunk," she muttered, her words barely intelligible. "Fuckin' bastard son of a mother fuckin' bitch." She looked at me. "Cool, eh?"

I looked at her, clueless. I didn't feel very cool.

"Undress me," she told me. "Put me in the fuckin' shower. Turn it on, like cold as it will go."

I gritted my teeth; I'd undressed a few girls now, not quite the impossible task it would have been a few weeks before. I did it, with Gloria helping only a little. Her blouse, her bra, then shoes, jeans and panties. Then I had to help get her feet over the edge of the tub, and then I had to hold her upright while I turned on the water. I didn't use straight cold water, for one thing, I was getting as wet as she was.

After about fifteen minutes, I sensed a change in her. Gloria's eyes focused, and she looked around. "Thanks," her voice was clear and soft, the earlier slurring gone.

"No problem," I grinned. "I come home most nights and take a cold shower with a naked girl I barely know."

"Darryl got me drunk," she told me, meeting my eyes.  
"Stinking, ripping drunk. I thought it would be cool." Darryl

was one of the second string running backs; a guy who'd given Tony a verbal hard time. Darryl's ego was a lot bigger than his ability to catch passes and block.

She sniffed in derision. "Son of a bitch did a good job, too. Then he wanted to fuck me in the ass; one second I was sitting there in his room, next thing I'm face down on the bed, with him trying to get it in." She looked at me. "So I punched him. Left. Stole his car, drove here, after I talked to Sue Ellen."

"Why not go home?" I asked, thinking that would have solved many problems.

"I have a father, two brothers and two uncles who live within a few blocks. If they even got a hint that Darryl did something like that to me, they'd kill him. Literally." She waved at the water. "Enough."

I shut it off, and she stepped out of the tub. Gloria eyed me. "You've been cool; I don't want to push the envelope. I think I can dry myself."

I handed her a towel, turned and faced the door. I heard a low chuckle behind me. "Sue Ellen said, when you don't pay attention, you don't."

"You didn't want me to pay attention to you the other day at school," I said. "I doubt if you want me drooling on the floor, looking at you now."

There was a moment of silence. "You're right there," she murmured. "Instead, I saved myself for Darryl the Rat Bastard. Gosh, was that ever a good choice!"

I said coldly, "It was the one you made at the time with your best judgment."

"I fucked up," Gloria said with frustration. "And if any of the males in my family learn about it, Darryl will abruptly lose his balls, just before they beat his piss pot brains into jelly."

Gloria stopped talking and I put my two cents in. "Darryl," I said positively, "is a moron. The men in your family are only marginally better, for all that they profess

that they want to 'help.'" I hung air quotes around the last word.

There was silence behind me, and after a second when nothing happened, I turned and looked. Gloria was leaning against the wall, her eyes closed. She had, I thought, managed to get half dry.

I contemplated what next. The smart thing to do, what would the smart thing to do be? I eyed her. I'd look brain dead if I tried to pick her up and carry her, only to drop her because I wasn't strong enough; Gloria was a lot bigger than JR, more like Sue Ellen.

I walked over and touched her on the shoulder. Nothing happened. I shook her, just a bit. Nothing. I was afraid she was going to fall down, so I reached behind her, putting my arm under her shoulders. "Taking you to bed," I told her, as I led her out of the bathroom.

Gloria mumbled something, and then clear enough, "Yours?"

"Yes," I said simply. "No one will bother you, I promise. I'll be downstairs on the couch."

I got her into my room and managed to get her onto my desk chair. I hastily stripped my sheets, returned with new ones and made up the bed. Getting Gloria from the chair to the bed was more interesting; I did carry her because by then she was lightly snoring.

I tucked her in, turned off the light and went downstairs to make up the couch in the family room. I was still doing that when Dad came in. He stopped and watched, as I was finishing.

"I'm sure there is a simple, reasonable explanation why you plan on sleeping on the couch. Why there's a car I don't recognize blocking the driveway," he asked mildly.

"Yep!" I replied, "A girl I know from school is upstairs sleeping in my bed. Her boyfriend, now ex-boyfriend, got her drunk and then he wanted to get a little kinky. She can't go home like this, they'd go ballistic."

"And the car in the driveway?" I blinked. Gloria said she'd stolen it! Didn't need that!



"I'll go move it," I told him.

The phone rang, and Dad picked it up, expecting, I think, to hear from Mom or Mary. Instead, he held it out for me. "For you, another girl."

I grimaced, and took it.

"Tom, this is Janey."

"Hello, Janey," I said mildly. I glanced at the clock, nearly ten on a school night. Not quite out of the bounds of normal. Not that she'd ever called me before.

"Sue Ellen told me that she spoke to Gloria, that Gloria might be there."

"She's here, she's crashed; she was pretty blotto." Janey didn't need to know where Gloria was sleeping it off.

"Sue Ellen and I will come by in the morning, with some clothes and things. Is the car there?"

"Parked in the driveway."

"Could you move it to the street?" Janey asked, "Just a few houses away. I don't know if Darryl reported it stolen or not. Tony's trying to find out."

"I'll do that," I told her.

"I heard about your friend's sister," Janey said quietly.

"They think she's going to be okay," I told her.

"Good, that was cool, helping her. Dawn. Gloria."

"I'm still comfortable with a simple thank you," I told her.

"Well, thank you. Can I call tomorrow around 6 am?"

"Sure, I'm up before that," I told her.

"Good night, Tom." Janey hung up.

Later, I lay on the couch, running over what had happened today, the days before. I could only shake my head in wonder. Particularly a puzzlement, was how something that I'd done all my life until the last two weeks, sleeping by myself, was suddenly so difficult to do. I missed not having a warm body to snuggle up to. Eventually I slept.

Thursday, March 28, 2002

I woke up; for a moment I was confused. Where was I? Oh, on the couch in the family room. Why? Gloria is in my bed. Why wasn't I snuggled up behind her, my erection buried where it would make our day? Gloria not only wasn't interested, she'd threatened death and mayhem to the guy who tried.

I muttered to myself; all this and no morning sex! On top of that, all this talk about saving people just for the thanks was fine and wonderful, but having someone in the morning to talk to, to hug, to cuddle, to make love to -- was a whole lot better than waking alone.

Was I crying in my beer? Whining? I didn't think so, but I suspected it wouldn't take very much for it to be like that. I threw on a pair of jeans, went upstairs and peeked in my room. Gloria looked like she hadn't moved, lying on her back, still tucked in. I contemplated what I could do for her, decided that my getting a warm shower was about the best thing I could manage right then.

The phone rang while I was finishing dressing, having moved everything I needed downstairs to the family room. This time it was Sue Ellen. "Janey and I will come by in about a half hour with some things for Gloria. It's been a pretty long night."

"I looked out the window a while ago, the car's gone," I told her.

"Yeah, Tony called Darryl's mother, told her where it was. I told him not to be rude; I hope he was polite."

Me too, I mentally agreed. "When you and Janey come over, I could fix you some breakfast. Bacon and eggs, some hash browns," I told her.

"Gloria will probably be hungry, I'm starved," Sue Ellen

agreed. For a moment I heard nothing; she'd put her hand over the phone. "Yeah, Janey says she's starved too. Long, long night..." I laughed, and Sue Ellen did too. "I hope your mom doesn't mind the company," Sue Ellen concluded.

"Ah," there was no way they weren't going to notice. "Actually, Mom stayed at the hospital last night with Mary and Elizabeth. JR and Jenny are over at Kim's. Just my dad and I are home."

There was a silence on the other end. "Is he going to say anything?" she asked softly.

"Not if I ask him not to," I told her.

"Well, we'll be by in half an hour. Is Gloria awake yet?"

"Not yet," I told her, "but I'll get her up now."

"Thanks, Tom," Sue Ellen said, and hung up.

I turned and saw Gloria standing, nude, in the door to the family room. "Morning," I said to her, trying to sound cheerful. I wondered how I could stand there and be so cool, not even have an erection; Gloria wasn't bad looking at all. Half grapefruit breasts that it seemed like most girls had.

"I'm glad you didn't say good morning," she said, making a face. "God, have you ever had a hang over?" I shook my head. "My first and last. I swear to Mary, Mother of Jesus, never, ever, again!" She put her hand to her head and pinched between her eyes.

"Can I get you something?" I asked, thinking she really should have a robe.

"I was wondering if I could use your washing machine, to run my things through, so I won't be ghastly at school."

"Janey and Sue Ellen will be here shortly with clothes and things for you."

She looked at me steadily, then ran her hand down across the thick mat of pubic hair between her legs. "I remember coming here, last night. I remember the shower." She continued to look at me. "I'd know if there was anything else."

"There's nothing else. I put you on the bed, you were out of it."

"Where is everyone?" She said, waving around. "Mother, sister, father, friend?"

"Dad's in the shower," I told her; I could hear the water running. "He's the only one here. No one else is home."

Gloria nodded. "No one can know why I came here," she said. "I think I remember telling you about it last night."

"You did. I won't tell, my Dad won't."

"Could I have another shower?" She asked, and I grinned.

"Yep!"

She giggled. "I'm making you uncomfortable, aren't I?"

"Not really," I told her.

"Liar!" She said with a laugh. "If I walked around like this at home, I'd be grounded for a million years, and probably would end up in a nunnery." She pointed up the steps. "Shower's that way, right?" She vanished, and I went to get some breakfast going.

Sue Ellen smiled at me, give me a little peck on the cheek, Janey was carrying a bag of things when they knocked on the door. "We stopped by Gloria's house," Sue Ellen told me, "We told them Gloria had been at a cheerleader's meeting and had fallen asleep."

"I don't think they believed us," Janey sighed, clearly frustrated.

"She's upstairs, in the shower," I told them. "Breakfast will be ready in ten minutes."

They went upstairs, and then Dad appeared. "I heard voices."

"Clothes for Gloria," I told him. "Sue Ellen and a friend stopped by. I told them I'd feed them breakfast."

He looked at me, shook his head and laughed. "Somehow, you always seem to have a roomful of girls to hand; lucky guy."

"I'm not sure it's as lucky as all of that," I told him. He gave me a sardonic smile.

The phone rang again, this time it was Mom. "Elizabeth is much better," she said. Dad pushed the speaker phone button just in time for me to hear her. "They say that if she continues to improve, and if the tests don't find anything, maybe she can come home tomorrow."

"Cool!" I said, and Dad agreed.

"How are you two doing?" Mom asked.

Dad laughed, "We'll talk about it later."

"Talk about what?" Mom said. Just then the three girls walked in and Mom could hear them. "Who's that?"

"Some of Tom's friends," Dad told her. "Later, ok?"

Mom laughed. "You didn't have an orgy while I was away, did you?"

"No, no orgy," I told her.

Sue Ellen stepped close. "Good morning Mrs. Ferguson, this is Sue Ellen. Tom was a perfect gentleman. He helped a friend of mine, and we appreciate it."

"Tom's been doing a lot of that lately," that was Mary's voice! "We all appreciate it."

"I think breakfast is almost ready," I told the room, trying not to blush.

"I talked to Kim a bit ago," Mom went on. "She's going to take the girls to school, even Shannon. You two worry about yourselves."

"You want me to bring you something?" Dad asked, "Either of you? Anything?"

There were two no's from the other end. "We're just sitting, talking," Mary said quietly. "It's been nice," a pause. "At least as nice as you can get in a hospital."

"You better get going, Tom," Mom told me. "Have a nice breakfast."

School was, well, school. A lot of kids had heard about Elizabeth, and the word seemed to be spreading fast. A lot of classmates, people who wouldn't normally say anything to me, said hello.

At lunch, I was all but dragged by Sue Ellen to the cheerleading table; a place normally off limits to anyone not on the squad. Not that I stayed there; Gloria asked me if I would walk with her.

"I'm better," she told me, as we walked out onto the school grounds. "I feel logy; but Sue Ellen gave me some Tylenol. That's helped." She paused, and then added. "You helped."

"Gloria, one day I'm going to need something. You know, like the Godfather did, in the movie. And I'll have a lot of friends I can turn to."

She glanced at me. "I never thought of it like that. No wonder the Godfather was so popular." She stopped and looked at me. "You've seen me naked."

"I saw you undressed," I told her. She smiled at the distinction.

"Would you like to go out on a date with me?" she asked out of the blue. "Sue Ellen says you have someone you're seeing. I don't want to get in the way, but I'd like to go out with you."

"We don't own each other," I told Gloria, hedging my answer; my standing with Shannon was iffy, and that was being optimistic. I looked Gloria in the eye. "Gloria, I don't think we have that much in common."

She looked down, no longer able to meet my eyes. "I'm sorry," her voice was soft and sad.

"Gloria," I said, touching her arm. She looked at me, and then looked away. "You don't have to be sorry."

"Sue Ellen and Janey are having a party Saturday night. I thought you might like to go." She smiled slightly, "Janey says it's going to be an orgy."

"Saturday, I'm supposed to be on my way to LA," I told her.

"Oh."

"Gloria, when I get back, would you like to see a movie with me?"

She met my eyes again; there was a hint of something there, maybe anger. Oh, clever of you Tom! She thinks it's because she offered to go to an orgy with me, and I'm having second thoughts about getting into her panties.

"I thought we weren't all that compatible?" Gloria asked.

I shook my head. "I said we didn't have much in common.

"Then I was thinking I've talked to you more in the last five minutes than all of the times before in my life, and maybe I haven't got a clue what I'm talking about; I have no idea what you are like."

"Thank you," she laughed. "Of course, odds are I'm going to be totally grounded when I get home, and not be going to any parties or dates for the rest of my life."

I saw Shannon walking towards me, and I glanced at Gloria. This wasn't going to be easy.

Shannon stopped, looked at Gloria, then at me before Shannon spoke. "Elizabeth is probably coming home tomorrow. I won't need a ride tomorrow, I'm going to stay home for the day to be with her."

Gloria touched my arm. "Thanks for last night, Tom; for breakfast. Everything." She walked back towards the cheerleaders.

There was no doubt in my mind that Shannon was angry. "Yesterday you left me for Elizabeth. What's tonight?" She waved at the table where Gloria was sitting down. "Her?"

"No, not her. Her boyfriend got her drunk yesterday; she ended up on my doorstep. I let her sleep it off at our place." I waved a finger at Shannon. "I was just thinking how clueless I am about everything going on in my life right now."

"I see people like Gloria's pond scum boyfriend Darryl, Sam Reese, Roger, Keith -- they were born just like me, raised by their parents. Why are they the way they are? Why am I the way I am? Sam and Jenny were from the same family. Yet they are completely opposite people. Completely. I think I know things, then something happens, and I realize I don't know anything, not anything at all."

"You're upset with me because I left to talk to Elizabeth, who was desperate for advice. Because I helped Gloria. Why, Shannon? Because you want to marry me and live happily ever after?"

"Yes," she replied straightforwardly. "That's what I want. I don't like sharing that much. Not with Mom, not with Elizabeth, not with your sister. Not with Jennifer, not with any of them." Shannon waved towards the cheerleaders. "I'm just not into sharing. Particularly boyfriends."

I was silent for a moment, and then looked at her. "Shannon, I never wanted to hurt you or anyone else. I don't want to hurt you now. If nothing else, can we be friends?"

She laughed, shook her head. "Friends? How many girls are you friends with Tom, that you haven't made love to, or who aren't waiting in line?"

"You could always be the first," I said with a straight face.

Shannon's expression turned to a glare of anger, and then abruptly, she laughed. "I'm the one being an asshole, aren't I? No, you never wanted to hurt me; just wanted to love me; make love to me. The others aren't a surprise, you told me about them. I should be grateful, I guess." She held out her hand, and I took it. We shook. "Friends?"

"Friends."

She smiled, then, and it was nice. Very nice. "And thanks for my sister," Shannon told me.



"I'd like to go visit her, after school."

"Well, this morning, it was made very clear to me by Kim, was special. I'm back in need of a chauffeur after school. Tomorrow, I'm staying home with Elizabeth."

"Not a problem."

"See you after school."

She turned and left, and I stood for a moment on the school grounds, looking into the distance. What a weird life I was having! I remembered the old woman from yesterday, the one who called 911. Everyone I met, it seemed to me, was nice. It was the lurkers on the fringes, the Roger's and Sam's and Keith's that weren't. What would I have been like, if Tony and I hadn't been friends? A loner, I was sure. Like Sam and Roger and the rest. Not that pleasant a thought, not any more.

I heard someone behind me, turned and saw Janey. "Hello," I said, trying to cover up the fact that I was startled. Startled because for a second all I'd seen was where her legs came together. I had an instantaneous erection.

She waved towards the picnic table where everyone was congregated. "Gloria said you're going to be out of town for Spring Break."

I nodded and Janey went on. "That's too bad; I wanted to ask you personally to come to the party Sue Ellen and I are having Saturday night. Sunday morning."

I smiled. "Gloria said you were calling it an orgy."

"Would it bother you if it was?" she asked mildly.

"I explained that the other day," I told her. "If there's no coercion, then it's not a problem. Otherwise..." I spread my hands.

"Well, what I did was tell people it was Sue Ellen's and my party, with our friends, and that no one, absolutely no one was to tell anyone else they were invited unless it was the one person they wanted to invite themselves and who would be as cool about everything as the invited person is. One rule for the

party is suspended: You don't have to dance with whoever brought ya!"

"And the rules that aren't suspended?" I asked, curious.

"Oh, the usual cheerleader party rules. We don't smoke, drink or do drugs at parties, we don't get pregnant, and we don't spread disease. We have a good time, and no regrets the day after."

"Sounds like I should try harder," I said with a laugh, "to stay here over break."

"You're invited. It'll be at Sue Ellen's, starting 4 in the afternoon. She told me that any guest you want to bring, is fine with her."

Mary, I thought, is out of the question. Shannon? Nope. JR? Not hardly! Jenny? That was an interesting thought. Interesting.

"I'll try to come," I told her.

"Oh, you'll come, if you come," Janey said with a laugh. The bell rang, and we went to the afternoon classes.

Shannon and I drove over to the junior high, we picked up JR, Jenny and Penny; none of them wanted to go to the hospital, so I left them at Kim's and Shannon and I went on to park across the street from the hospital.

"I can't help being scared, just looking at it," Shannon said as we waited to cross the street.

"I've been in there twice before. Once to have my tonsils out, another time when I got hurt, playing baseball. Pain, both times. Not good memories," I told her, not comfortable either.

We went inside, found Mom and Mary sitting in Elizabeth's room. Elizabeth was asleep when we came in, but woke up almost at once. She yawned, smiled at me. She rubbed the front of her hospital gown. "Do you know how much it hurts to yawn?"

I shook my head, not sure what she meant. Worse, my damn eyes were staring at the front of her hospital gown, wondering what her breasts looked like.

"They call it the gift of life," Mary said quietly. "People who have CPR or worse, those defibrillation paddles... those actually leave permanent scars, most of the time."

"I have bruises," Elizabeth agreed. "But you are forgiven, Tom."

"Very forgiven," Mary added.

"I don't remember much," I admitted. "I heard Elizabeth scream, saw her fall." I shook my head. "The next thing I knew a fireman was trying to get me to let them do it." I met Elizabeth's eyes. "I'm glad you're okay."

Elizabeth nodded.

Then there was a knock on the door, and the world turned upside down one more time.

Mom went to it, and two men I recognized at once as policemen, were there. "Mary O'Leary?" One of them asked.

Mary stood up. "I'm Mary Leary," she corrected him.

"Could we talk to you for a minute please?" the other said, more politely, and added. "Outside, if you don't mind?"

Mary got up, and I saw Mom's eyes go to Elizabeth and Shannon. I stood up, and followed two steps behind Mary.

"This is private, young man," the surly cop said.

"Please," the other added.

"I'm a friend of Mary's," I told them bluntly. "If you have something to say or ask, let's get on with it."

"This isn't pretty." The surly cop glowered at me.

"So, why don't you get started?" I replied, amazed at my response. Why had I been helpful to the detective the other day? To Officer Moss yesterday? And today I wanted to spit in the face of this surly cop?

"This morning about 6 am a man fishing on Saguaro Lake saw

a woman dump some trash bags into the lake. Four or five large black ones." Surly stopped and looked at Mary coldly.

"I was here all night, my daughter had a heart attack yesterday afternoon."

"Do you know a Yolanda Menendez, Mrs. Leary?" The polite one asked.

"I've never heard the name before, no," Mary answered.

"She worked with your husband," Surly informed Mary, taking the tag from the other policeman. "The fisherman called the Forest Service, they called the Sheriff. Dumping is a problem at the lake."

He looked at Mary, and then said it. "On examination, the bags contained the dismembered remains of your husband, William Leary."

"Preliminary autopsy results show that he died yesterday afternoon around 4 pm," the polite one added.

I very nearly had a heart attack of my own.

"Where were you?" Surly asked Mary.

"At work all day," Mary said, her face now deathly pale. "Until Tom called his father to tell me about Elizabeth, a little after four yesterday afternoon."

I'd been about to blurt out what Elizabeth had said yesterday; I remembered Mary saying Elizabeth was sure her father was dead when she recovered last night. I bit my lip, said nothing; not hard to do. My mind was racing; it took a special effort to keep my jaw off the floor. Odd prickles marched not only up and down my spine, but literally from my toes all the way to my scalp.

"Ever since then, I've been here," Mary said, realizing that they were thinking she was the woman.

"This woman, Yolanda Menendez," Surly spoke again, "Were you aware your husband was having an affair with her?"

Mary shook her head. "Were you having any affairs, Mrs.

Leary?" asked Polite.

"No. I reported my husband missing on Monday." I wanted to cheer, because Mary looked right at Surly. "Am I suspected of anything?"

"No," was Polite's reply. "This Menendez woman; this is the third time she's run off with someone's husband after he cleaned out the family savings; she reappears and the husband doesn't. Except for your husband." He made a deprecating gesture. "We have to ask these questions; they're routine. So we don't overlook something."

"Perhaps then," Dad said from behind me, "if you don't think Mary has done anything, you can let her get back to her daughter, who nearly died yesterday. If you have any substantive questions, you can arrange another interview through her lawyer." He handed them a business card, which Surly took.

"And you are who?" Polite asked.

"David Ferguson," Dad told the detective, "a friend of the family."

Surly smiled. "Odd, his coworkers said the Learys have no friends."

"William Leary, perhaps so. Not Mary. Nor Shannon or Elizabeth," Dad said without heat. He waved at the card. "I know what giving you that card means, legally. If you would like, I will have her say the words."

"You a lawyer?" Surly snarled.

"No, an engineer. I employ lawyers, just as Mary Leary does." Dad turned to Mary. "Just say the magic words: I have nothing further to say until my attorney is present."

Mary parroted the words, and the two police detectives turned and walked away without another word.

"I'm sorry, Mary," Dad said softly.

Mary gave an abject laugh. "A week ago, I loved him. Five days ago, I wish I'd never met him. Now all I feel is numb." She looked at Dad, at me. "And now I have such friends!"

Friends like I never imagined! I think, in spite of everything, the luckiest thing in the world that ever happened to us was Tom." She smiled at me, and I smiled back.

"Tom, please go and ask your mom to come out. Give Mary a chance to tell Shannon and Elizabeth," Dad said quietly to me.

"Elizabeth already knows," I murmured. "I think that if we were to check, he was stabbed in the heart after being taken out into the desert in the trunk of a car, tied up. That's what happened to Elizabeth; it wasn't her heart that stopped, but her father's."

They both looked at me, and I held their eyes. "That's too strange," Dad said, obviously unsure.

"I thought she was just imagining things," Mary said quietly. "My God!" She looked, I thought, as pale as I felt.

I went inside, beckoned Mom to come out, she did and Mary went in. "What?" Mom asked us.

"They found Mary's husband's body," I said, editing out the graphic details. "He's been murdered. The woman he ran away with, most likely."

There was silence in the hallway, before Mom sighed. "Well, I think this is the final straw for the trip to LA. Mary has been through hell this week; so has Jennifer." Mom shook her head. "We need to do some serious de-stressing; LA probably wouldn't work."

"Probably not," Dad said. "Let me see what I can do." He paused, "And speaking of things I can do; Fallon told me today that he was going to terminate Mary for attendance. I told him not to be daft; this was a temporary thing that could happen to anyone. He got on his high horse, and was going to insist."

Dad smiled weakly. "This whole thing with the company was a stupid idea; I should never have talked myself into it. Fallon is a moron, who shouldn't be allowed to run a hot dog stand, much less an engineering firm. I told Herb Roosevelt that I was invoking the 'not so silent partner' clause of the contract. And that I wanted to replace Fallon. I meant it one way, he took it another. I'm Fallon's replacement."

Mom laughed, shaking her head. "I never thought you'd be able to endure it for this long. Just what you need: more responsibilities."

"I'll manage. But I'm now the Executive Vice President for Engineering Operations and Fallon's looking for a new job."

Shannon came out and told us Mary wanted us back. Mary put her hand around Shannon's shoulder, held Elizabeth's hand. "I want you all to know, we couldn't have faced this without you," Mary said, talking to all of us.

"Tom," Elizabeth spoke to me, and I went over to her hospital bed. She took my hand, and joined it with Mary's. "Yesterday, you understood. You didn't think I was a freak; too weird."

"No, I didn't think you were tooooo weird," I said with a laugh, drawing out the one word, anything to lighten the mood. "Just enough."

Elizabeth smiled slightly. "Shannon says you and she are going to be friends." I nodded. "Can I be your friend too?" Elizabeth asked.

"You have always been a friend," I told her. "Ever since I met you." She nodded, and then a doctor came in, some nurses. "More tests," Elizabeth grumbled.

Out in the hallway, we stood together. Mom and Dad, Mary, Shannon and myself. "I'm sorry I'm so bossy, Mary," Mom said, apologizing. Mary just shook her head. "Dave, take Mary and Shannon to their house. Let them get cleaned up, have something to eat, maybe take a nap. Along about eight, Dave will bring Mary back here. When you get here, Tom and I will go home. I'll talk to Kim; maybe Shannon can stay there again."

"I'll be fine by myself," Shannon said.

"What about Roger and Sam and Keith?" I asked, "Does anyone know what happened to them?" I didn't want any of my friends running into those clowns, without help close to hand.

Dad smiled. "Threw the book at them, million dollar bail on Sam, half a million on Keith and Roger. Maybe they'll have it by the weekend, they didn't have it today."

Dad left with Mary and Shannon, Mom and I waited outside Elizabeth's room, until they were done poking and prodding. A couple of times Mom made calls on her cell phone; it was, I thought, a lot more convenient than a pay phone.

I waved at her purse when she sat down after talking to her brother. "I think JR and I ought to have cell phones. Jenny, too."

I was expecting resistance; instead, I got a nod. "That's a good idea. A family plan isn't that expensive. I'll talk to Dave. Probably next week." She looked at me fondly.

"Dave said you had a friend over last night."

I shook my head. "She's a girl I know, just a little," I explained in more detail and Mom nodded.

"You did good, Tom."

"She asked me out on a date. Saturday; I told her I couldn't because we were going to LA."

"Well, we're not going to LA. Maybe LA can come to us; their spring break is two weeks from now. We're still going to go someplace, just local. I asked Craig about it."

"Going someplace?" I asked, curious.

"Crystal's," Mom said, a bed and breakfast we had a part interest in, up in the hills near Sedona. A very pretty spot. "Crystal's is really too far, but I talked to her a bit ago. She says they make reservation swaps all the time, between other places like hers. There's one out near Pinnacle Peak that could put us up for a week or so.

"Kim says she still wants to go to LA." Mom heaved a sigh. "I told her to go, not to worry about us."

We went back into Elizabeth's room after a bit, and she and I talked about all kinds of things; she really was smart. A lot smarter than me, and her interests ranged all over the place. She was animated and interested, right up until around seven when she smiled and said she was falling asleep. A second later, she was out like a light bulb.



An hour later Dad was back with Mary. We talked a bit, then Mom and I went across the street and got in my car; the drive home was silent.

That didn't last past pulling into the driveway. I saw Melinda Carter, the newswoman, get out of a car and walk up to us. I was surprised, looking around for her cameraman. Evidently she didn't keep him chained up all of the time after all.

"Evening Mrs. Ferguson, Tom," she said when we stopped for her.

"No camera tonight?" I asked, and she shrugged.

"No. I think, as a story, you're on your last legs. Unless you save someone else." She shook her head. "My editor thinks you and I are cooking this up between us for publicity."

Mom bristled. "He thinks you're faking rapes, beatings, heart attacks and murder for publicity?"

Melinda's eyes narrowed. "Murder?" She swung around and looked at me. "Who got murdered?"

"William Leary, the husband of Mary Leary, father of Shannon and Elizabeth," I explained to her.

Melinda snorted. "No wonder I was told to take the afternoon off." She faced Mom directly. "Having a little time on my hands got me to thinking."

Mom smiled then, and I remembered the interplay between the two women. "Would you like to come in, Melinda? And my name is Ellen, by the way."

I grinned to myself; Mom had said we were going to spend Friday night together, evidently she was holding to the schedule.

Inside, standing in the family room, Melinda was talking to me, but her eyes were on Mom. "I've been thinking it was time for a change of scenery. Phoenix is a big market, not many larger. But San Diego is almost the same size."

I nodded; I'd read it somewhere in the papers last fall. "Phoenix passed San Diego in population just last year."

Melinda nodded, looking at Mom.

Mom reached out and touched her arm. "We are a very private family. What happens inside these walls stays here."

Melinda nodded. I wasn't sure how they had ended up face to face, now a few inches apart, when a moment before they'd been much further away from each other. I was just a little curious about who was seducing who here, then I realized that, in that way, I was a lot like Mom; it was mutual or it didn't work.

For a second, I was distracted, remembering things. Jenny reaching out for Mom; the two of them going off. I hadn't seen Mom and Mary when they went off together on Sunday; I was suddenly sure it hadn't been Mom tugging Mary's hand. Another epiphany, I thought; much more mutual than I had thought. Is it possible to learn something from someone where you never ever talk about it? Never knew to ask? Never saw it demonstrated?

Here and now, Mom and Melinda kissed, a seriously hot kiss, even if it started out mild and sweet. I had a raging hard on; so hard that I had to reach down and shift things around.

Melinda pulled back a bit, looking at Mom, but this time talking to me. "No one believes it, but reporters do have rules and a code of conduct that you only break if you want to crash and burn. One of the most important rules is that you never sleep with someone you report on. Someone close to the story; that's different. But when you do that, best if you hand off the story to someone else. Well, this story has moved on. I'm moving on. No harm, no foul."

She kissed Mom again, this time their hands were ranging up and down each other's backs.

I expected to get sent from the room, then I was wondering if I was supposed to make that decision myself. Then Mom brought up her hands between them, caressing both of Melinda's breasts at once. The kiss had been passionate, now Melinda was going full bore; mouth wide open to get her tongue deep into Mom's mouth.

I took a deep breath. If I was a woman making love to another woman, would I want someone, a guy, standing a few feet away, watching? Jerking off like I so much wanted to? I snorted quietly. Not! Another epiphany. What had I said the other day to Shannon about watching? Maybe if that was something I explicitly knew was okay with all parties; now I decided that when in doubt, leave.

I turned and went up the steps, stopping only at the top for one last look. Mom had Melinda's blouse undone, her bra unhooked. Melinda's breasts were the most pendulous I'd seen unbound, slumping across her chest. I watched Mom lean down, heft one in her hand and feed the nipple into her own mouth.

I stared for another second, then finished my trip upstairs. I decided that sex is sex. If you wanted to make love to someone, things like minor imperfections weren't important. I went down the hall to my room, flipped on the light.

Jenny smiled at me from the bed. "I ran away again," she said with a smile. "Joanna and I both decided we'd rather sleep here tonight. I thought you might be lonely."

I undressed, and she saw my erection. "You are lonely!" She giggled, and held the covers up, so that I could see that she was nude. "Me too."

I slid under the covers, hugged her to me. "I'm so glad Elizabeth is going to be okay," Jenny whispered, her hand on mine.

"Me too. I think now, maybe, we'll all be okay."

Jenny reached between us, finding my erection easily. "Rub this on me, like you did the other day," she asked softly.

I obliged, rolling over on my back, and I started rubbing my erection along her clit. Jenny was hovering over me on all fours, a look of blissful pleasure on her face. She gave a little sigh, and opened her eyes and smiled at me. "Are you close?" she asked, and I nodded. This time it was Jenny's fingers that took over the rubbing. She moved my erection a little harder against her clit, not so hard across the entrance to her vagina.

On one of the trips from her clit down her pussy lips, to her vaginal hole, she pushed me further, and I felt the tip of my cock brush that other hole. When she rubbed it across there again, I knew it was deliberate. I spasmed, shooting my load up her backside.

Jenny giggled. "You liked that."

"It was unexpected," I said. I didn't shoot early often, I wondered if there was a common thread? I considered that, not what had just happened.

"Tom?" Jenny asked after a second. I realized her fingers were still on my perpetual boner, still rubbing it over the same spot, now greatly lubricated. "If I want you there, does it make me a pervert?"

"No," I told her simply, "it doesn't. A pervert is someone who gratifies themselves at the expense of others."

Jenny nodded, leaned down and kissed me, moving my turgid member away from where it had been. "If I wanted you that way?" She asked, "Would you?"

I'd done it accidentally with Penny; if asked then I'd probably have said no way. "You would have to be very, very sure," I told her.

"Scoot over a little," she said in a matter of fact tone of voice. So I did. Jenny moved, lying now next to me on her stomach. "Please, Tom, I want to try it."

I blinked, wondering where she had gotten the idea. Kim, Penny or JR I thought. Which?

I moved to straddle her legs, looking down at the target area; Jenny obligingly pulled her cheeks apart, so I could see what she wanted clearly. I wasn't certain if I was repelled or attracted; of course my erection didn't care. I lowered myself, aiming for the red rosebud, slid the tip across the spot, and then slowly pressed down.

I remembered it hadn't been as easy to enter with Penny; it was true for Jenny as well. Still, my prick had no conscience and my judgment centers were fried; I pressed on, going slow even so.

Eventually, I was deep inside her, until I felt her ass cheeks against my groin. That, I decided on the spot, was the sexiest thing I'd ever felt in my life. I began to move, and Jenny began to buck her hips against me, moaning lightly into her pillow. If I hadn't just spent myself, I doubt if I could have held back for even a minute; the feeling of her buns pressing against me was wild, exciting. Jenny began to pant, quickly to the Oohhhh! Aaaahhhh! stage of her arousal. I smiled at the familiar sounds, then shot off.

Jenny twitched, "Don't stop! Not yet, Tom! I'm so close!" It was hard, but then, I was too. I managed to keep going for another few seconds, then Jenny clamped her legs together and squeezed her cheeks; in spite of the fact I'd shot off twice in ten minutes, I twitched and added another dribble to the mix.

I collapsed down against her, glad that Jenny wasn't JR, because I'd have mushed JR. "Mmmmm," Jenny murmured. "Nice?"

"Yes," I said simply, reveling yet again at the feel of her ass cheeks against my groin.

"We have to clean up," she said, pragmatically. "This isn't the most sanitary of things."

"Nice, though," I told her.

She clenched her cheeks again. "Do you want to do it this way again? Not now, but some other time?"

"Yes. Seriously hot," I said, wishing I had something left to shoot.

She giggled, "Get up and we'll wash up."

We did, and like Penny before her, Jenny washed me herself.

She stood, when we'd finished, looking at me, in the light of the bathroom. "Sam wanted a masturbation toy. Suck him off or spread my legs. He never cared about me, about anything. Just getting himself off."

I reached out and stroked her cheek, and Jenny smiled. "When I went to the camp last year, Anna... " She shrugged, "She wanted to make me come. It was a new feeling, even if I

wasn't sure if she was more like Sam than I liked. But she was sweet and nice and I liked it, I liked it when I came. And even if she didn't know about Sam, she understood it would take a while before I could love her the way she did me.

"We kept seeing each other after we got back, for a few weeks, then I met Penny. I liked Penny a lot, we became friends, real friends, not just two people who did it because it felt good. Penny was the first friend I ever had. And one night Penny was having her period; Penny gets real bitchy during her period. She snapped at me, leaving me in tears.

"Kim tried to explain... I'm not sure how it was, but I got this idea in my head, that she was a woman; she could be like Penny and me. I swear, I had no idea she had been for years and years!" I saw the smile on her face; this was a new Jenny, much more like Mary than I'd ever seen her before. Happy, content. Normal.

"I thought I was seducing her, I was a little ashamed that I was doing it to someone who maybe didn't want to, my best friend, my very best friend's mother. It was nice, and Kim knew a lot I didn't. And later there was Joanna; that was a surprise when someone at school told me I shouldn't be friends with Penny because she and Joanna were lovers. I laughed." She sighed. "After that everyone knew."

She looked at me, and then hugged me. "And you, you showed me something that I never expected from a boy. Love, respect. You wanted me, I could see that. Oh, how I could see that!" I smiled; I wanted her again, now. She glanced down and smiled. "Like that!"

"At first, it was, I don't know..." She shrugged. "It wasn't teasing not at first, although after a bit, I was teasing you. Pushing the envelope to see if you really were like that. Cuddle and hug, but no sex. I started to feel bad, because I knew I was being mean to you. It reminded me a little of Sam.

"And like I told you the other day, I realized that if you made love to me, and I liked it like I like making love to Kim, Penny, Joanna, your Mom, Anna; it would mean I was normal. So I did. And I did like it; it didn't remind me at all of Sam. Tonight, I wanted to do something different, special. Something most girls would never do for a boy. I wasn't sure if I'd like it, or if you would... but I wanted to. And it was new,

different, nice. It was me wanting things, and you sharing them." She looked at me, her eyes bright. "I love you, Tom."

"I love you, Jenny."

We hugged, kissed. "Now," Jenny said, reaching down and cupping my balls, "I want to go back to bed, have you put this in me, and go to sleep. We can wake up as many times as you like tonight, and do it."

I laughed, "We might not sleep."

"Cool," Jenny said.

I lightly stroked her face. "Jenny." She looked at me. I'd thought about this earlier, hadn't thought it was possible. Now it was possible. Was it a good idea? "Sue Ellen and Janey invited me to a party at Sue Ellen's this Saturday. I told them originally that we were going to LA, I couldn't go."

She nodded. I took a deep breath, there was no easy way to say it, and I decided that I just had to say it. "They told me it was going to be an orgy. A lot of people having sex. People who want to do it with each other. Maybe someone besides who they came with. All kinds of people doing it. As the spirit moves them. Their choice. They were very specific and firm about that."

"I'd like to go," I said it baldly. "Not because I don't love you, or I don't love other people. Because I'm curious. About me, about some others."

She looked at me for a long second. "You want me to go with you?"

I nodded. "If you want. This is no pressure, Jenny. None. Only if you want to. And if you decide that you want to come home, or want to be with just me or me just with you, that's fine. That's what we'll do."

She smiled slightly. "I told you I wanted to be with your dad." I nodded, "He told me, you and Ellen have plans for tomorrow. I told him in that case, I had plans for him." We both traded smug grins.

Then Jenny looked at me, a different expression on her

face. "Tom... " She leaned close and hugged me, then pushed back. "I'm not as smart as Elizabeth. Not quite."

"I remember you reading my dad's Economist magazine, the first afternoon you were here," I told her. "I've tried to read it, but I keep falling asleep."

Jenny smiled, nodded. Then her face turned very serious. "After Sam killed my cat, I knew one of two things was going to happen. I was going to run away... or I was going to kill him." Jenny said the words coldly and in a matter of fact tone. "I thought about it and thought about it. I decided to run away, because I never want to be anything like Sam. Ever."

"You aren't like him, even a little," I told Jenny.

"If you were different, if I hadn't proved to myself that you really meant the things you say, I'd wonder." Jenny looked at me. "I'm not up to taking on all comers; in fact, if I'm there, I suspect you will be the only boy I'm with. But you won't mind, will you?"

"No. Not if you don't mind I'm with some girls who don't usually go with boys."

Jenny giggled again, no longer serious. "I can tell them for you: if they haven't been with you, they are missing a treat!"

A few minutes later, we were tucked into bed, and my erection was tucked into Jenny's pussy; our arms around each other. Sleep? Don't be daft!

Friday March 29, 2002

I awoke slowly, feeling Jenny's pussy contracting then releasing my erection every few seconds. It was a slow awakening, a delicious feeling. I opened my eyes and saw that it wasn't light yet, but it was getting close... like me. I reached up and caressed Jenny's breasts, and she sighed her first, "Aaaahhh!"

Jenny tugged lightly, telling me she wanted to roll on her back; I did so, wishing she was reversed, but eager anyway. I started stroking slowly and deeply into her; each time I'd reach the bottom of her pussy with a push, she'd move her hips against



mine, pulling on my bottom to get me in deeper. We'd hold that for a second, and then repeat.

Jenny reached up, starting kissing me, using her tongue to spear into my mouth, far more passionate than our loving movements. When she came, I was unprepared; she starting shaking and trembling, then frantically bucking against me, twisting and writhing in pleasure. It didn't take much of that before I came as well.

We lay together for a couple of minutes, and then the alarm clock went off. "Got that timed pretty well," Jenny joked.

I reached over, turned the alarm off. Outside came the slam of a car door; I pulled out of Jenny, hotfooted it to the window in time to see Melinda's car drive away. I grinned at the memory of last night; I wondered if Mom had had nearly as pleasant a night as I had?

I turned to Jenny. "Time to get up, Jenny."

She grimaced and threw off the sheet; we both went down the hall to the bathroom and showered. It was, I thought, something I could definitely get used to.

Mom and JR made breakfast, then I drove JR and Jenny to school; I felt odd not having to pick up Shannon and Elizabeth. It had only been a few days, but already I was comfortable with it, and missed seeing them.

I ran into Janey in the hall before school and told her that the trip to LA was off.

Her eyes lit up. "Oh cool! I was looking forward to you coming. And coming and coming."

"Can I bring a friend?" I asked, wanting to be certain. "Jennifer?"

"Eighth grade?" Janey asked, and I confirmed. "Yeah, she's gotta be cool, though."

"She's, like, down on guys, right? Her brother was screwing with her, wasn't he?"

"Janey, one thing above all else: I don't talk about other

people's business. You've heard rumors about Jennifer; some are right, some are wrong."

"Well, if the ones I hear most often are true, she sounds like my kind of girl."

I just looked at Janey and didn't say anything at all.

"See you two then, Saturday," Janey said, losing the battle of wills.

After school, Janey sought me out again with more information. "Saturday, four in the afternoon we open the doors." I nodded. "We close them at five. No latecomers. If you want to leave -- that's cool, but you can't come back."

"Rules are good," I said, nodding.

I drove over and picked up JR, Jenny and Penny; dropped Penny off and the rest of us drove to Shannon's.

Mary and Dad were there, talking. Elizabeth was sleeping, we were told. If I were a betting person, I'd have said that Dad and Mary had gotten some sack time in, but they hadn't slept much. Dad declared a 'study free' day; since none of us had any homework due over spring break.

Shannon asked if she could talk to me in her room. I felt bad about the day I'd gone off with Elizabeth. I was uncomfortable with the memory, so I agreed, even though I thought it might not be a good idea. Shannon's first words didn't help that feeling.

"I keep thinking about us," she said. "I know I must seem like a squirrely bitch who can't make up her mind."

"You sound like someone who's not sure what she wants," I agreed.

"I spent last night alternating between masturbating and thinking. Frankly, getting myself off was the most productive part of the night. I don't hate you Tom, I keep wanting to, because you don't want to be with just me.

"I think about what you told me about how it's okay to be with others, and I start to nod agreement; then I think about

you and..." She looked at me. "I don't know, Tom. I have a feeling, deep, deep down inside myself that if I walk away from this, I'll miss the most important thing in my life. You know what today is going to be for me?"

I shook my head.

"The first Friday afternoon since I was six years old where I didn't go to Mrs. Hesse's house and learn more about the violin. Three thirty every Friday, like clockwork for ten years. Now there's no money; no prospect of money, at least for the time being, because my father is dead. Dead and gone. I keep wondering what in the world I could have done to not make this happen, and I can't think of a thing."

I thought for a few seconds. "Shannon, I want you to promise me something. I'm going to tell you something, and I want you to promise me you'll never, ever tell your mother. Not first. I will tell her or maybe Dad will. Not very likely my mom; but one of the three of us tells her first. It'll happen soon, but I don't know exactly when."

Shannon was looking at me, obviously curious. "I suppose."

I shook my head. "Supposing won't do. Cross your heart, hope to die."

"You're serious."

"Yes."

She shrugged. "Okay, I promise. Cross my heart and all of that."

"Most likely we'll tell Mary when it comes time for her to sell your house." Shannon nodded, as I spoke. "Because it's going to be me that buys it."

"You?" She obviously didn't believe me.

"Me. And I'd just as soon you don't tell anyone else."

"How could you buy our house?"

"In a word, actually two: it's 'trust funds.' My father's side of the family isn't poor, but not rich. Dad's father was a

civil engineer; he built dams and bridges all over the world. It paid really, really well. My dad is an only child. My mom's father is so rich there aren't words to describe it. Mom and her brother are the only heirs; Mom had a baby when she was thirteen; grandfather has never forgiven her for that. So he gives our Uncle Craig, JR and I gifts twice a year, but not Mom. Lots of money; lots and lots of money." I watched her eyes. "Millions of dollars. Eventually, tens of millions."

Shannon was silent, then looked up at me. "Oh." It was a word she said with considerably understated feeling.

I laughed. "All my life, all that I can remember, my dad would rant about the lottery. A big waste he said; people betting a little on the hope of a big score. Something for nothing, he called it. When he told me about Grandpa's plans, well, he said I would just have to adapt to the fact that reality doesn't fit into nice, neat little boxes. Because JR and I have won the lottery."

"And what does this have to do with Mom or my playing the violin?" Shannon asked.

"Because I make more a day in interest than Mary will make at work in a month," I told her. "JR does the same. My Dad does okay too... Any of us, except Mom. You four could move in with us, or we could just write you a check. We'd never notice it."

Shannon blinked. "Mom would have a cow," she said mildly. "It would be just like before. Totally dependant on someone else."

I nodded. "I think Mary is wrong; there's nothing wrong with relying on someone else if you have something to fall back on. She wasn't ready, wasn't prepared. I think she needs to work for a while, having to deal with everything. I think she lost a lot of self-confidence when your dad left. She needs to get that back. Someone dumping more money on her wouldn't do that." I smiled at her. "As for you, Shannon Leary, you've never once played your violin for me. Not once. You don't lack self-confidence; you won't flip out if someone pays for your violin lesson. Last week, your Dad, real soon now," I tapped my chest, "me." I smirked at her, and wagged my finger at her. "And before next week, you will play for me!"

She looked at me, her jaw literally down around her navel. "Okay." Shannon still sounded like she was unsure.

"Shannon, would someone who owns a mile of beach be giving up much, if he gave away a pinch of sand?" She shook her head. "That's me." I paused, giving her a chance to think. "I really would like to hear you play. I love music, particularly classical music."

"Thank you, Tom." She paused. "You told me that it's just a grain of sand to you, so I won't feel obligated, didn't you?"

"Pretty much," I replied. "Also, because it's true."

"You're not trying to buy me; you just want me to share something you have in abundance. Just, for most people, that's not something they have in abundance. If you're so rich, why go to North High?"

"My mom went to an expensive private school; supposedly quite good. Somehow in the curriculum, they didn't get around to teaching what happens when a boy puts his penis inside a girl's vagina and comes. Mom had no idea how she got pregnant until Uncle Craig explained it to her. Mom decided that expensive or not; she hadn't learned what she needed to know.

"So we go to public school, JR and I. Not, mind you, that that's all we do. Mom has been supervising our studies since before we first set foot in a school. We spend the summers hitting the books, sometimes even harder than during the regular year. She's a real tyrant when it comes to education.

"Dad says that having money isn't a simple thing. It means duty and responsibility as well as privilege. We already have a couple of hundred employees. I mess up, well, if Dad messes up until I get to be 21 and take over running things, they lose their jobs. As you know, not having an income can be pretty shitty."

Shannon nodded. "Wow!"

I agreed. "Double wow! Please, Shannon. To me, it's no big deal. JR doesn't even begin to understand it that much. Numbers on pieces of paper; reality is that we both have allowances and can't spend beyond them."

"And you can afford my music lessons on your allowance?" Shannon asked, eyes wide.

I shook my head. "Probably not, but Dad told me that I was old enough to use my judgment. I'm going to have to tell him what I want, why I want it, and justify it to him. I do believe I can do that."

"I don't know what to say," she said finally.

"Play, that's what I want. I want you to play your violin."

She laughed then, shaking her head. "I keep finding reasons why I should love you, reasons I can't hate you. Now something else." She looked at me. "I don't think I can deal with sharing, I really don't think I can. But if some night I'm lonely and horny..."

"Oh yeah!" I said with feeling. Then spoke to the first thing she'd said. "Shannon, when you told me about you and Roger, you told me how he wanted to control every little thing about you. That's not me. I want to share; you're right about that. I want to share part of your life, and I want you to share part of mine. I don't own you, don't want to. I don't want to be your entire life, like your dad was to your mom. I don't want anyone to be my entire life."

"Maybe it's selfish, maybe it's hormones, I don't know. I don't think so. It's how I feel. Here." I tapped my heart.

Mary knocked on the door; I grinned when Shannon went to open it and talk to her mother. A bigger grin when Shannon turned to me and told me that there was a Scrabble game being organized, did I want to play?

The seven of us played Scrabble; Dad applied some major whupass on us, showing everyone just what it means to be a Scrabble genius.

We were just finishing when Elizabeth woke up, and came out to join us.

"If one more person offers to do one more simple thing for me," Elizabeth said firmly after Jenny offered to fetch her something to drink, "I'm going to bop them. Wednesday was bad."

Yesterday was uncomfortable, mostly because of all the tests they ran. Today I feel a little tired, but aside from some bruises..." She looked at me, "I'm fine. Really."

"The doctor said you have to take it easy for a week," Mary told her. "You will take it easy for a week."

Elizabeth nodded, then turned to me. "Tom, would you come in my room? I want to talk to you." I nodded, unsure what she wanted; even more unsure how Shannon would react. Still, I followed Elizabeth into her room. "Close the door," she asked, and I did.

"Did you tell anyone about what I said, before it happened?" she asked.

"I told your mom that I thought that you had the attack when your dad was killed. That's all." I'd kind of hinted to the police how her dad had been treated before he was killed; I was reasonably certain they'd blown me off.

"I'm going to tell Mom about it some day. Not soon. I don't know about Shannon." She stopped, looked at me. "Everyone says you're cool, you don't push a girl."

"Never." Not, I added to myself, unless it's a place we both want to go.

"I want to ask you a question about something; I don't want you to flip out when I show it to you."

"I won't flip out." I was expecting gross; well, in a way, it was.

Elizabeth started lifting her flannel nightie over her head. The first thing my eyes went to was her dainty pussy mound, with a faint tracery of pussy hair that looked like a flower, a delicate stem with a whorl at the top. Dark, but fine and delicate hairs. It was, I thought, the most beautiful pussy I'd ever seen, very much like Jenny's.

Then the nightie went above her breasts, but her breasts weren't what caught my eye; what stopped them in their tracks were the black and blue marks on her chest, the size of a dinner plate, over her heart. I'd heard them talking about bruises earlier. It's one thing to talk about something... I'd pictured

in my mind the bruise I'd gotten when I'd been hit by a baseball when I'd played Little League; a black spot the size of a silver dollar. This was that, cubed and then some more.

"I have bruises everywhere except my breasts," Elizabeth said matter-of-factly. "I put my hand there, tried to do it like you must have. My fingers almost always touched one breast or the other. But there are no marks on my breasts."

I met her eyes. "Elizabeth, when I saw you collapse, I bent down and started pushing on your chest. Mouth to mouth. I honestly don't remember anything else." I paused, nearly overcome with emotion, remembering her laying on the sidewalk. "I just didn't want you to die." I put emphasis on each word as I spoke. "I wasn't thinking about groping you."

She smiled slightly. "You might think that's true, but inside here." She stepped close and tapped my head.

I was aware of two lovely breasts an inch from my chest; the most beautiful pussy in the universe an inch further away from my aching erection. "You were thinking about it. And didn't want to touch me... because you were sure I didn't want you to."

I couldn't help it. "I want to touch you now," I said, my voice a whisper.

"Go ahead," Elizabeth said, "do it." Her voice was as much a whisper as mine.

I brought my hands up, cupping her breasts with my fingers. After a second, I dropped my hands back down by my side.

She reached out, took one of my hands in hers, led it to her beautiful sex, and pressed down. "I masturbate myself, Tom. Please, finger fuck me."

My fingers caressed hair like the finest silk; the faintest, most gentle caress in the universe. I felt dizzy, like I'd run a million miles. "I can't." I was stunned, surprised.

She smiled, leaned close and kissed my cheek. She reached down and took my hand in hers, then she put my hand over the bruises on her chest. Then she placed her hand on my chest, in



the same spot. "It's because in here, you know and understand I didn't want you to."

I met her eyes and knew the truth.

"I can't say how it is I know things, like what was happening to my dad, how you feel, inside here." She pressed her hand down on my chest. "But I do. I really do."

I nodded; again my jaw was down around my socks in awed wonder.

"Tom," her voice was simple, undemanding. Yet I wanted to drop down on my knees and beg forgiveness; I had no idea what forgiveness I needed.

"Tonight, Tom, I'm going to be with someone. And Sunday, another. Monday, Tom. You and me. And Tuesday, Tom, Tuesday. You will need all your strength for the two women who will share your life for the rest of time."

She kissed me on the cheek, and then giggled. "I hope you and Jenny have a good time this weekend." I blinked. How did she know? Did she know? Jenny and me... Who was Elizabeth going to be with first?

Then I knew.

"I'm not sure if it's karma or fate or what," Elizabeth said. "One of those. Somehow, for some reason, I seem to be able to see it. I have this feeling that maybe I can still do it now, but I won't be able to tomorrow. Reserved for virgins."

Elizabeth was grinning at me, the whirl of my emotions had sped up, not slowed down.

"Besides," Elizabeth went on, nodding at a computer on her desk. "It's easy to be omniscient when you have access to the Internet. I know a lot, Tom. A lot about a lot of things that you haven't talked about. It'll be fine; I promise."

She stepped back, and motioned to her nightie on the floor. "Could you pick that up for me? You wouldn't believe how much it hurts to bend over."

My eyes went back to the bruises; yeah, well, you'd be

surprised there, I'd had a bruise or two of my own. I leaned down and got it, handed it to her. Elizabeth shook her head, then held her arms up like a bad guy in front of a cop, shoulder high. I slipped it over her hands, helped her shake it into place; when she was covered, I sighed deeply. Elizabeth giggled. "Soon, Tom, soon."

Outside, I found that the rest were working on dinner; Mom told me to go read a book. Dinner was pleasant, as relaxed as our first one together; it was, of course, because that's what Mom and Mary wanted.

It was an amusing meal, though. Mom and I were flirting, so were Dad and Jenny. Elizabeth was very attentive to her mother; JR and Shannon talked non-stop to each other.

When dinner finished, Dad looked at Mary, who nodded. "First things first," Dad explained. "This weekend. Tomorrow, ten AM, the police want to talk to Mary, Elizabeth and Shannon. They wanted downtown; we got them to agree it would be here. You will have the lawyer here; he'll sit with each of you; they won't let anyone else be there. It should be short, no more than a half hour each.

"Tomorrow afternoon, Tom and Jenny are going to a party; the rest of us are going to a place away from here; I'll give Tom the address and directions. I'd wanted to go to a small bed and breakfast, but they couldn't take so many people on this short of notice.

"So, we have reservations until next Saturday night at a suites hotel in Scottsdale. We'll be away from things, which should give us all a chance to unwind and relax. Of course, Ellen, Mary and myself have to work next week. I'm sure you kids can find something to occupy yourselves, one way or another."

"No problem," JR agreed with a smirk.

I realized that the timetable Elizabeth had spoken of, was the one Dad was talking about. I glanced at Elizabeth, except she was whispering something into Mary's ear; Mary looked mildly amused.

Mom leaned close to me, "Did you like watching Melinda and I last night?" Her voice was a whisper, her warm breath

pleasant on my ear.

I smiled and nodded, remembering. Oh yes!

"Melinda has an exhibitionist streak in her, odd in someone in her profession," Mom's tongue traced a line along the curve of my ear; I shivered with pleasure. "She was surprised though, that you didn't stay longer."

"You know what?" Elizabeth suddenly spoke, a little loud. I looked around; the room had grown quiet because Jenny was in Dad's lap, his arms around her. JR and Shannon were lip-locked, and Elizabeth had an arm around Mary's waist.

"I think we should get bare, like the other day," Elizabeth announced. I mentally blinked. Considering the current pairings and stated intentions, the orgy would be starting tonight.

"Cool," Mom said firmly, and started taking off her blouse. I undid my jeans, slid them down, then my shirt. There was no way to obscure my erection; I figured, why bother? Who was it going to surprise? Dad had one too, I noticed. Moreover, he was helping Jenny out of her clothes.

Mom turned her back to me, "Undo me, Tom." I popped the snap of her bra, and she pulled it off. I let my fingers trail across the marks it had left on her back; eventually the marks led around front, and I cupped both her breasts. This wasn't earlier with Elizabeth; I had no trouble keeping my hands there, rubbing her nipples erect.

I leaned down and kissed her neck, and she almost purred. What was that about an exhibitionist streak? I looked around, Jenny was still in Dad's lap; there was no doubt in my mind where his erection was. JR was licking Shannon's breasts, while Shannon in turn had a hand buried in JR's pussy. Elizabeth was kissing Mary, not a terribly passionate kiss, but I was sure that that's where it was heading.

Mom twisted slightly to face me, her eyes also sweeping the room. When she got to Mary, a smile appeared on Mom's face. She leaned close to me. "You like it on top, on the bottom. Ever do it doggy style?"

I blinked, nodded, trying hard to keep my enthusiasm from

overwhelming me. She smiled, turned back to face the other way, sliding forward. Soon, I was presented with a wide wiggling bottom. I got up on my knees, and Mom guided me to the place where I was supposed to go; not the other place of forbidden pleasures.

It was good, very good, and while Mom didn't have Jenny's rock solid buns, she more than made up for the difference in experience. It didn't take long to shoot; hearing Jenny's Oooh! Aaaahs! didn't hurt either. Nor the sibilant sigh from Shannon as JR hit the right spot. Then, an Oooooooooohhhhhh! Aaaaaahhhhhhh! from Elizabeth; I saw that Mary was fingering her.

There was a long moment of silence, followed by a universal chorus of giggles. "I think," Mom said with dignity, "that it's about time to go to bed. David, why don't we gather Jenny and Tom and hit the road? I assume, Joanna, that you'd like to spend the night here?"

JR looked up from where she was, sitting in front of Shannon. "I'm just getting started," JR muttered, causing Shannon to blush.

Mom stood up, dignified, even when nude, and started dressing. Dad and Jenny did the same, I sat for a moment, watching Elizabeth and Mary, and then I too got dressed.

The drive home was blessedly short. Melinda had been right, Tom Ferguson, boy wonder, seemed to have fallen off the news charts, the house was quiet.

Mom led me upstairs to her room; Jenny was leading Dad away at the same time to hers.

We shared a quick shower, then kissed and cuddled for some time, talking about small things. I started to get horny, looking at her. Mom saw the rise in my midsection, and smiled. "When I was your age and a little younger, Craig was very much like you are now. He could make love for hours and hours and hours; once our parents left on Friday night, came home Sunday afternoon. We must have made love thirty times that weekend. It was wonderful.

"And a while ago, that was wonderful, too. Dave and I... our sex has been even better than it has been, and it's been

good to wonderful since the first time."

I'd leaned down and was suckling on her breasts, and she sighed with pleasure.

"I mentioned earlier that Melinda was surprised you left," Mom whispered, her face bemused. I continued my attention to her nipples and she stroked my face. "She hinted that in a couple of weeks she would be back and wouldn't mind if you watched everything."

"I never really thought of this as a spectator sport," I said, lifting her breast to better lave her nipple.

Mom laughed lightly. "You are the private one! Sometimes, Tom, small things can be, well, let's call it erotic. Like having someone watching, or trying different positions. Once, Shirley and I surprised Craig, waited for him to come home from work. We dragged him into bed and made love to him and each other," she paused, as my free hand found the damp spot between her legs.

"Shirley does love young people; she was the first of us in the 'intergenerational' world. She made love to Lionel, Leslie's son when he was thirteen; oh my! Lionel is drop dead handsome, pretty enough to make you want to cry. And almost as lusty as you are. Last summer, Lionel caught me in Craig's pool, everyone else was too tired from the day at the beach; I wanted to see if I could get more sand out." She grinned, ran her hands over my cock, started pulling on it.

She giggled. "And then there's Kim. That girl has a streak of fantasy and romance a mile wide that runs through her. She has these pretend things..." Mom shook her head in wonder. "Once she had me dress up like I did when I was in grade school, in my school uniform. And she dressed up like a teacher. God was that good sex!"

I started finger fucking her, and she put her hand on top of mine, pressing me harder into her. "God, this is good sex!"

She pulled me down and into her, and for an eternity there was nothing but me thrusting into her, and Mom matching every thrust with one of her own. Around eleven thirty or so, she fell asleep; I wasn't able to do much to keep my eyes open either. And it was nice, really, to have my cock buried inside

my lover, then to fall asleep.

Saturday, March 30, 2002

We slept in past eight, then made love again, Mom on top, riding me hard. We had a leisurely shower, a leisurely breakfast that Jenny and Dad joined.

By 9:30, Dad and I were off to Mary's to meet the lawyer; it was a long, excruciatingly dull morning. The policemen were the same ones from the other day at the hospital; Surly and Polite. They managed to piss everyone off, including our lawyer, before they were finished. Finally, they were done, and gone out the door.

A bit later Mary, Shannon and Elizabeth had finished packing for their sojourn; they drove over to our house for a late lunch.

When we got home, Mom handed me a silver cell phone. JR flashed hers at me, a dark blue one. Even Jenny had one, lighter blue for her. Mom had programmed in a few numbers to start with, I did a couple more for Tony and Sue Ellen.

After lunch, Mary and Elizabeth left to make funeral arrangements for her husband; Shannon shook her head when asked if she was going along. Instead, she did something remarkable.

I've heard violins all my life; my parents love music, particularly classical music. My own tastes pretty much match theirs; I've never gotten very excited about music that has unintelligible lyrics and the music is nothing but drums and guitars.

Shannon didn't play anything like that! She put up her music stand, put some music on it, and then tuned her violin. I was sitting on the couch with JR and Jenny, the three of us reading. We didn't read long because Shannon was utterly wonderful. After a few minutes Mom and Dad had come in and were sitting quietly on the other couch, Mom snuggled up next to Dad, her feet curled up on the sofa.

Shannon played for the better part of an hour, solid pieces. Bach, Mozart, Debussy; all kinds of composers.

Finally she did a little curtsy, and we all clapped

loudly.

"Now I'm going to practice," she told us. "Comments aren't wanted or needed."

"You play really well, Shannon," Mom told her.

"Yes," the rest of us chorused.

Shannon reached down and picked up some of the sheet music she'd been playing from. "Notes. You can teach someone to play all the right notes on a violin... that takes a year or two. Another couple of years to get them to play notes the right length. After that, it's just the souls of the composer and musician and how each sees the music. How the music expressed."

I'd seen sheet music before; it had always been a mystery to me. "If it's all written down, how does it come out different?"

"Just like two people can't read the same lines from a play or poem the same, two people can't play a piece of music the same." She grinned. "And some musicians take what the composer wrote as just the starting place, and add a lot of themselves to it."

She must have seen I still wasn't sure. "I can say, 'Come here, Tom.' My tone is soft and even. I can say, 'Come here, Tom!' and raise my voice; it doesn't mean the same thing. You can put embellishments into music, just like when you're talking. Slurring words and notes together, adding an extra note just to make it sound better, or slightly change the meaning. 'Can you come here, Tom?'"

That made sense. "Well, you speak really good with your violin!" I told Shannon.

She practiced another half hour, and then said she was tired and was going to take a nap.

I was feeling mellow and wonderful, a nap sounded like a good idea to me, so around two I laid down on my bed; both JR and Jenny curled up with me. We just slept, only kissing lightly for a few seconds first.

Mom woke us up around three thirty, Jenny and I got first

dibs on the shower, and by four we were dressed. Jenny was wearing shorts and a t-shirt; I put on jeans and a t-shirt as well. We packed toothbrushes and some other things in a small bag that Dad lent us; then we bid everyone else goodbye. Dad made sure I had two copies of the map, and the phone number of the hotel programmed into my phone.

We pulled up at Sue Ellen's a quarter past the hour; there were more cars there than I ever remembered seeing. We knocked on the door, and Sue Ellen met us and waved us in.

"Would you believe, Tom, that you're the last?"

"Of course we're the last," I said with a laugh, "we just got here."

"No silly, you're the last of the people we invited. Must be some horny people here! Wanting to get started early!"

"Me!" Jenny said primly, and Sue Ellen giggled, eyeing Jenny.

"Come on into the family room." She led the way; I looked around. Quite a crowd.

Janey nodded to me, then got up. "I wanted to say a few words before things got going; I'd thought I wouldn't be getting around to that until closer to five. Oh well..." There were chuckles.

"First things first. I've been a bitch the last couple of years; no two ways to look at it. I joined the cheerleaders, made the squad my first year. I saw nothing wrong with the initiation rites; chowing down on my teammates, having them go down on me. I mean, I like these things; I did before I ever got to high school.

"I know it sounds stupid, but it never occurred to me that other people might not feel the same way about it," she nodded to me. "Tom Ferguson took me to task last week, raised my consciousness, so to speak. At first, I was pissed; I'd just offered to have real sex with a boy, the very first time I'd ever wanted to. And not only did he turn me down, he told me I was wrong for forcing people to be like me.

"I thought he was full of shit." She looked around the



room, before laughing bitterly. "Someone was sure full of it, me." She tapped herself on the chest.

"Tom told me Sue Ellen didn't like being with girls all that much. That was news to me; I've liked Sue Ellen since the first time I saw her. She was the person I wanted when I had a chance. I went and asked her if what Tom said was true, or if she'd bull-shitted him or something.

"Sue Ellen set me straight. Oh, she likes me. Likes me a lot." The two of them traded grins. "She likes sex a lot, too."

"Amen," Tony added, and everyone laughed.

"No, this is serious," Janey said. "She'd gotten pissed at me because she didn't like jerking off just any guy and didn't like going down on just any girl. And that's what we did. Used to do, because it's going to be different next year. I promise. Of course, I'm a senior and out of here; we had a team meeting, Sue Ellen's back on the squad. I hope she's captain of the squad next year. I do.

"So, here we are. People Sue Ellen and I know personally, or known personally to people we trust. Eight couples, four individuals and your two hostesses. That's twenty-two altogether, for you football players." There were smiles; I looked around again. Tony and Jack Scott. Actually, not a large number of football players. And Jack Scott was really the star of the baseball team.

"We're here to have fun. Sex, too." More smiles. "Simple rules. If someone says no, well, that's no. This is a coercion free zone. Also booze and drug free zone. Sue Ellen's parents are paranoid about losing their house because someone smoked a joint; not going to happen, is it?" There were a lot of nods.

"There is a cooler with sodas and juice stuff here." She waved at a big Coleman cooler in a corner. "There's more in the kitchen, plus ice tea and lemonade. This isn't our house, and we are not pigs. Use something, put it away. Empty a can, put it in the recycling. Use a glass; the dishwasher is in the kitchen. If it's full, turn it on. If you have some coffee and empty the pot, make a new one. Simple little things.

"Around ten or so, we'll order pizza and Chinese takeout.

Whoever answers the door will be dressed; the rest of the time, it's up to you. Please do not go wandering around outside, starkers, except around the pool. Somehow we forgot to mention swim wear," she grinned and there were laughs.

"Sue Ellen's parent's room is out of bounds. Her room and two guest rooms are okay. One of the guest rooms has two double beds, for those who don't mind someone else maybe seeing how you work. By the pool is the pool house; there are five dressing rooms, each with a couch that folds out to a small bed. They are folded out." More smiles. "Most of the furniture has sheets or blankets on them; if they get too gross, there's a laundry basket in the kitchen, and more sheets and blankets on the table next to it.

"This room and the home theater, through there," she pointed to the door. "Feel free to be as frisky as you want; understanding that you aren't going to necessarily have any privacy. That's a personal choice of the people involved. If it bugs you, if anything bugs you, please do us a favor and leave. Once you leave, please don't come back.

"Second to last, Sue Ellen wants us to wind things up by one tomorrow afternoon. If you stay past that, you will be put on the cleanup squad. And last, but not least." She held up several decks of cards. "This is for our icebreaker. A little strip poker. We will break up into two groups of seven and one group of eight and play until there is a winner and a bunch of naked losers."

That brought guffaws from everyone. "We range in age from eighth grade to seniors; eight guys and fourteen girls. There are four girls here who are lesbians. Myself, Jennifer Reese," She pointed to Jenny, "Michelle Paz," Another girl, vaguely oriental; I didn't recognize her. Michelle had long black hair down to the middle of her back, pretty cute. I mentally sighed, she would have been nice!

"And," Janey went on, "Gaby Sanchez." A girl I did recognize from the cheerleading squad. Short, also black hair, but short, very short.

"Guys, if one of us comes on to you, what you do is your affair. But please, don't try to start something with one of us. Our choice, not yours," she motioned towards Sue Ellen. "Maestro, the rest of the introductions, then the ah, pairings

for the card games."

Sue Ellen moved forward, stuck out her chest. Wow and double wow! Her nipples were obviously hard, showing through her t-shirt. "Tom Ferguson, who, although he doesn't know it, is the spiritual father of this party. Janey wanted a venue where he was going to have a tough time telling her no." I blushed, but Sue Ellen went on. "My bud, Tony Richardson. We're still friends, gonna be friends until the day we die." She went through the names, starting with the boys. Since Gloria wasn't there, I suspected she had indeed, been grounded.

"Now, we'll get on with the games," Sue Ellen grinned, and held up a thin deck of cards. "I have here, a special deck; eight aces, seven deuces and seven treys. Each of us will draw a card. Aces will meet here," she pointed to a spot off to one side. "Deuces in the theater and treys around the kitchen table."

She smiled. "Janey and I talked about it. We figure boys have shoes and socks, jeans, shorts and a shirt. Seven pieces of clothes. Girls, shoes, most likely no socks, jeans and undies, blouse and bra. Six pieces. Guys first, how many of you have a number other than seven?"

Only Tony raised his hand. "Six," he reported. "I figured, who needs to know if I wear jockey shorts or boxers? Eh? Really?" The room dissolved in laughter.

Then Sue Ellen asked the girls; several were wearing socks, several, like Jenny and Sue Ellen, weren't wearing bras. Girls with socks, got a start on undressing, Sue Ellen had them take off their shoes. Then Janey picked up a box, and started passing out dark blue baseball caps to all of the girls. Each cap had the letters 'SE & J's Party.' on the front; braless girls got two.

"Magic hats, ladies," Sue Ellen said with a grin. "When you lose, find someone to give it to. To show who you'd like to ah, talk to, first."

We all stood up, walked up to Sue Ellen and picked a card. I got an ace, Jenny a three. "Good luck and happy hunting," I whispered to her.

"You too," Jenny told me.

I joined with the other members of the group. Gaby Sanchez and Jack Scott were the only ones I knew half well. Sue Ellen handed me the cards. "You start the deal, pass it to your left, after each hand. Seven-card stud. Whoever has the highest hand chooses who loses something; whoever loses chooses what they lose. If you run out of clothes, you're out. Last person in, will play the other two winners in a showoff, er showdown." She giggled, and then vanished.

Jack looked at us, macho captain of the baseball team, a decent running back. Trying to take command.

"I'm Jack Scott," he waved to me.

"Tom Ferguson."

The girl next to me said she was Mindy Foraker. She was the shortest person in the room, very thin, with shoulder length blonde hair. Next person was Phil Frazier, a lanky redhead, well over six feet. The next girl intrigued me; her eyes were the same color as Mary's, hazel; her eyes were round, mesmerizing. I thought she was about Jenny's age, but I wasn't sure. "Katrina Foleyeva," she introduced herself.

The next girl said, "Fleur Winois." Fleur was almost as busty as Sue Ellen, but much shorter, and much stockier, looked to be a freshman or sophomore. Anna Jackson was a light-skinned black; I'd seen her on the cheerleader squad, but had never talked to her. She was tall and willowy thin, her hair done up in elegant braids; not dreadlocks, but French braids.

The last girl was another blonde, pretty and cute at the same time. "Fay Church."

I saw Gaby give Fay a little smile, saw the smile in return. And so, I thought, it starts. I shuffled the cards, Mindy cut them. When my hand touched hers, there was a small spark; static from the rug. I saw her look at me and smile. I smiled back. Oh yes! I was going to need all my strength for this!

Jack won the first hand, nodded at Fay. "You." Evidently, Jack hadn't seen the exchange; he was surprised to get a shoe. Gaby won the next hand; and she picked Fay too. This time, Fay handed her baseball cap to Gaby. Leaned across the table and

they kissed. Well, I hoped Jack got the message.

And, echoing the thought, after that the girls ganged up on Jack. With five people gunning for him, he quickly went out. However, in there I won a hand and smiled at Mindy. "You." She handed me her hat, still smiling. Cool! I smiled back and put the cap on my head.

It was pretty clear pretty quickly who was embarrassed about losing clothing essentials and who was not. Phil picked Anna Jackson, and she promptly doffed her blouse, revealing that she was one of the girls without a bra. I tried not to obviously stare, but Anna was the first black girl I'd seen anywhere close to nude; she had really nice breasts, peach shaped, with nipples that were much blacker than the rest of her skin, small and tight. Now that I could see them, they looked erect, too.

No doubt about it, I thought. There's not a girl sitting in front of me this second I wouldn't want to do it with. Fleur maybe, was the exception. Even Fleur sat and looked backed at me with an interested, contemplative expression. Like she was wondering what it would be like to be with me. Again, I tried not to smile. The math was, I thought, simply superb. The party was slated to last more than twenty hours. Fourteen girls, of whom four were nominally lesbian; of course I was moderately sure that Jenny was going to be with a guy this weekend, if no one else, me. I was also tolerably sure at some point in time I'd be with Janey. That was still more than an hour apiece, almost two hours. Plenty of time to do the job right.

The thing to do, I thought, was get past the card game, get started. I turned my attention back to the game. Once Jack was out and Anna was bare from the waist up, people started getting more into the spirit of things, although it was obvious Gaby and Fleur were not going to be comfortable, nude. Fay was almost as nervous; Mindy was, I thought, curious. So was Katrina.

Phil was trying to appear blase, like he got naked with a group of horny girls every day. Kind of the attitude I was trying to show.

I was picked twice in a row by Anna, and was shoe-less. Phil won again, and Anna pulled off her jeans. Anna was wearing French cut panties; which, she showed off, turning her back to

us while she was taking off her jeans. From behind, they barely covered anything, revealing ass cheeks that were, I thought, even more spectacular than Jenny's.

Any time Gaby or Fay won, they would choose the other; still it took a while for anyone other than Anna to get to the interesting point, and that was Fay. She took off her blouse, showing a filmy bra. Katrina smiled slightly when I chose her, and she too skipped the usual order, and took off her t-shirt. Katrina's breasts were again, very, very nice. Hemispheres, but small, with very tiny nipples that were almost the same color as her skin.

I realized I was in danger of sensory overload; too much of a good thing! I was getting to be like a kid in a candy store; unable to decide what I wanted more, what to pick first. I smiled at Mindy again, and she smiled back. Well, I'd picked, so the rest was waiting.

Anna got on another roll, winning three straight hands; Phil lost everything but his jeans and shorts. Fay won again, and picked Phil. Boxer guy, but his erection was sticking out. Fay giggled, some of the other girls smiled. Phil, showing his true mettle, didn't wilt.

Gaby won, and she too picked Phil. He doffed his shorts, smiled at the group, but stayed in the circle, even if he wasn't playing any more.

Down to six people, things started to pick up. Anna won again, picked Gaby; I won and picked Gaby. She giggled, took off her own shirt, revealing nice, braless breasts. Katrina won, and picked Anna, who promptly took off her panties, revealing a thick mat of pussy hair that obscured just about everything between her legs. Anna won twice more, and picked Katrina both times. Katrina was wearing pale blue panties that bunched up between her legs, more clearly revealing her feminine anatomy than you could see looking at Anna, who wasn't wearing anything. Katrina took off her panties with a small blush, and then she too stayed in the circle.

Gaby went out, then Fleur won twice in a row, and Fay was out. I looked at Anna, who was giggling, then at Mindy. I'd lost my shoes and a sock by that point. Anna had shoes and socks; obviously expecting not to be chosen again. It was, I thought, pretty clear that Anna was using strategy to win; it

had never occurred to me to try.

Mindy was at the edge of losing significant clothes. I won, and picked Mindy, the second time I'd picked on her. She shed her blouse. Mindy's breasts were small, little more than puffy nipples; they looked like the breasts of someone eleven or twelve. Fleur won and chose Mindy, who also was wearing blue panties. Fay won and Mindy was out; a pussy as bare as JR's.

Fleur won and chose Anna, who generously doffed a shoe. I won, and made her take off her other. Anna won twice in a row, and Fleur was suddenly down to panties. Fleur was stocky, and had breasts that were perhaps the least appealing of any I'd seen; like pudding, sagging already. A thick waist, her hips were only marginally wider than her waist.

I won and picked Fleur. Her pussy hair was a surprise; like Sue Ellen's, a neatly trimmed vertical bar. On Fleur, though, it was easy to see why: she had the most dramatic tan lines, showing that pussy hair anyplace else would have stuck out of her swim suit. I blinked; Sue Ellen didn't have tan lines! How many times had I come over here to swim? A billion or more; never a hint of skinny-dipping. Obviously, I'd missed something there.

Now it was Anna and I. And the Gods of Cards decided that she'd won enough, and I won three straight hands and she was out.

Sue Ellen, wearing only a t-shirt, was standing a few feet away, and she grinned. "I always knew Tom Ferguson was good. Only in the last few days have I come to learn how tough he is to beat!" She gestured to me. "But now, we have to find out who is the real champ." A girl I didn't know came in, wearing just a bra.

"Tom has a little advantage," Sue Ellen said, as she started shuffling cards. "On the other hand, we outnumber him." Everyone had gathered around, even Jack, although he was holding hands with a girl I knew faintly, Jean Whitman. Tall and buxom, blonde hair.

However, the cards ran straight for me. I won two hands, putting out Sue Ellen first, and then the other girl, Emily Church, Fay's younger sister. Sue Ellen waved to Janey, who tossed Sue Ellen a wadded up t-shirt; Sue Ellen fielded it and

held it up. On the front was a picture of the Venus d'Milo, and then she showed the back with a picture of Michelangelo's David. Over David was the legend, 'SE & J's Party' and beneath, 'Poker Champion.'

"Go ahead," Sue Ellen said, "put it on." I stood up and pulled it on. Sue Ellen came up, put her hand on my shoulder. "Good job." Her grip tightened. "Now pants him girl!" Janey dropped in front of me, undid my jeans and hauled them down, revealing that I was definitely interested in all of the feminine pulchritude around me.

From her position, Janey reached out, ran her fingers along my boner. "Cute," she said drolly, "for a guy." Everyone laughed at that, and for a change, I didn't blush.

"I'd say you were cute too," I told Janey, and then my eyes went to Mindy. "But you might get ideas." More chuckles; no doubt about it though, Janey had shot me a zinger and all I'd managed was a pretty lame return.

Janey stood up. "I think it's time to get this party under way!" I glanced around; saw Jenny in conversation with Katrina from the group I'd been in. Janey was talking to Michelle, again I was curious because Michelle looked vaguely oriental, but at the same time she had a Spanish name. Sue Ellen had her arm around a guy I didn't know, and Tony was looking soulfully at Anna Jackson.

I turned to Mindy, and she smiled, nodding at my shirt. "A Champion! Cool!" I lifted the shirt over my head, tossed it on my other things.

"Want to check out the pool?" I asked, and she smiled and nodded.

We went outside. It was still afternoon; the sun was almost hot, the air was still. Mindy nodded at the pool house. "Sure," I said, my stomach suddenly in my throat. It was all well and good to come to an orgy, but now I was going to partake of my first partner. I felt nervous, more nervous than when I'd first seen Marsha Richardson.

That brought a thought to me. My God! I haven't written to her, except the once! As quick as that thought was, the riposte was as fast. I wrote her last; why hadn't I heard back?



Nonetheless, I followed Mindy outside, around the pool and into the pool house. Four of the five doors were still open; she made a beeline for the one farthest from the one already in use.

When we were in the room, the bed neatly made, Mindy turned to me. "Tom?"

"Mindy," I replied earnestly.

"Can I tell you something?" she asked.

"Sure," I replied, curious what she wanted to talk about.

"Could we sit on the bed for a bit? Make out -- pretend we were at a movie or something?"

"Sure," I repeated. I sat down next to her, smiled, and she smiled back. I leaned close, kissed Mindy lightly. She hesitated for a second, and then kissed back. In spite of my own feelings, I realized that Mindy wasn't as ready as I was for what was slated to happen next; I kept the kiss understated, less than full bore. This seemed to suit Mindy, for she did the same thing.

We spent a good half hour, sitting on the bed, kissing. Finally, Mindy pulled back. "I said I had something to say."

I smiled at her. "I'd say, we've been communicating just fine for the last few minutes."

She smiled before turning more serious. "Last summer I met Gordon; he was nice, very nice. I liked him. We went on two dates during the summer; on the second date, he very shyly tried to hold my hand. After a bit, I very shyly let him." I nodded as if I knew all of this. "We dated after school started, going slowly."

Mindy took a deep breath. "On the day after Thanksgiving, we did it. Went all the way." I thought for a second, Mindy was going to cry. "Gordon came; easily. A few minutes, he came again. Easily. I never got close. The week before Christmas, we did it again. He came, and then he came again. I didn't get close. On New Year's Eve, the same thing."

I nodded, finding I wanted to punch this clueless Gordon moron in the nose. "That night Gordon told me he didn't want to go out with me any more, because I just laid there, I didn't care about him."

"Did you?" The question seemed to take her by surprise.

"I thought I did. I don't know. Does it matter? Most girls come when a boy is in her."

"That's not what I've heard," I told her. "I don't know all that many girls well enough to have talked about how it is with other guys, but I've heard that if neither the girl nor the boy know anything, the first few times can be bad. Or worse."

"Really?" I nodded. She smiled shyly. "But I mean, I didn't get close at all."

"Do you masturbate?" Again the question surprised her; Mindy blushed. "Do you?" My voice was low, and curious, not demanding or angry.

"Yes."

"And do you come?" I continued, and she nodded. "Then Mindy, the problem isn't with you, it's with the guy." I pursed my lips. "A lot of boys just want to use a girl as a masturbation aid; they don't care if she enjoys it or not." I reached out and ran my fingers lightly over one of her small breasts. "I care," I said simply.

She reached for my hand with one of her own; for a second I thought she was going to move it away. Instead, she pressed my hand harder against her breast. "I was so desperate, I was thinking I'd see if Janey..." Mindy's words were soft, but filled with longing and not a little desperation.

"Janey can probably help, too," I said with a grin. "But before that..." I leaned close and kissed her, this time much more wattage in the kiss, and I focused my attention on her fat nipple, rubbing it between my thumb and forefinger.

Inside my head, I was marveling how easy it was to be with someone new, someone I hardly knew. Marsha and I had spent an evening together first, basketball, and a dance, then together. Here, just a poker game and now this.

I switched attention to her other breast, sent my tongue into her mouth. Her arms were around me, hugging me tightly. After a few minutes, I pulled back the least bit and smiled at Mindy; her expression was that of a woman who was definitely getting there. I scooted down a bit, licking one of her fat nipples with my tongue, while my hands, now free, stroked her body, teasingly close, but not touching her pussy.

I continued to kiss her breasts, stroking her skin, which was smooth and fine. I kept getting closer and closer to the apex of her legs, until my fingers were trailing through the hollows of her hip, down to her inner thighs. I lifted my head for a second, saw a glazed, happy expression on Mindy's face; her eyes were closed. Much closer still, I thought.

Then I started kissing lower; I could tell when Mindy figured out where my tongue was headed, she gasped softly, but didn't say anything. I kissed like I'd stroked; slowly growing closer to what I was sure by now was something she wanted. I'd run out of bed, but managed to find a half way comfortable point, half way off.

I checked out her pussy from inches away. Thin, almost invisible pubic hair, relatively longer than most girls, sparse and fine. Her clit was visible, although the tip was curved down, and hidden inside her. I placed a dainty kiss on it, then ran my tongue down the length. Mindy gasped again, and her fingers touched the top of my head.

I reached out, spread her pussy lips apart, sent my tongue questing for the tip of her clit. It wasn't easy to reach; in fact, I used my finger to lift it up so that I could get at it with my tongue. Then I was licking and sucking on it; Mindy got 'there' abruptly, gasping sharply, and then pressing my head down against her pussy.

I licked her clit some more, this time putting my finger inside her. Mindy moaned with pleasure, wiggling as I began to slowly finger fuck her, while still teasing the tip of her clit; which I had noticed was something that definitely got Mindy's attention. For the next few minutes, I steadily fingered her, until I switched my tongue and finger. My tongue, I found, didn't go in nearly as far into her as it did to someone like JR or Jenny; the angles were wrong. On the other hand, my finger had an easy time with her clit, and Mindy came again. Then

again.

I blew lightly on her pussy, ran my tongue along her clit again, then slowly started kissing back north. The scene in Armageddon, which I hadn't really thought about much popped into my mind. I grinned, and agreed with Ben Affleck; the question about which was better: going north or going south, was best answered by doing both.

Mindy showered me with hot wet kisses, making it hard to concentrate on putting my erection where we both wanted it, and when it was there, she wrapped her legs around my midsection, pulling me even tighter into her. I moved against her, slowly building up steam; she came again, muffling her cry with her arm. Mindy's legs pulled against me harder; I only slowed a bit, getting close myself.

"I'm coming!" She gasped, then gasped it again, "Coming! Oh come! Please come!" I came, heaving into her as deeply as I could. She hugged me to her; her body rigid. For a moment, the only sound in the room was our rapid breathing, then from outside someone laughed, and we heard a large splash in the pool.

Mindy giggled. "Oh, I didn't need that! Now I need to get up!" In spite of that, she wrapped her arms around me even tighter. "Tom!" I smiled at her. "Wow!" She said after a moment to reflect. "Wow and wow again!" I moved in her, still hard.

Her eyes blinked. "You want to do it again?"

"Don't you?" I murmured.

"I..." There was another splash from the pool. Mindy giggled. "I really, really need to get up." I moved off and she smiled and vanished into the bathroom. I heard the toilet flush, and after a second, Mindy came back out. She came straight over to where I was standing, put her arms around me and hugged. The feel of her small nipples burrowing into my chest was exquisite; evidently it felt nice on her side, as she wiggled them against me some more.

"I was thinking about a shower," Mindy murmured, looking at me. In that instant I knew that she and I were more alike than I'd thought. Now she knew what it was like; whether or not

she'd be back was impossible to tell. I'd made love to how many women before I repeated? What was the purpose of this party, anyway?

"Sure," I told her, and she giggled, and then took my hand and we showered. It was, I told myself, no different than showering with Jenny; pleasure and enjoyment, but not necessarily play leading to sex.

When we were out and dried, we stood talking for a few minutes, then there was another splash outside, and more laughter. Mindy put her head on my chest. "It's not wrong, is it, to make love like that, then want someone else?"

I shrugged. "I think it's what you make of it. Janey was pretty clear about the nature of the party."

"I wasn't sure if I wanted to come; even though I talked Tony's ear off about it for two hours last night. Tony brought me," she confirmed.

"Mindy, our hostesses want us to have a good time, and when we leave, have smiles on our faces after having a good time. Having had that good time with one to however many partners. No regrets for the day after; Sue Ellen told me that once."

Mindy's eyes went to the bed. "You were awesome. Not even, I mean, even by myself it isn't like that..." She blushed. "Thank you, Tom."

"Any time," I told her. "Any time." Mindy blushed again, then giggled.

"Thanks."

I took her hand this time and pulled her lightly through the door, and outside by the pool. About two seconds after we'd stopped to watch Tony about to jump in, Jenny and Katrina went through the door behind us. I smiled to myself. Logistics was obviously going to be a problem. What, I wondered, had Dad said about that at the hotel? We couldn't very well play musical bedrooms; someone would certainly notice.

Sue Ellen came up; standing a little behind us, put her arms around both of our waists. Next thing I knew, I had one of her breasts, dueling with my elbow. I saw that Mindy was

getting the same sort of attention. "Ah, happy campers!" Sue Ellen chortled, "I like happy campers!"

Even Mindy giggled. "I don't suppose I can borrow our Indefatigable Tom for a few minutes, can I?" Sue Ellen asked.

Mindy looked at Sue Ellen, then down at Sue Ellen's breasts. "Is that what you call him?"

Sue Ellen gestured at my midsection, my boner sticking right out. "Oh yeah. And there's the reason why," Sue Ellen giggled. "Tom may not have the longest or fattest sausage here, but it's the readiest!"

"Thanks, Sue Ellen," I said, striving for some dignity. But Mindy was laughing, and so were a couple of others, including Anna Jackson. Her eyes were riveted on my erection. She lifted her eyes and met mine. And smiled.

Sue Ellen tugged on my arm. "None of that! Tony's still making goggly-eyes at Anna," she whispered. "Of course, maybe if the lunkhead would drag her off to the bedroom, he'd get some; showing off how dumb you can look cannonballing off the diving board isn't getting the job done."

I followed Sue Ellen and was surprised when she led me into the house; more than half the partygoers had been by the pool. Sue Ellen led me through the kitchen, into the family room, and stopped a few feet from the theater door. "On the other side of that door is someone who is not a happy camper."

I looked at the door, then at Sue Ellen. I frowned slightly, wanting to pull her chain. "At least on the Price is Right, you get to pick the door," I growled.

Sue Ellen laughed, reached down and ran her hand lightly along my erection. "This is a favor, okay? You don't have to do anything but go in there, say a few words. If it doesn't work, well, it doesn't work. Okay? Coercion free zone, remember?"

"I remember," I told her. I found my curiosity was intrigued. Who wasn't having a good time? What if it was a guy? I wasn't the only person running around erect; looking at someone else's hard on did nothing for me at all. I stepped forward, stopped and turned to Sue Ellen. "Catch you later,

girl," I told her, and then stepped through, Sue Ellen's laughter in my ears.

There was only one person in the room, watching a DVD of Beauty and the Beast. Fleur.

"Hi," I said, smiling at her. She'd put her blouse and jeans back on. I waved at the screen, "Can I join you?"

She shrugged, seemingly intent on the scene where Beauty was dancing with the Beast. She was sitting in the love seat, more or less centered on it; not really room enough on either side for someone else. I remembered the nearly shapeless body under her clothes, was tempted to sit on the couch.

It was like an electric jolt running through me. A not very pretty girl, sitting, watching this particular movie. Most girls would, I was sure, wish they were Beauty. Not many would be afraid they were the Beast. I stood still, for a long second. "Could I sit next to you?"

Her eyes looked up at me, cold. "I do not," she put considerable emphasis on the negative, "want a mercy fuck."

I met her eyes. "I didn't say I wanted to fuck, I said I wanted to sit next to you. Mercy me!"

She stared at me, then shrugged, and moved over a fraction. I sat down next to her. "If you don't want to fuck," she said, still angry, "why do you want to sit next to me?" She nodded at the door. "Sue Ellen asked, didn't she?"

"Fleur, have you ever been with someone, walking or riding or whatever, and they said to you, 'Hey, look at the rainbow!' or 'Isn't that a pretty sunset' or 'Look at the full moon.'?"

She nodded. "Fleur, why do people say those things?"

She shrugged and I went on. "They say them because they want to be sure you notice something that's pretty, something that means something to them. No one says, 'Hey, lookit the ugly duckling!' or 'Gosh, doesn't that weed suck rocks!'"

Her gaze was steadily on me, and when I'd been quiet for a minute, she sniffed. "Words. Evidently you didn't look at me a while ago."

I laughed and shook my head. "I did. I saw your physical body; so what?" I reached up and tapped her forehead. "I didn't see what's up here." I tapped her heart, "Or what's in here." I waved at the screen. "Beauty learns to see what's where. You want to be Beauty, and you're not. Maybe not ever, although you never know. You're afraid you're the Beast -- and missing the point of the story. The Beast is who he is; maybe one thing on the outside, but maybe the handsomest devil in the universe, underneath. Beauty knows, you can see it in her face."

Fleur turned her eyes to the screen and watched. Her expression was unchanged a second later when she turned back. "Still words. You want to fuck me, that's all."

I laughed lightly; I wasn't likely to hurt her self-esteem, she had none. "Fleur, I don't want to fuck or make love or boink you. I don't know you well enough. I want to sit here, talk to you, get to know you, and go from there."

She looked at me, after a second, she shrugged. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Anything. Read any good books lately? Heard some cool tunes? I've never seen you before, so odds are you don't go to my high school. Where do you go to school?"

"France, mostly. Except this year I got kicked out," she frowned. "Smoking in the dorm." Again her eyes lifted to meet mine. "I don't like cigarettes, but I heard that nicotine suppresses appetite. Helps keep people skinny. Dad's in the French Foreign Service, he met Mom when she was an exchange student in high school, in Paris. My mom is Sue Ellen's aunt."

"For a second there, I thought you were going to say your dad was in the French Foreign Legion. That would have been cool," I said with a laugh.

She smiled slightly. "That's funny. He was in the French Foreign Legion, after college. Legionnaires can not be French, but their officers are all French." Her eyes held mine. "He spent a number of years in Algeria. In all senses, it was not cool; he doesn't talk about it much." She paused again, "He does not like Phoenix, too much like Algeria, he says. Even to the shootings."



She looked at me, smiled just the least bit. "You are easy to talk to. Maybe you are not completely full of shit."

"Talking is good," I told her.

"I do not want some boy who wants to fuck me out pity, or because he feels obligated to someone else."

"Sue Ellen said this is a coercion free zone; reminded me of that before I came through the door. The only duty I feel here is the duty to treat anyone I'm with, with respect and decency; to make sure that neither they nor I leave here with any regrets."

I reached out and touched her hand. "I thought it would be easy to come to the party and find someone nice and make love. I was right; it was easy. It's not nearly as easy as I thought it would be to walk away, after. Goes against human nature, I think. But then, I'm not a Neanderthal who bonks women on the head so I can boink them in my cave."

She giggled. "Are you telling me that if we fuck, you're going to stay? Or go?"

"We are not going to fuck; make love, maybe. How can I tell you what I'm going to do afterwards, before? There may never be an afterwards."

She reached out, took my hand and led it to one of her breasts. "Did you get a good look at these, a while ago?" She moved my hand over it, so I knew exactly what it was like. "Ugly!" She hauled my hand between her legs. "I wear a bikini, the only thing any one has ever complimented me on was, 'what a nicely trimmed bush, Fleur!' That was a cousin who snuck in to watch me change. He laughed at the rest of me."

"I saw you, and I didn't laugh. It is a nicely trimmed bush. Like Sue Ellen's, but she doesn't have any tan lines. You do."

"People do not want to look at my body. A few years ago, my father took us to a nude beach. 'Cover up, Fleur.' my mother told me."

For another half hour we talked; the movie ended, and right

after that, Jenny came through, walking hand in hand with Katrina. "Jenny," I said, "do you suppose you could ask Sue Ellen if they have a Scrabble game?"

Jenny grinned, nodded. "We need at least two more, if you're interested," I told her. She vanished, and I turned to Fleur. "Want to play Scrabble?"

She shrugged, "I do not know it."

"How well do you know English?" I asked, had to be pretty good, because except now and then, she didn't have an accent.

"Better than most Americans," she said with a smile. She was doing more and more of that, and she did have a nice smile, and she was almost cute when she smiled, too.

Jenny returned with Katrina, Anna and Tony. I wondered about Tony; it was fairly clear he hadn't actually been with Anna. They were flirting, hugging and kissing, and Tony had a hard on at times, but it would quickly wilt. Looking at Jenny and Katrina kept me up; Anna helped there too. Fleur was one of the few at the party who'd put her clothes back on.

We played for about forty-five minutes; Fleur might not have known the game, but she didn't have any trouble learning it. The only real contest was between Fleur and Jenny, and at the end, Fleur won going away, scoring nearly 250 points with her last two words.

Still, we'd all had fun, laughing and giggling, talking about all sorts of things. At the end, Jenny traded looks with Katrina, and then turned to me. "See you around, Tom." They left, holding hands.

"Let's get something to drink," Anna murmured to Tony.

Tony grinned at me, then smiled at Fleur. "Enchante, m'selle." He turned and followed after Anna.

I put away the game, and sat down again next to Fleur, this time taking her hand in mine. She looked at me. "Words," she laughed lightly. "Deeds." She waved in the direction of the other room. "You have made love to Jenny; it shows."

"Yes."

"The black wants to be with you, too."

"I noticed. I also noticed that Tony thinks it would be cool to score with a French girl."

She sniffed. "Any French woman would rather be with an American. My mother is the odd one; most American women hate French men. Most French women hate French men." She met my eyes. "In France, it is against the law for a grown man to sleep with a young girl, but they all do it. I have been with three men, all my father's age. From when I was almost twelve."

"Did you like it?"

"Of course," she said firmly. "I like to masturbate, too. That, most of all, maybe."

I looked into her eyes, reached out and stroked her cheek. "Want to find out if someone younger can ring your chimes?"

She smiled at that. Piquant, I thought, that's the word. There was something piquant about Fleur when she smiled. I leaned close, kissed her lightly, and then did it again. She kissed a little back, the second time; the third time our lips clung, and her arm came up around my neck, and the third kiss drew out, longer and longer.

"You really do want me, don't you?" She asked, more than a little amazed.

"Beauty," I said, kissing her on the forehead, "is as much here, as here." I ran my fingers over her face.

She reached down, stroked my erection. We kissed again, and I felt the tip of her tongue push between my lips, I welcomed it. I dropped my hand down to one of her breasts, hefted it, rubbing her nipple through the fabric of her blouse. She kissed me harder, and I returned it. Finally, I pulled back, smiled at her. I stood, holding her hand as I did, lightly tugged Fleur to stand up.

She came right up, embraced me, and we kissed again. My fingers started on her blouse buttons; I heard a muffled sound of surprise through the kiss, but she did not resist. I put my hands inside her blouse, cupping her breasts, hefting them in my

hand. Cupped and held, they were like any other woman's breasts; firm and warm, the nipples hard against my palm. I broke the kiss, sank a bit and fed one of her breasts into my mouth, sucking hard on her erect nipple.

She sighed, "Oh, yes! Do me!" I learned later, that she meant to make love to her; I thought she meant something else. I started kissing down her chest, crouching down in front of her. I undid her jeans, pulled them and her panties down, and started kissing her between her legs. I actually saw her clit behave like a miniature penis, a round button that grew longer, poking out from a small area of wrinkled skin.

I licked it, and she murmured, "Mmmmm!" I licked again, tried a little suction. "You want to do it here, right here!" Fleur said quietly.

"Yes. For all to see." I kissed her again, but she started moving; in a second, I was on my back, and she was straddling me backwards. She leaned down and took me in her mouth; I went back to sucking on her clit.

I started to get close, so I spent a few seconds concentrating on spreading her pussy lips, getting my tongue into her pussy; which made Fleur move her mouth and hand on my erection faster; increased the suction. She succeeded in getting me to shoot; I hung in there and finished her a few seconds later.

Unlike any woman I'd been with up to then, Fleur had a trickle of fluid in her vagina afterward, it tasted a little like limejuice. Not at all bad. She didn't spend as much time on my erection after either, as I was used to, but instead, she turned around, laying on top of me, kissing me lightly on the forehead, nose, cheeks.

"I'm not squishing you, am I?" she asked. I laughed and shook my head no. Then I lifted my belly and thrust it against her pelvis, showing her I was far from squished.

"You are still ready!" she muttered in wonder.

"Always," I said, and reached down, trying to fit it inside her. I ended up rubbing it around her pussy area for a few seconds, before I slid inside her. I started pumping into her, and Fleur's eyes glazed over with pleasure. She moaned again,

and then whispered in my ear, "Do it to me! Do it! Do it!" I did it, over and over again. Twice for her, once for me.

She slumped down, kissing me again. "Oh that was wonderful!" She must have been distracted; her French accent was very thick. She smiled, and then lightly frowned. "I am leaking all over things."

"Me, anyway," I said. I could feel the trickles tickle.

"Come, let us find a shower." She helped me up, and grinned at me. "It is a very French thing, a cigarette after sex, then a shower."

"Well, in America, mostly we've dispensed with the cigarettes," I said with a laugh.

Fleur nodded. "You people are Nazis around smokers!" I knew the way to the bathroom, we stepped into the shower.

Fleur washed me, starting with my mild erection, then the rest of me. I did her too, also starting between her legs. When I was deliciously washing her back, she said softly, "Do you really think I am pretty?"

I leaned down, kissed the back of her neck, my erection brushing her bottom. "I think you're pretty desirable, Fleur. I think you shouldn't worry about things you can't control, deal with what you can." My boner had a mind of its own, tracing a line through her butt crack.

I stepped closer, cradling it there, my hands going around her. One went to a breast, the other found her clit. "Deal with this," I murmured in her ear. She giggled, and clenched her butt cheeks; it was lovely.

"I can deal with it. Can you?" she asked playfully.

I moved my cock up and down, as though I was in her pussy; I remembered the sweet feel of Jenny and my cock buried inside that other place. Fleur leaned forward, and my boner brushed past where I'd been thinking about a second before. I slid my hard erection underneath, headed towards her pussy.

Fleur giggled. "I have never had a man tickle me in that place before."

I worked on her clit, pulling back a little and letting my cock retrace it's steps. "Some like it, some don't," I whispered to her.

She wiggled her bottom, and interesting effect, as I touched her there again. "I suppose," Fleur said giggling, "I should find out if I do or don't," she giggled harder. "That's what the very first man I was with said. Some girls, he told me, like men. Some like women, some like both. Only way to find out what you like, he told me, was to try it."

I concentrated on lightly touching her rose bud with my erection, deciding that that particular Frenchman knew what he was talking about. I pressed a bit, saw the head start to slide inside; it was tight, tighter than Fleur's pussy, and when she would clench her ass cheeks; better than just about anything.

Fleur let out a small sigh as I reached as far as I could go, then began to move her bottom against me in a pleasant motion that sent ripples of pleasure through my body. I felt Fleur lean forward a little more, and then I felt her hand on my ball sack, squeezing lightly. A second later, she clenched her cheeks as she did it, and I shot my wad again, this time a different place. Fleur gave one last ass clench, and straightened up, pulling off.

She turned to face me. "Not a comfortable position," she said with a small smile. She reached down and soaped me off. "We should leave some hot water for the next people. American's have barbaric hot water heaters; not what we have in Europe."

A few minutes later, we were out, drying off. She patted my boner down, shaking her head. "Mon Dieu! You are still ready!" She stood up, and shook her head in wonder.

"In America, we've found sex after sex beats the hell out of cigarettes or showers," I quipped, and she giggled. I reached out and tipped up her chin, kissed her lightly. "And Fleur, when you laugh, when you smile, it's Beauty I see." She started to reply, but I kissed her again. "And if you were to smile more, maybe others would see it. And things you can help, will take care of things you can't do much about."

She hugged me, then kissed me. "You are a man of words and deeds, Tom Ferguson. One of these days, you will be a great

man."

We went into the kitchen, and I saw Tony. He caught my eye, and came over. "Can we talk?" He asked. I looked around, and Anna came out of the bathroom.

"Sure," I told him. Anna smiled at me, saw Fleur, and came over and they started talking. I mentally shook my head; what was that?

I walked a few feet away with Tony. "Tom, I have a problem."

I nodded, and he blushed, and waved at his groin. "It keeps going limp. Lettuce, not celery," he sighed. "Only time I've been able to keep it up today for more than a few seconds is when Anna and I watched you and that French girl do more than French. Sixty-nine." He shook his head, "Awesome, dude! I've never tried to eat out a girl," he grimaced. "Like smell and taste issues."

"But God, I got hard watching you. Anna tried to go down on me, but it just wouldn't stay up. Tom, I... I... would you introduce me to her?"

I smiled. "Tony, sure. What are friends for?"

Tony shrugged. "I don't know." He looked at me, shook his head. "Anna has the hots for you. Sue Ellen told me that she and Janey were going to drag you into bed later for a threesome. And me? I got wilted lettuce!"

"Tony, come on."

I led the way back into the kitchen. Anna was kissing Fleur passionately, and one of Anna's hands was working Fleur's pussy. Tony blinked; I merely smiled. Fleur blushed when she saw me, and Anna turned.

"Girl's heart isn't in it, no matter how horny the body," Anna said pragmatically.

"Fleur, this is Tony Richardson, my best friend," I told her. "He's interested in learning something about French culture too," I spoke with a straight face. Tony blushed, but Fleur looked at him.

"You wanted to meet me?" Tony nodded, then Fleur smiled. "What do you want to know about France?"

"Start with how they kiss," Anna said, bringing a blush to Fleur's face.

Anna turned to me. "Want to see what's going on pool side?" I nodded, and we walked outside, and she linked arms with me.

"I'm patient," she said a little smugly.

"I can see. Me too."

She pulled me over to a long pool chair, and sat down, legs straddle it, facing me. "You in the mood to talk or party?" she asked softly.

"Either," I told her truthfully. "I could do either all night long. Or both."

She smiled, and I let my eyes rest on her lovely breasts. Ripe peaches, I thought, only chocolate peaches; small black nipples that looked perpetually hard. Anna glanced down at my boner, now straining with eagerness. "Your nice puppy wants to come out and play," she said softly.

Anna looked around, there were a dozen or so in the pool, a pair of other couples on other chairs; both in clinches. There were at least two couples coupling in the pool, too.

"Everyone has good things to say about you," Anna said, her voice soft. "Just these last few days; before that, you hung around Tony and Sue Ellen," she grinned at me. "But now, really good things."

I didn't say anything, anything would be puffery or false modesty; I was well aware I'd had a couple of weeks of extraordinary good luck.

"Janey, Sue Ellen, some others that might surprise you, say you're the person to come to for advice. That, and you like tall girls," Anna continued.

I was curious about who might surprise me; it must have



showed. "Do you know Susan Morgan?" she asked, and I nodded. "She and I have been friends for a long time. She told me a few months ago she'd been seeing this girl who was pretty down; needed self-esteem shots. Nothing better for the ego, Susan says, than to have someone wanting to get frisky with you. Or several some ones. Your friend, Jennifer."

I nodded, that was a surprise. Not a shocking surprise, but a little surprise, I'd heard a couple of times that Jennifer had been with a black girl. Jennifer had mentioned she had been lovers with someone named Anna; why hadn't I put them together?

Anna laughed, "This conversation is too strange! You keep looking at my tits, and I keep looking at your hard on. We both know what we want, don't we?"

"Yes," I said firmly, meeting her eyes. "Want to move someplace less public?"

"Does public bother you?" Anna asked, a little smile on her face.

I shrugged, "Some."

"It bothers me more than some," Anna went on. "But I think about it sometimes; that's hot!" She stood up, and I did too. She headed for the house, and down the hallway with the bedrooms. One door was open a little; Anna glanced inside as I came along side her. Jenny and Katrina were sitting next to each other on one of the beds, kissing.

"This will do." Anna led the way inside. I followed, closing the door behind me.

Jenny opened one eye, saw who was there, and said something soft to Katrina, then got up. She went to Anna first, kissed her lightly, then me. Anna patted Jenny on the bottom, and nodded at Katrina. "Go, girl!" Jenny smiled, and went back to sitting on the bed, hugging and kissing Katrina.

I reached out and lightly pulled Anna towards me, my eyes for the millionth time scooping out her lovely, lovely breasts. Anna moved, pressing them against my chest, rubbing her nipples against mine. I leaned down and kissed her, intending to keep it mild at first; Anna kissed back, and there was nothing mild about it. Her tongue speared into my mouth, wrestling with

mine. Both of us had longer tongues than most people; this made for tongue action unlike anything I'd experienced before.

Anna broke off the kiss, shaking her head. "No wonder you're so popular," she giggled. "Your tongue goes on forever."

"Yours too," I told her. "Would you let me taste you, see how far I can get?"

"That's my kind of language!" Anna exclaimed, and I leaned back on the bed, and she positioned herself over me. "Eat me all up, Tom!"

I contemplated her pussy; everything I'd heard about races and racism rushed through my head. Anna was a girl with different colored skin, but already I'd made love to a wide range of skin colors. From pale white to Sue Ellen's golden tan. Anna had a full bush, but up close I could see lighter pink skin beneath. I leaned close, using my tongue to explore those deep dark depths.

It was different than any other girl I'd gone down on, her hair kept getting in the way, and was, I was sure, causing a lot of irritation when I should have been giving pleasure. It was mildly frustrating, but then I thought about it for a second; Anna liked other girls, ergo there had to be a way to do this without rubbing her raw and fur coating my tongue. I brought up my fingers, as if I was going to spread her pussy lips wide; instead, I held back some of her hair.

That allowed my tongue to go the places I wanted it to go, and so I started some serious licking; Anna's clit was long and fleshy, easy to lick and suck on. And I could tell she liked it; she was rubbing her own breasts. Did all girls do that? Seemed like it; if I was to start rubbing my erection right then, it would be distracting! Anna's eyes were closed, a dreamy pleasant look on her face.

I kept on with her clit for four or five minutes, then shifted to her pussy; Anna tasted not as sweet as Fleur or Jenny, more like Mary, although once I'd been working on her pussy for a few minutes, she got wetter than any girl I'd been with up to then, except Fleur.

At one point, I glanced over at the other bed; Jenny was nibbling on Katrina's ear, her arm around Katrina's waist.

Katrina though, was staring at Anna and I, intent, I thought, on every detail. I decided that Katrina was probably a virgin; she'd never been with anyone before. I'd been JR's first boy, but she was a long way from virgin. Same with Marsha; the rest had all had experience to some degree or other. What would it be like to seduce a virgin? Someone who'd never been with anyone, anyone at all? I mentally shrugged; actually, I probably couldn't. I really liked willing and eager partners; I suspected a virgin wouldn't be that.

I shifted my attention back to Anna and her clit, licking and sucking her; my hands roved a little, cupping her bottom, running over her smooth skin. God, I loved this! Could you ever get tired of it? I couldn't imagine it! It was all new, fresh, hot and wonderful!

I felt a burst of excitement; I put the least bit of pressure from my teeth on Anna's clit. I felt her skin change, and she sighed. "Oh, that was just right! That hit the spot! Oh baby, I'd get in such deep shit if I let you do this to me all night! God! I want to!"

So did I, and I pushed my tongue as deep into her pussy as I could, wiggling and moving it as best as I could. Anna shuddered; her sigh was louder this time. "Oh yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! That's it! Do it again!" I did it again, and then I did it again and again, straining my tongue to the utmost, holding her hips down so that I could get maximum depth.

Anna changed from sighs to little bursts of sound, almost a grunt, then a long drawn out, "Ooooooohhhhhhhh baby!" The trickle of fluid was heavier, and I licked it up, as so many girls had done to my own come. Anna trembled, then finally moved back, coming to rest with her pussy down near my knees, and her head even with mine. For a second though, when I felt her bush passing over my erection, I couldn't help noticing that my mouth was level with her breasts.

She kissed me hard for a second, then lifted up a bit. "Tom Ferguson, boy wonder!" she said with a laugh.

"Anna Jackson, yummy partner," I told her. Her eyes lit up, and she grinned. She glanced over at the other bed, and so did I. Jenny was still kissing Katrina. "Speaking of patient," Anna whispered lightly in my ear, blowing on it as she did.

"First time, I think," I whispered back; I don't think you could have heard our whispers six inches away, much less six or ten feet. I ran my hands down her back, but I could only reach the top half of her bottom.

Anna smiled at me, kissed me again, her tongue not at once in evidence. I went to find it, and found a warm welcome. "I'd think I'd tired you out," Anna said with a giggle.

I shook my head. "When you love your work, you don't get tired."

She giggled harder. "Not so with most guys," she smiled, reached down between us and fisted my hard on. "Not you, eh?"

"Not me," I wondered, debated asking Anna. She wasn't tired, she wanted to go again. Why didn't she think I'd feel the same thing?

"In that case, I'll do something for you I've never done for any other boy." She starting sliding down my body, kissing all the way. I'd never had a girl kiss my nipples before; Anna spent a while at it. They got hard, I found, just like I'd made girl's nipples harden in the past. That was a minor wonder, but then when Anna wrapped her tongue around my erection, that was major.

Again I glanced over at the bed next to us; Jenny was fingering herself, Katrina was watching Anna in rapt fascination. Jenny started her Oooohhhh! Ahhhs! And Katrina turned to look at her; a small smile appeared on Katrina's face, and she ran her own hand over the thin bush she sported. Katrina seemed to concentrate on her clit, and her finger never went inside herself. Both of them were masturbating themselves while watching Anna go down on me, another seriously hot thought.

Katrina let out a little gasp, and Jenny turned to look at her, saw what Katrina was doing. Jenny slithered off the bed, kneeling at Katrina's feet. Jenny ran her hand up the other girl's leg, then her other hand, before leaning close and kissing Katrina on her inner thigh.

"Either I'm not very good at this," Anna murmured, returning my concentration to her, "or you are made of iron. Everyone says guys spurt in just a minute or two."

"Feels too yummy to want to rush," I told her.

She smiled, "Just saving it up to put inside me," Anna said.

"Oh, you keep this up for another few minutes," I told her, "You'll get what you expect; unless you'd rather the other."

"Both," Anna smirked.

"Okay," I agreed. Anna stopped licking and sucking just the head of my cock, but swallowed it down her mouth, deeply into her throat. For a few minutes, I lost track of anything but what was going on between my legs.

I shot my wad into Anna's mouth, and she pulled back, fisting my boner as it leaked the last drips of cum. Anna moved back up, this time her breasts stopped at my mouth, and for the first time I got to taste those lovely, lovely shapes, while Anna pushed my still erect cock inside her. She sighed in pleasure as I sank in to the hilt; then again as I stroked one breast with my hand, while tonguing her rock hard nipple. Anna started moving against me, and I picked up the motion too; I smiled to myself. How can you explain this to someone else? Rubbing one breast, licking another, running my cock into her pussy, my hips and hers rhythmically meeting. If patting your head and rubbing your stomach is supposed to be a feat; what about three things?

All I knew was that it was an incredible feeling, as incredible as I'd ever had. Anna's vagina started to contract, timed as I would reach the bottom of her pussy on each stroke, further enhancing my pleasure, and probably hers as well. I enjoyed the pressure, letting myself hang on the edge of cumming, but not really wanting to do more than savor the edge. I thought Anna was doing the same thing, until I heard a small gasp from another voice a few feet away.

I turned to look, saw that Anna was looking too. Katrina sat with her legs spread wide, Jenny was smiling in satisfaction at having brought Katrina to her first oral orgasm; Katrina herself was wreathed in the most innocent, shy smile of pleasure that I'd ever seen.

I gave one heave, my hands leaving Anna's breasts and going

to her hips, pulling her down onto my hard on, driving up inside her. Anna pressed down, clamped down with the muscles of her vaginal walls. I came and she did too; both of us silent, savoring the moment as we clung together, each trying to make the moment last as long as possible.

Anna slumped down, and I put my arms around her shoulders, and she lifted up a bit, grinned. She moved slightly, found that I was still mostly erect. "Oh my, Tom!" She kissed me, straining to reach me without my having to pull out. "I think you're ready to do it again!"

"Yes," I said simply. Anna reminded me of Sue Ellen, her raw physical drive for sex; it certainly found a responsive chord in me.

Next to us, I heard the bed creak, I turned and saw Jenny now laying full length next to Katrina, kissing her and at the same time, stroking Katrina's breasts. I watched for a few seconds, knowing that Anna was doing the same thing.

"We should let them love each other in peace," Anna whispered to me. "Even if it's hot to watch."

I nodded, and she pulled off, stood up. She held out her hand and I took it, using it to stand up. We walked hand and hand then, out the door; Anna pushed it shut behind us with a grin.

She too wanted to shower, and appreciated how much time I spent soaping her breasts. When it came to do her back, I was tempted to trail my boner down her ass crack; to see if I would get the same response as I'd gotten from Fleur. I'm not sure what stopped me, but I didn't. And when Anna washed my back, she did my ass as well; something no girl had ever done. Perhaps, I thought, as she finished the last few strokes, I'd been wrong.

But when we toweled off, she kept it mild, smiled at me. "I do want to talk to you for a while," I nodded, my eyes going back to those beautiful breasts. She leaned close, kissed me lightly on the lips. "And, yeah. I surely want to do that again. And again."

We went outside, hand in hand again, stood near the pool. Fewer couples were visible, at least one of which was unaware of

anything else except each other. Anna tugged, and we ended up in the living room, sitting by ourselves on a blanket-covered couch.

"When you look at me, what do you see?" she asked.

I knew she was serious, and I bid my hard on to relax for a while, take a break. "A tall girl; cheerleader and basketball player."

"Black?" she asked, and I shrugged.

"Yeah, but it isn't that important."

"So far as I know, no one has ever discriminated against me. Never. Except, of course, in my favor."

"In your favor?" I asked, puzzled.

"Call it affirmative action, whatever."

I shrugged. There were always this, that and the other programs in school, even when I played little league.

"My grandparents on my mom's side grew up together in Mississippi, before and during the second world war. Things weren't like they are now, back then. There was real discrimination. They didn't much like it; they moved to Arizona in the early fifties.

"My parents grew up here in the sixties and seventies; Martin Luther King, civil rights, all of that. They fought to make us equal; they won the fight. Mom was black, Dad was white; they met in jail in Alabama, surprised to find they grew up in the same town," Anna grinned.

"Momma told me once that a lot of black men marry white women; it's a black thing, she said. Not meaning it very nice. Trophy wives, and women who didn't mind. Not a lot of those marriages last, but marriage with most black men doesn't last either. Mom and Dad were different. They married because they loved each other; they loved what they were doing. Then the battle was over and they lived happily ever after.

"Kind of." She looked at me. "You follow politics?"

I shook my head. "Not unless you call Monica Lewinski politics."

"Actually, I do," Anna said. "Dad's family are professionals; they were liberals through and through. Didn't mind at all that their son married a black woman; if anything, they were proud of him. They weren't embarrassed to be seen in public with a mixed race couple; it kind of went with the territory. Mom's parents..." Anna sighed. "A different story. They didn't really want to recognize Dad as in the family. Oh, they made the right noises and all of that, whenever they got together, but they didn't go out of their way to invite Mom and Dad except when they had to."

"Time passed, things changed. I have two uncles and an aunt, on Momma's side of the family. An uncle and an aunt on Dad's side. Two sets of cousins, as different as night and day. Dad's brother and sister, both of them went to college. But on Mom's side..." She shook her head. "A truck driver, a beautician. One of Mom's brothers went to college and got a job as a computer programmer; that's what he still does."

"My cousins on that side..." She laughed bitterly. "Hate me; hate everything I've ever done. White, that's what they say I am. I might have dark skin, but I'm white inside; good grades? That's the proof! Basketball? Well, maybe there's a little black in that girl, maybe. Cheerleading? No black cheerleaders!"

I reached out and put my arm around her. "All that talk got to my older brother; instead of going to college, he's going to jail. Last week, he was sentenced to a year for drug possession; he was lucky, he told me, that he managed to get rid of most of the stuff, and rat out everyone else he knew. He was proud of it. Like to killed Momma; Dad just shakes his head, he hasn't a clue what they did wrong."

"I have a little sister. Sally is twelve, nearly thirteen; Momma's family works on her every day at school; telling her how bad I am, how bad Momma and Dad are. Momma is scared to death, mainly for Sally." She met my eyes, "But she worries about me too, even if I'm on track to go to college."

"I told my cousin, the one with the biggest mouth, to get off my case," she told me. "That if he kept pushing, I'd drop basketball. I don't give a rat's ass about it. He laughed and



told me I was a 'white nigger' that I had my head so far up whitey's ass, the sun doesn't shine.

"And you know what? The college wouldn't care, because I'm a black woman. Doesn't matter what I do, so long as I graduate from high school. An automatic, Go to College, collect my \$2000 a semester full scholarship. Affirmative action. Doesn't matter how good I really am on my own, I'm black. A girl. So go to the head of the line."

"What's wrong with going to the head of the line?" I asked, clueless, not half understanding what she was saying. "Sometimes it's a damn long line. Why wait if you don't have to?"

"Because I didn't do anything to earn it. Because it means something to me, to do things myself. To get things I didn't earn because of my skin color? That sucks! Black skin lets me go to the front? How is that different from black people going to the back of the bus? Tell me?"

"I don't know," I told her honestly.

"It's not where in the bus they tell you to sit, it's that they are in control. They tell me I can't make up my own mind where to sit, that I can't compete with someone like Jennifer, because I'm black and she's white and I need a leg up to stand level with her." Anna's voice had steadily been rising in vigor and volume, her arms were gesticulating wildly. I put my hand around her shoulder, squeezed in what I hoped was a comforting gesture, not knowing really what it was I could say or do.

Anna calmed down, laughed. "You must think I'm nuts."

"No, I don't think you're nuts," I was stunned, though. Surely stunned. How could people let things like this go on? It was, in it's own way, as crazy as Sam.

"Sally is in eighth grade; girl's quiet, shy. Doesn't make friends; her cousins get mean if she talks to someone white. They are pretty sorry excuses for people, no wonder Sally doesn't like them any more than I do.

"So there's Sally, who doesn't have a clue that her sister is a bisexual cheerleader and basketball player. Sally cried because she's never been invited to a party in her life, and

wanted to come to this one. Who, so far as I know, doesn't even know how to masturbate. And the worst thing? There are two girls from her class here, including Jennifer. And she knew it. How could I explain to her what was going to be going on?

"I couldn't tell Momma, either. Hey, your favorite daughter's going off to spend the day fornicating with boys and girls. Should I take your other daughter along, too? No, so I said I'll be home by one in the morning."

She stopped, her breathing as fast and rapid as it had been in the bedroom. "God, Tom, I like sex. With girls mostly, a very few guys. I can't explain it to my family."

I realized I had exactly the opposite situation. My family had been reluctant to talk to me about their rather extensive sex lives until I had a sex life of my own. Explaining my sex life to them was no big deal.

Sue Ellen came in, saw us and spoke to Anna. "You'll never guess who showed up at the gate to the pool."

Anna sagged, "Oh no!"

"It's not the end of the world," Sue Ellen said. "Look, I told her to come around the front here. That I wasn't the only one running around starkers."

There was a knock on the front door, a few feet away. Sue Ellen vanished, was back in a second, and handed us two white terry robes. "Explain to her," Sue Ellen nodded at me. "Better yet, let Tom do it."

I blinked; let Tom do it? I hadn't a clue! Still, I put on the robe, and Anna walked over to the door, opened it.

The person on the other side was a bit younger than Jenny or JR, but not much. She was, in fact, a miniature version of Anna; Anna was at five seven instead of six two, younger, but a girl who held her head up just as proudly as her sister.

"Can I come in?" she asked, her voice one of the nicest I'd ever heard, smooth and even. Anna's sister was wearing a white sundress, rather cute and went well with her light chocolate skin.

"Sure, why not? I mean, you're just crashing a party you weren't invited to," Anna said, her voice tired and defeated.

"Come in," I told her. To which Anna gave me a 'butt out!' glance.

I moved close, opened the door, and the girl brushed past me.

"Anna, please, just let it go, okay?"

"Let it go?" Anna said angry. "Why?"

"Because, Anna, you are blind and stupid. What do you think we gossip about at school?" She waved at me. "That's Tom Ferguson. His sister Joanna is in my class. Do you think I don't know what kind of a person she is?"

"No, actually you don't know what kind of a person my sister is," I contradicted her mildly.

"And her friends Penny and Jennifer? Anna, do you think I don't know what you and Jennifer did when you two would come home after school to 'study?'" Sally's voice was bitter and sarcastic. "Like what classes do juniors have that a middle schooler needs help with? It's okay for you to do what you want, but I can't?"

"Sally..." Anna's voice drained away, her former energy dissipated.

"I'm here," Sally said with finality, "for the same reason you are. For the same reason he is," she waved at me. "All of the rest of you."

Anna stood silent for a second, and then looked at me. "I don't suppose you'd like to fuck my little sister?" She glanced at Sally. "Unless you'd rather be with Sue Ellen first?"

I happened to be looking at Sue Ellen at that moment. Sue Ellen glanced at Sally, then away. For an instant, I saw surprise on Sue Ellen's face, that changed to contemplation, then her brow furrowed. A shiver went up my spine, and I looked back at Anna and Sally. They were both looking at me.

I'd heard something once on the radio; one of the

announcers had been having a bad day and he apologized to his co-host for 'stepping all over your lines.' Had Anna stepped on her line? Someone else's? That would mean they were working from a script. That meant...

I straightened up, the silence lengthened. "Well, here's my sister," Anna continued. "You want to be first? She's bound and determined; there's nothing I can do that'll stop her." That rang hollow, flat. Sally's face turned stony.

I turned to Sue Ellen, keeping my voice mild. "Coercion free zone, eh? Where does lying to someone fall -- in the zone or out?"

"Tom Ferguson, you have a streak of stiff-necked pride, not to mention the weirdest set of moral scruples I've ever seen or heard of. You turned down Janey and the cheerleaders, why?"

"Because not all of them wanted to, or agreed. Just like you, Sue Ellen, I don't mind making my own choices, and letting other people choose. I just don't like it when it's not someone's choice, but a 'duty.'" I hung air quotes around the last word.

"Tom," my name came from an unexpected source: Sally.

"I meant what I said before," she waved at Anna. "My family has made a career out of protecting me. From the rest of my own family, from anything and everything. I want to be free to make my own choices. If I crash and burn, if I get hurt... well, how am I ever going to be able to do anything on my own if I don't take the chances and deal with consequences when I mess up?"

"I wanted to be with a boy this weekend. Not that big of a deal, in the great scheme of things. Anna thought of you, talked to her friend Jennifer. Jennifer said it would be cool; I would be surprised, she told Anna. Then Anna talked to Sue Ellen and Janey," she looked straight at me. "It seemed harmless. A little game." She lifted her chin a little. "I didn't want to take a chance on someone unknown. I'm not ready for that." Sally waved in the direction of the rest of the house.

"I'm sorry," Sally concluded. "But don't blame anyone else. I made the choice, I agreed."

"If you stop and think about it," I said, still mild, "starting off telling someone a lie, even a little one, isn't the way you want to get to know someone for the first time. Sure, if it works, wonderful, but you'd always remember. Maybe later it would all be a big joke, no harm, no foul.

"But maybe not. Maybe telling the truth might make things more difficult, less sure in the short run. In the long run, it makes it easier, more possible."

I grinned at Anna. "I was watching Jennifer and Katrina, wondering what it would be like to make love to someone who'd never been made love to before. I was little envious of Jennifer."

Sue Ellen stepped close, "Excuse me? Katrina's a virgin?" I nodded, and Sue Ellen started to curse. "That wasn't supposed to happen. Janey brought her; assured me Katrina was gay and proud of it, was thinking she might want to experiment a bit." Coming from Janey, of course, you would tend to think she wasn't a virgin.

"Tom's right," Anna said, then she walked up to me. "I'm sorry about this, Tom. It was a stupid idea."

"You probably had a tough time learning the lines," I said with a glimpse of another truth.

Anna grimaced. "I practiced a dozen times. Never could get them down."

"Because maybe you didn't think it was a good idea," I told her. "Maybe any number of things. I don't want to rain on your parade, but the worst part of your plan is that I'm uncomfortable not getting to know someone, at least a little, before I make love to them." I shrugged.

I looked at Anna. "I wanted to be with you again," I smiled at Sally. "This would take a while."

"I can wait," Anna said quietly. "I've waited before." She looked at me. "I wanted to spend more time with you too." She glanced at Sally. "My sister, though, she's important to me."

Sue Ellen giggled. "Tony came up to me a bit ago, he's

wild about Fleur. A real French girl." She shook her head. "He's besotted with her, he's not going to be interested in anything else for a while."

Anna grinned. "Tony and Tom aren't the only two fish in the sea. I'm sure I can keep myself occupied for a while."

Sue Ellen touched my arm. "Let me show you my room; we kind of saved it up for this." Sue Ellen walked down the hall, turned a corner and opened a door; Sally went through, then I did. The door closed behind us.

"This is kind of cold, isn't it?" Sally said, her voice soft.

"A little, but Sally," I looked at her. Light chocolate skin, even lighter than Anna's. "It's always a little like that the first time. Someone has to decide to go ahead." I shook my head ruefully. "At least, that's what I've always thought it was like. My first time, I was so excited that a girl wanted to do it with me, I didn't care that she was as interested in doing it as I was. Or what that meant. She wanted it, I wanted it. I'm not sure if she was here, now, if we'd do it again." It was true, I thought. I hadn't thought about Marsha hardly at all for almost a week and a half. And I'd not gotten a reply to my letter, or a call. I made a mental vow to get another letter off to her, Monday at the latest.

We spent a few moments looking at each other. "I'm tempted to tell you the sad story of my life," Sally muttered. "I don't think it's that good of a story." She came closer to me, reached up and undid the sash on my robe. It fell open and she stared at my erection.

Sally looked me in the eye. "Anna offered to find me a nice girl, one who'd 'bring me out' with care and consideration. I told her thanks, but no thanks." She reached out, touched me. "It was this I wanted. She took me to the high school nurse." Sally made a face. "Like the nurse didn't care who I was, just fixed me up, so I don't have to worry about mistakes for a few months."

She kept lightly stroking me, looking at me all the while. "Everyone says you're nice, really nice. But you want this too, don't you?"

"Yes," I told her honestly. "I keep telling myself there's more to it than just sex; but here I am, at a party having sex with people I barely know. People I never met before today. There are times I think I'm a giant hypocrite." I smiled wanly at her, reached out and stroked her cheek. "That's the bad news. The good news is, when I feel like that, I want to make it very, very good. For my partner, for me."

"Good's good," Sally muttered, looked consternated for a second, then laughed. "Good's excellent in fact! Nice place to start!" She leaned close to me, and just before we kissed, murmured, "Now's a good time to start."

Her mouth clung to mine, her arms came around my waist and all in all it was a very nice, if mild kiss. She slid the robe off my shoulders after a second, and I smiled, then turned her around, unzipped her dress, and let it fall to the floor. Sally had come prepared; the dress was heavy cotton, which quite obscured the fact that she had absolutely nothing on under it.

Her breasts were the most startling I'd seen to date, and I was getting so I had a very long base line. Sally was my size; most girls had hemispherical breasts, four, five or in Sue Ellen's case, maybe eight inches each in diameter. Sally's were almost perfect spheres--and little more than an inch in diameter. It was like she had two large marbles implanted under her chest. For all of that, her nipples were very dark, although not as dark as Anna's.

Her pubic hair was absent, as I found out the first time I touched her pussy, Sally had shaved it off. "Pretty," I said, my fingers trailing down her cheek, across her breasts, down her stomach and brushing lightly past her pussy. "Very, very pretty."

She smiled at me, "Tom..." I looked at her face, her eyes. More serious than most. "I want to learn as much about sex as I can, okay? Everything you can think of to teach me."

I grinned. "That might take a while."

She giggled. "So?"

I reached out and hugged her to me, and she put her arms around me in turn, and the next kiss wasn't mild, even if it didn't involve tongues yet. A full bore, hot and horny kiss it

was. My hands ran over her body, her wonderful smooth body. I cupped her buttocks; rounder and firmer than anyone I'd met yet, even Jenny or Anna. I remembered Jenny and the feel of her buttocks pressing against my groin as I'd made love to her; my erection went into serious spasms, and I nearly came. I pulled Sally closer to me, rubbing my boner across her pubic area, bringing a sigh from her, and then I slid my tongue between her lips, plunging in to chase hers down.

After a bit, it was all I could do to keep from coming, so I pulled back and smiled at her; Sally was too wound up, she was now grinding her pelvis against me, obviously wanting to lose her maidenhood. Everyone agreed that it hurt the girl; I wasn't happy about that. On the other hand, they all agreed it didn't hurt long, and if you were doing it right, she quickly didn't care. Still, I thought, it wouldn't hurt to lubricate the area thoroughly first.

I pulled her towards Sue Ellen's bed, pulled down the covers and laid down on my back, then pulled and tugged until she was sitting on my face. I started kissing her inner thighs, running my tongue over the hollows of her hips, leaving wet trails where it had been. Sally's clit was smaller than her sister's, but when I touched it with the tip of my tongue, there was almost a spark of electricity; I jumped and so did she. I touched it again, sucked on it, kept moving my tongue around on it.

"I'm so close!" Sally sighed. "I want to come with you in me!"

"You will, you will," I promised, my mouth full of clit. "This is just a warm up!"

I sent my tongue into her pussy, and almost at once, felt the obstruction. I licked and sucked, and Sally moaned and writhed above me, finally trembling in an orgasm. I licked and sucked harder, my hands now on her hips, pulling her onto my tongue. Again and again I drove my tongue into her, pushing deeper. Sally's next orgasm was almost a scream, a cry of joy and completion, louder than any girl I'd known; the antithesis of Shannon.

Sally moved then, pushing back, leaning down, smothering my mouth and face with kisses, hot and wet. "Oh God!" she murmured, showering me with dozens of kisses, her hand stroked



my face, "Oh God, Tom! I love you!"

I don't think I'll ever have words to describe it. One second, happy, ready to apply my member to her in most interesting ways, teaching her all she wanted to know. Then the worst cacophony of bad brakes, shrieking in protest; the clatter of a million tons of steel falling off a cliff, banging and breaking at the bottom.

Like a sheet, my consciousness was ripped asunder. In a flash, the last few hours replayed in my head; then the last two weeks. A half dozen years of my life; all in a fraction of a second, seeming to last forever.

I took a deep, shuddering breath, tried to calm my heart. Another breath; I felt like I was being squeezed in a giant vice.

Then it was calm again, and I was laying with Sally Jackson atop me, in Sue Ellen's bedroom, at her and Janey's sex orgy.

"Are you okay?" Sally asked softly.

I gave a half-hearted laugh. "There is okay, and then there is okay. I think this counts as an epiphany."

"You just got religion?" her voice was a little angry, a little hostile.

"Well, not in that sense," I chuckled. "Maybe a sexual epiphany." I bounced my pelvis against hers. "Could we talk for a bit?"

Reluctantly, she sat up, and I did too. I leaned against the bed headboard, reached out and pulled her to me. "This starts, I guess, in seventh grade. Tony's my best friend, at least until recently; now he has competition," I smiled at her, kissed her lightly.

"We played Little League together, on the same team. My Dad had a cow when I wanted to play football, too. No, he said, too much chance of getting hurt. So I could only play baseball.

"I was a pitcher, a pretty good pitcher. A good hitter, a good fielder. One day I was facing a big guy, bigger even than Tony. I had two strikes and no balls on him; I decided to put

the guy away with a fast pitch, low and inside. Oops, I slipped. Instead of low, it was chest high. Instead of inside, it was right down the middle. And he crushed it.

"My dad said, always keep your eye on the ball; not all pitchers do, but I wasn't one of them. I saw it coming; I knew it was going to hit me. I tried to get out of the way -- but the flight time of that ball was on the order of a third of a second. I barely had time to move. I moved enough, anyway. It hit a glancing blow to my elbow.

"For like a second, I thought it was no big deal. Then it started to hurt." I met Sally's eyes. "I couldn't bend my elbow for weeks; even now, three years later, I can press down on that spot, and it's still tender.

"I couldn't play the rest of the year. The next year I went out for the team, made it easily. In the second game of the season, I pitched for the first time since I'd been hit. I got eight strikeouts, and allowed only ground balls. Coach was ecstatic!" She giggled.

"Next time I pitched, the first batter hit a ball right past my ear, the second baseman put his glove up, caught it. First out of the game. And my last. I was terrified; I almost wet my pants. I couldn't even get the ball close to the plate after that. After three wild pitches, Coach sat me down.

"A couple of days later, in practice, I was fine; right up until the coach hit one close on purpose. Then I fell apart again.

"I was humiliated because I thought I was a coward; Tony was like a giant rock of strength, he just laughed. 'Man,' he told me, 'most guys don't know what it's like. Don't you ever worry about it.'"

I sighed. "Two weeks and a day ago, I was just like you. A virgin. Except, it's different for boys and girls. If a girl walks up to a group of guys and says, 'I'm horny, wanna do it?' She will have a raft of volunteers. Maybe other girls won't respect her, maybe the guys won't either, not really, not later. But she'll get what she wanted.

"But if a guy comes up to a group of girls and says, 'Wanna do it?' Well, the kindest thought anyone is likely to have of

him is 'What a loser!' Even the other boys would laugh. Too dumb and lame for words."

"Oh yeah," Sally nodded.

"So there I was, a virgin. Not a loser. Two weeks and a day ago, I met someone who wanted to do it with a guy; normally she's gay, but hey, she was here, a long way from home, why not try? And of course, I cooperated whole-heartedly. We had sex; at the time I thought that was what making love was all about.

"Next time, pretty much the same thing. A girl who'd been with a lot of girls, zero guys. More sex. A friend of hers; ditto. Sex, not love. Not that I didn't care for them, I did then and still do. But not romantic love, just a love of sex. But hey, I was starting to tell them I loved them." I looked at Sally, wondering what she was thinking; she was quiet.

"Then two more. No romantic love, just sex; sex and respect. It was good, it was fun, and enhanced us, didn't diminish us. Everybody went away happy, with smiles. I told them I loved them too.

"Then I met someone I cared for, cared a lot about. Before I had sex with her, I met someone else, someone I cared even more about, and we made love, not made whoopee." Sally smiled. "Then I made love to the other girl, not whoopee. She wasn't wildly happy about not being the center of my universe. We tried, anyway. There was someone else who meant a lot to me; we made love too. The first girl I cared for put her foot down. I had to choose. Me and only her, or not her.

"So, now we're friends. I hope some day that will change, but it probably won't. Life's like that.

"Then, today. One girl after another. Now you. I wanted them, they wanted me. Sex. Whoopee sex." Another smile. "And now you. You said you love me; I've heard that before, said that before. I believed the words, the ones I said, the ones I heard. But what I feel now isn't love, and I don't think that's what you feel either."

I met Sally's eyes. "I think I was close to making a wrong turn. Going someplace that wouldn't have been good. Sue Ellen told me once, that she never wants to have regrets the next day. Sally, I don't want to have regrets tomorrow either.

"Sally, I want to have sex with you, but it'll be sex, not love."

Sally was silent for a moment, and then looked at me. "I think I got carried away." She sighed. "My life is so screwed up." She leaned close and kissed me. "I told you I love you because I want to have sex with you. I thought it was boys who said that to girls, so that they could score."

"Not me."

She kissed me again, and I turned to her. "I like you a lot?" Sally said with an exaggerated question in her voice.

I laughed, and kissed her back. "I like you too. I couldn't do this otherwise. But not love."

Our tongues met, and her hand went to my now rigidly turgid member. "Would you teach me how to go down on a boy?" Sally asked quietly.

I'd not really thought of myself in the teacher mode; considering what I thought about most teachers in my experience, I wasn't looking forward to it.

I explained in general, and Sally crawled down between my legs. I explained that there seemed to be two techniques, one emphasizing tongue and suction on the head, the other, full mouth method. "Both are good, I don't have a preference. Whatever you are comfortable with."

She stared at my cock from a few inches away; the most obviously intent stare of any girl I'd known until then. She cupped my balls, testing their weight, then kissed me on the tip of my erection. Her tongue touched the end, licking along the side. It took her a bit to get it in her mouth; I wasn't sure if she was mildly teasing or just hesitant about it. Eventually though, Sally was doing a very credible job of it, only to leave off.

"Tom," I smiled, not sure what she wanted. "Would you tell me before you come? I... I..."

"You don't want it in your mouth," I told her.

"Sorry."

I shook my head. "You don't have to be sorry; you have to be comfortable. And if you like, I won't shoot at all," I grinned. "I can save it up for later."

"Would there be a later if you came now?"

"Oh yeah!" I said laughing. "Sooner rather than later."

She went back to it, and again got me close. "My mouth's getting tired," she muttered. I reached down and pulled her up. How good, I wondered was the lubrication I'd supplied a while ago? It was I thought, maybe twenty minutes. Reapply, I thought. Or maybe better...

I stroked her breasts for a few seconds with my fingers, teasing and lightly pinching both her nipples, then started kissing them, while I started rubbing her clit with my index finger. Sally liked this, murmuring with pleasure, but when I went to finger fuck her, her hand tugged on mine. "Not that, not there. I want you to do it. With this." Her hand went to my boner.

I eased Sally back on the bed, straddled her, and guided my prick towards her. I rubbed the tip on the outside of her pussy lips, then slowly started pushing in. Sally was tight, and the passage obstructed; I spent a couple of minutes trying to work my way through the problem. I sensed Sally's growing impatience, but I was afraid of hurting her.

Nature, however, has prepared for this; if the boy is reluctant, the girl has her own urges. Sally grabbed my bottom, pushed hard, pulling me towards her. I felt the tissue tear, Sally gasped, but kept pushing and pulling, until I was deep inside her. I could see the pain in her eyes, but when I went to pull out, she wrapped her legs around me, and pulled me to her.

"It's okay, really," Sally said, kissing me. She smiled then, one of the brightest smiles I'd ever seen. "This feels so good." She wiggled a bit, smiled more. "I've had my fingers inside me, a little plastic tube..." She wiggled more, and I stroked into her. "But, God! A real dick is completely different!"

I almost lost my cool; I wanted to laugh so badly. I'd never thought about it as a dick, Tom's Dick. Tom's Hairy Dick. Who knows why our minds go wandering off to these places at times like this?

But Sally was moving against me now, and I was moving against her. I started kissing her breasts, using my fingers on the other; her nipples were rock solid. She let out a moan of pleasure, and I felt her tremble as she came, way, way before I was ready. I couldn't help myself; I might have just broken Sally's hymen but the only thing I thought of was coming; spending myself deep in her vagina.

She gasped again, clutching my shoulders with her hands. I looked at Sally, who stared back at me again. "Don't stop," she hissed softly, "Oh my God!" She came again, and I started to move harder and faster still, bouncing Sally and the bed for all I was worth.

My orgasm exploded deep inside my body; I emptied myself into her. Sally's fingers were like steel clamps on my arm, her legs were bands of flesh and muscle pulling me into her. She slowly relaxed her grip, then reached out and touched my face with her hand. "I liked that," she whispered to me. "It was all I could ever hope or dream about doing it for the first time." She smiled softly, "And who ever comes next is going to have a tough act to follow."

We kissed again; I'd been a little surprised a moment before. My erection had subsided, and I'd all but come out of Sally. Now though, it hardened, but not the full arousal I'd come to rely on. Sally kissed harder, and I responded, but not as mightily as I'd done before. Inside my head, I chuckled. Evidently there were limits to my stamina after all; it shouldn't have been a surprise, but it was.

Sally whispered softly. "I'd listen, sometimes, to Anna and Jennifer when they would make love. Anna would think I was reading or watching TV, but I just listened to the sounds they made. Once I peeked; watch her eat Jennifer's pussy. I was hot, so hot! I wanted someone to make love to me like that! But everyone in the family watches me, except Anna. And even her, sometimes."

She was silent for a second. "After they would make love, Anna and Jennifer would have these little smiles, almost a glow

to their skin. Like I imagine I have right now." It was true, I saw, looking at her. She did glow. I'd seen that expression a dozen times now; hadn't recognized it for what it was. I flashed back to Mom telling me that I could sleep with JR. How much had changed since then! Now I knew why she could tell we'd been sleeping together.

I looked at Sally, down at her dusky breasts, so elegant and beautiful. I lifted up a bit, to see her pussy. Easily the prettiest girl I'd ever made love to. The best proportions, the best... I flashed back to making love to Jenny in the backside; her buns hard against my groin. I gulped; my erection grew to full length and strength.

Sally's eyes lit up. "Again? Oh yes! Tom! Yes!"

We kissed hard and passionately; our tongues writhing in a fiery dance. After a moment of burning desire, I opened my eyes, brought up my fingers and stroked her cheek. "Sally?" She looked at me, nodded, her eyes bright and eager with anticipation. I lifted my midsection, pulling out of her.

"Roll over; we'll try it another way." She looked at me steadily for a second, then nodded. She rolled over and I trailed my erection down the crack of her ass, the dimpled rosebud there was ebony black. I longed to plunge into it; a voice whispered in my ear that who would know? Sally would like it, I was sure. I touched it with my boner, continuing to move further netherwards. There was no reaction, no sign like from Fleur that she recognized what had happened. I slid my hairy dick into her vagina; sliding down and forward as I did. I felt her hot buns nestle into my groin and for a moment I was in nirvana; reveling in the sensation; without warning, I spurted hard into Sally, thrusting as deeply into her as I could.

It was like a light switch; my body simply shut down. I slept.

I awoke almost the same way I'd fallen asleep; one second asleep, the next wide-awake. I might have been wide-awake, but memories came less quickly than I had, that last time. I looked around; the bedroom was empty. I sighed, remembering that last heave; the last spurting orgasm. I glanced at a clock on the stand next to Sue Ellen's bed; saw in was nearly eleven. The room was dark, so I figured that had to be before midnight, not before noon. I breathed a silent sigh of relief; although if

Sally had been there, I'd have wanted nothing more than a repeat of what we'd been doing.

I remembered Anna, Fleur. Mindy. All of the rest. I gulped; God! I loved them all! To some degree or other, I loved them. Mary, Jenny and JR. I loved them. I'd wanted to do Sally like I'd been with Penny, Jenny and Fleur; at the last second, I hadn't. Not because I didn't want to, but because I wasn't sure what Sally wanted. Maybe it would have been okay; but then again, maybe not.

There was a faint sound, and I turned towards the door. Janey was there with a girl I didn't recognize. They came inside, closed the door and starting kissing. I realized I was shamefully wasting one of the few beds, so I stood and walked to the door. Janey smiled at me in passing, but went back to what she was doing.

I stood outside in the hallway; contemplating life and the universe. What if I'd done nothing? How far would Janey and the other girl go with me there? Unanswerable, I thought. At some point, maybe I'd like to watch. Right now, though, I'd far rather participate than watch. I went through the kitchen, which had a pile of empty pizza and Chinese takeout boxes and went outside.

The pool was quiet, no one was in it; I saw Sue Ellen sitting at a picnic table talking to Nancy Driscoll, a senior. Sue Ellen saw me and waved, and I walked over to them. I sat down next to Sue Ellen, who grinned. "What's happening?" I asked.

Sue Ellen chuckled, "That's funny; that's what we were just talking about." She shook her head. "This isn't turning out like I thought."

I looked at her, curiously. "Not that it's turning out bad," Sue Ellen went on, a little hastily, "but not what I expected. I thought more people would, you know, circulate."

I mentally raised an eyebrow; something must have shown on my face. Sue Ellen patted my knee. "Oh, you've done your part, so has Janey. But what's happening is most people have found someone they like and are staying with them. It's more like a party where everyone started out as strangers and ended up friendlier."



I thought back, wondered who Sue Ellen had been with; I hadn't seen her do anything but act as a hostess. "And you?" I asked quietly.

"Me?" She blushed; one of the most surprising things I'd seen in my life. "I've been making sure everyone has a good time."

I glanced at Nancy, who looked blandly back at me, no expression on her face. She was about an inch shorter than me; played on the girl's soccer team; was kind of on the girl's basketball team, but didn't play much because she wasn't tall enough. She had nicely rounded breasts; I couldn't see much of her pussy, sitting the way she was across the table.

"Well, I've had a good time," I said mildly, watching Nancy's reaction more than Sue Ellen's.

"Me too," Nancy replied, a hint of a smile. "Although I have this feeling Sue Ellen is chatting me up for a reason."

Sue Ellen smiled at Nancy. "Well, I did tell Janey that she was going to have to take a turn at hostess around midnight." I was mildly curious; for me this evening, when I'd set out to be with someone, I was a little more forthright. Sue Ellen was acting shy and diffident.

I saw Nancy glance around, and then look at me, then started talking to Sue Ellen. "You ever have a daydream about something that you just can't shake? Like a little tune or jingle that plays through your head, over and over?"

I nodded, so did Sue Ellen.

Nancy grimaced; "Every girl in the family above the age of two knows to stay away from Keith; usually someone walks Dawn home. A couple of weeks ago, I walked with her. Keith and Sam were watching a porno movie, whacking off in the living room when we came in.

"Dawn just went in her room and locked the door, I ignored the stupid comments about what they'd most like to do." Her eyes met mine. "For the life of me, I wish someone had stepped on those guys a long, long time ago. Sickos."

I didn't say anything; she was right. And it should have been someone in a family that warned their two year olds about someone. "Anyway, I got out of there." Nancy sighed.

"In the movie, there was this girl with huge," Nancy sketched breasts, glancing at Sue Ellen as she did. "Really huge, bigger than Sue Ellen. This woman had a guy behind her, making love to her. A woman eating her out at the same time." Nancy looked at Sue Ellen. "Ever since then, I think about being that woman. Not that I have big..." She smiled wryly.

Sue Ellen put her arm around me. "I have it on very good authority, that if Tom was there, he'd want to eat you up, too. I know I certainly do. Maybe we could work something out." She smiled briefly. "Or in."

Sue Ellen leaned close. "I know you were expecting Janey and I at some point, but I don't think that's going to happen. That girl has gotten a serious case of cold feet. She's going through the girls here like there's no tomorrow."

She turned to me. "Think you can handle a pair of horny girls? One of whom is really, really horny?" Sue Ellen asked me.

"Two really, really horny girls," Nancy said. "All Janey did earlier was get me started."

I contemplated the two of them; I'd thought about this too. I had no idea how three people could make love at the same time. But I was erect again, and more than willing to experiment. We all stood up and Sue Ellen nodded towards the pool house.

"Unless someone snuck in while I wasn't looking, there's a room open there." We walked towards it; none of the rooms close to the outside, but the one furthest from the main door had a door ajar. No one was there, and Sue Ellen closed the door behind us.

Sue Ellen reached out an arm, wrapping it around Nancy's waist, pulling the older girl closer to her. For a moment, Sue Ellen rubbed her breasts against Nancy's much smaller set; Nancy's nipples popped erect and Nancy applied a little pressure of her own in return. Of course, there I was, standing very much alone; I'd wondered how three people made love, and I'd been right, I thought, to wonder. But this time I had an

explicit invitation and if nothing else, I was going to watch two girls do it. And if there was a point where I could put an oar in the water, so to speak, I'd take it.

The two started kissing; a hot open mouth kiss where you had no doubt what was going on. They were now rubbing breasts together very hard, and I saw Sue Ellen lean close to Nancy's ear and whisper something. Nancy replied more audibly, "Eaten." I hadn't heard the question, but I was curious about it.

Sue Ellen pulled back, leaving her breasts in contact with Nancy's. She turned to me. "Lay down on the bed, Tom." I walked over and lay down. When I was in position, Sue Ellen pushed my cock inside her, while Nancy moved over my face, facing Sue Ellen. The two of them started kissing and rubbing each other's breasts, while I started licking Nancy's pussy and trying to remember to stroke into Sue Ellen.

I was barely able to reach Nancy's clit, it was small and as long as my tongue was, it wasn't that long. I pushed it inside her as far as I could, enjoying her taste, Fleur had tasted of lime juice, Nancy was a little more tart still, somewhere I thought, between lemon juice and vinegar.

I might not have been able to reach Nancy's clit, but Sue Ellen could; at one point her fingers were there, sliding along Nancy's pussy slit, eliciting a sigh of satisfaction from Nancy.

It had taken me a few minutes to get the pattern of pushing into Sue Ellen and licking Nancy set in my head so I could do both at once. Even so it was really easy to forget one and concentrate on the other; at one time or another I stopped doing what I was doing to Nancy or Sue Ellen, and focused on just one of them. Sue Ellen also seemed to be having the same difficulty; there were times she'd sit quietly on me, her fingers frantically rubbing Nancy's clit or breast, and other times were she was matching my deep strokes with moves of her own. Nancy seemed to me more or less able to concentrate on Sue Ellen, although once I felt her fingers touch my erection as I moved in and out of Sue Ellen.

Nancy moved, leaning down to kiss Sue Ellen's breasts, moving over my face as well. I brought up my hands up on her bottom to keep her from mashing my nose, and found my eyes-only inches from her puckered rosebud. I mentally gulped; there was no smell, beyond sweat and Nancy's lemon-vinegar. I had, I

thought, eaten all parts of a girl but this one. I touched it tentatively with the tip of my tongue; prepared to beat a hasty retreat if I tasted anything like I expected shit to taste like.

There wasn't any such taste, but I couldn't bring myself to press my tongue inside her like I would a pussy; still Nancy had let out a startled sound, then her bottom moved in an odd corkscrew motion that made it hard for me to remain in contact with my target.

I heard Nancy mutter to Sue Ellen, "Finger fuck me hard!" And Nancy started coming almost at once as Sue Ellen did just that.

Sue Ellen's vaginal muscles started contracting in time with my movements into her, her breathing increased in pace with Nancy's gasps. I thrust harder and Sue Ellen moaned, then I spurted into her, although not as much as I'd been spurting earlier.

After a bit, I pushed my tongue back into Nancy's love tunnel, and she wiggled again.

"Tom's still frisky?" Sue Ellen said with a laugh, and I felt her bounce on my middle. "God, like the man doesn't know how to quit." Nonetheless, she lifted up, pulling away from me and standing up. "Gotta run guys, see how things are going."

Just like that; two seconds and gone. Both times we'd made love, I thought, Sue Ellen had run off afterward. Why was that? Most of the other partners I had loved the feel of me inside them, afterwards. Why was Sue Ellen different?

Nancy lifted up, and I thought she was headed after Sue Ellen; instead she turned and lay down next to me, lifting her lips to be kissed. I obliged, Nancy wasn't nearly as passionate with me as her earlier kiss with Sue Ellen, and taking a hint, I kept it that way myself. After a bit, she pulled back and looked at me, her eyes and face expressionless.

"Do you think all of the Driscolls are sex maniacs?" I shook my head. "I let you kiss me just now... there. That's not crazy?"

"It's a matter of personal preference," I almost said taste, decided that would have been in bad taste. "I've never

done it before either. But I was running out of anything to reach," I admitted.

Nancy nodded. "It wasn't the most comfortable position I've ever tried, usually when I sit on someone's face, it's the other way around." Her eyes met mine, flat and expressionless. I wondered what she was thinking; I had a feeling it wasn't really about the position we'd just made love in.

She spoke softly, "I've been sexually active since I was eleven; my last baby sitter just loved to eat little girl pussy. And I loved the attention and the way it felt. I really hated it when my mom told me I was old enough not to need a sitter any more. I didn't think I was going to get tongued like that again, any time soon.

"One night, Dawn was sleeping over; we were stupid, really stupid. Swiped one of my dad's beers," she shook her head. "Twelve year olds have no head for booze, much less nine year olds. We got drunk as skunks. I was so horny I forgot where I was, and started masturbating. Dawn was curious and so I showed her what I'd learned from my baby sitter. And sure enough, Dawn loved it."

She gave a short bitter laugh. "We both loved it; for two years, after school, any old time we could manage a sleep over, we did it. Then Keith caught us. He wanted me to give him a BJ as the price of silence; I wasn't thinking about anything except not getting caught. So I did it.

"After that, he hunted us, trying to catch us. We haven't, not since that day." Nancy was silent for a long time. "So Keith just popped in one day after school and demanded another payment, anyway," Nancy huffed a sigh. "I told him to go fuck himself, which is what I should have done the first time."

I leaned close, kissed Nancy lightly. "It was the right thing to do."

She shrugged. "When Mom came home a bit later, I told her that Keith had found Dawn and I 'playing.' Mom asked a few questions, nodded and laughed, 'Played a game or two like that myself, in my day!' she told me. After that, if I wanted to bring someone over, that was okay with her. She told my Aunt to keep her son away from me, or she'd call the cops."

"She should have called the cops," I said softly.

"Easier to say than to do. Except for you," she replied.

"Are you pissed at me for turning him in?" I asked, wondering if that was the source of what I thought was unhappiness.

"No, you're right. It was way past time to have done something about Keith. But once you start covering up for someone, all you think about is covering up. Stupid. Everyone has apologized to my Aunt for not saying something sooner. She's pissed, really pissed, at the rest of the family; even yet she doesn't really accept what Keith did. She talks about how it was 'the other boys.'"

"In Sam's case, that might be true," I told her. "He was the violent one; Keith and Roger were turds, but not violent turds. Not on their own."

She looked at me more seriously. "You're making excuses for him, too."

"Uh uh!" I said quickly, "That was an explanation, not an excuse! No excuse for what they did, just a possible explanation."

She looked at me, her eyes wide. "I never thought of it like that before." She was silent for a long time, then her hand went down and rubbed my cock, which was not ready for the attention; not that I didn't respond quickly. "You want to do it?" she asked softly.

I looked into her eyes. "I like it when the girl I'm with is a little more whole hearted," I told Nancy.

She rubbed me another time, and I grew rock hard. "When I was a sophomore, Mom read something in a magazine about how to get into college. Extra-curricular activities, she told me. I had to do something. I'd been taking dance since I was four; cheerleading seemed logical," she laughed ruefully.

"I wasn't prepared for all of their little rituals. I didn't mind Sylvie George 'adopting me' for a month; I didn't mind eating or being eaten. It was the night when I made the team and they drew a football player's name out of the hat for

me to do the same thing to. I came this close to walking away, right then." She held up her fingers a fraction of an inch apart.

Well, I'd told Janey Sussman about that; it didn't make me feel much better to know I was right. "But I picked Tony," she smiled slightly. "Tony told them, he couldn't get it up, not with an audience. He stood there, in the middle of the cheerleaders and the football team and told them he couldn't get it up." Her voice was filled with wonder, obviously amazed, even now.

"They all left, and Tony told me that while he'd like a blow job, he didn't want it that much. We could just fake it. So I jerked him off." She met my eyes. "A couple of weeks later we were coming home from an away game; we'd gone to the dance later, it was after midnight. Tony and I were the only two awake on the bus. I jerked him off again, and then let him finger me.

"A couple of weeks later, his mom drove us home after a practice. I asked Tony in; no one was home and that time we did it. Ever since, not often, but once or twice a month we do it." She waved at the door. "I wanted to get Tony and Sue Ellen together tonight, just like this and tell her."

I was silent for a long moment. "Do you want me to tell Sue Ellen?" It seemed to me to be the obvious explanation for what she was after.

She met my eyes. "You and she are friends. Of course you'll tell her."

"You and she are friends too, you haven't told her. Tony and Sue Ellen are friends, and they haven't spoken about it. I'm friends with Tony; he hasn't told me." I looked into her eyes. "Not everyone tells secrets, Nancy. And this is personal and private; I won't unless you want me to."

"Even if I'm a big chicken, and haven't got the courage to do it myself? That I'd be using you to duck something really unpleasant?"

"I don't much want to do it, Nancy. It's not something I look forward to. But if you ask me to, I will." I reached down where Nancy had still been rubbing my cock. "And you don't have

to do this to get me to do it, either."

For the first time, I saw emotion on her face. "Sue Ellen told me you were the one guy she's met who doesn't mind the girl on top. Tony hates that."

"Sue Ellen told me that same thing," I told her. "Personally, I like it best."

She kept lightly stroking my cock, but was otherwise silent for a bit. Then she looked at me. "I started off with girls, but Tony's nice, really nice. But he's been the only boy I've been with. I know this is supposed to be like Mardi Gras this weekend, no rules. Tom..."

I leaned over and kissed her. "If you want to, I surely do too!" I told her. This time she lifted her mouth to be kissed, and I felt her mouth fall open. I used my tongue, and the kiss swiftly went to the 'super hot' variety. Still, I was a little startled when Nancy rolled on top of me, and rammed my cock into her pussy. It was almost rough, but I realized she was simply in a hurry.

She moved on me, more at first than any other girl I'd been with, only Penny had been close. Her hands ran over my body, her kisses were not only to my mouth, but my ears, my face. A giggle ran through my body, I don't think Nancy felt it; the reason I liked the girl on top was when she sat up, I could rub her breasts or clit. Lying on top of me wasn't as good, because I could hardly reach anything. Still, one part of her I did reach was her bottom, and I rubbed her ass cheeks, trailing my fingers through the crack of her ass.

Nancy gave a low moan, lifted up her head and looked at me. "You keep touching me back there."

I nodded, "I'll stop if you want."

Nancy shook her head, looking at me steadily. "It's just nice, I guess."

She smiled, not quite the first emotion I'd seen from her, but easily the most. "I guess laying on my back, it would be hard to reach." I nodded, and she continued to move against me, her hips doing most of the work. After a second, she lifted up slightly, and I moved my hands from her bottom to her breasts.



"I know guys do it there. And I've heard some girls let guys do it to them." Again I nodded, enjoying the feel of her breasts under my fingers. As I'd noted when Sue Ellen had rubbed Nancy's breasts, her nipples grew erect; very much longer than most. Nancy had paused, not only talking, but moving against me. "Have you ever...?"

Again I nodded. "Not everyone likes it. I've never been with another guy," I shook my head, "I don't think I'd like that."

She nodded. "I don't think I want to do it either. But touching, that's nice." There was a funny catch in her breathing, and I looked at her with a trace of concern. "God," she murmured, wiggling a bit. "I want you so much. Hard. I wish..." She shook her head, bit her lip. "I'm just using you, you know."

"With Sue Ellen, just now... I want some boy to fuck me; fuck me hard. Yet, I look at you and that's not what happens. It's loving, gentle. Wonderful. I'm very confused right now."

"That's okay," I smiled back, moved against her. "As long as this is what you want."

"Oh yeah! I want it!" Nancy started moving again, more vigorously. She lowered herself back down, and I moved my hands over her back, down to her bottom, long strokes. Twice in the next few minutes I trailed fingers through her ass crack, then another time with more pressure, spreading her cheeks slightly, touching the rosebud. Nancy gave a sibilant sigh of pleasure, and started moving faster. I lifted to reach her, and then touched her there again.

This time there was an "Ahhhhh!" very much like Jenny's, and I felt her quiver above me. I thrust very hard, very deep and she clamped her vaginal muscles down on me, and I came inside her. For maybe half a minute, we stayed like that, frozen in our mutual pleasure, before finally her muscles relaxed, then mine.

"I like this way lots better than the other," Nancy said after a minute. "Way better."

"It's better still, if you sit up," I told her softly. "I

can rub all sorts of places." I was surprised when she leaned down, kissed me lightly on the forehead.

"Tom... " I looked at her, curious what she was thinking. "You're the first person I've been with who, right after, was thinking about ways to make it better for me. With girls, it's mostly trying to make it better for both, but Tony, he's a fountainhead of ideas on how to get himself off."

"I'm not Tony," I told her, pushing into her again with my half erect cock. Inside, I realized that maybe I wasn't Tony, but how many times had I compared one lover to another?

She giggled. "No, not Tony. Different." She smiled at me. "I was unhappy earlier; Tony was with that French girl. Sue Ellen was more or less busy; Janey was quick. Gaby and I took more time, but she wanted to go back to Fay."

I felt her vaginal muscles clench around my rod. "You're different." She was silent again, and then started rubbing her nipples over mine. "We'll probably never be together again, like this, after tonight." I could only nod. Probably not. "Once more?" I surged into her, lifting her midsection a few inches off the bed.

After a few more lifts, I pressed lightly, until she was sitting up. One hand went to her amazing nipples, hard and huge; the other for her clit, small and soft. We rose on a cloud of passion, and at the mountain's peak, again she sounded more like Jenny than anyone else. A few moments after our climax, she curled up in my arms, and was asleep a few seconds later.

I kissed Nancy's forehead; considered what I should do next. Sally didn't seem to have had much compunction about leaving me snoozing away; of course, I suspected she was now home in her own bed. Did she have a smile on her face? I hoped so; I did thinking about her.

I glanced at Nancy, her face relaxed in sleep. There was a strong temptation to curl up next to her and sleep myself. Except I wasn't all that tired, but it seemed like such a rat thing to do, to get up and leave someone you'd just made love to.

I sighed. On the other hand, what if Nancy slept until

morning? What about Mindy, Sally, Sue Ellen? Hadn't they gotten right up and left?

I kissed Nancy again, stood and left as quietly as I could. The clock on the nightstand stood at midnight.

Sunday, March 31, 2002

I saw that Sue Ellen had turned out the pool lights; it was a little after midnight now. I almost missed seeing her, Sue Ellen was sitting by herself on a picnic table; only a stray gleam of light from the kitchen revealed her. I walked up and she smiled.

"It's a pretty evening," Sue Ellen said quietly.

"I get this feeling that you aren't enjoying this as much as some," I replied to her softly.

She laughed and punched me lightly on the arm. "Some I could mention have had a really good time." She turned more serious. "You. Tony. Anna and Sally. Even Jennifer." Another pause, "Most others, I guess." Yet another pause. "I don't know what's gotten into Janey tonight. She's been chasing all of the girls, even the straight ones. I told her to chill; now she's pissed at me."

"If this works at all," I told her quietly, "it has to be free choice." Sue Ellen nodded. "And who have you chosen?"

She looked at me, shook her head. "No one rings my chimes. Not Tony, not you. Not Janey..." She sighed.

I wondered how to tell her about Nancy and Tony. "Nancy?" I inquired.

"Oh, that." Sue Ellen chuckled. "I don't know what those two thought, she and Tony. Tony doesn't like to admit it, but after doing it... his interest really flags for a while. There were times when, for no reason I could see, he wasn't interested. Very un-Tony-like. And about then, Nancy would avoid me; if we met, she wouldn't meet my eyes.

"So I decided, what the heck, I'd do something she wouldn't expect. Her, me... and someone other than Tony."

"She wanted someone to try to explain it to you." I shook my head. "I don't think you can explain things like that... they just happen."

"I didn't really mind. Tony's sweet, I figured that Nancy probably had a lot of problems... She and Dawn have been close for a long time. Which meant Keith was around."

"She hates Keith; really hates him. A few close calls but Tony was the first and only guy, until tonight."

"And now, Tom Ferguson, man of steel."

"I've had to take some time to rest up," I told her, laughing.

She was silent again, and then glanced at me. "If you could be with anyone here, right now, who?" she asked.

I sighed. "I don't honestly know. Jenny and I..." I shook my head. "She's always going to be special to me. Anna, Sally..." I huffed a sigh.

"Anna took Sally home," Sue Ellen told me. "Tony's locked in a room in the pool house with Fleur." She giggled at that. "He is so smitten!"

"Thank you, by the way, for telling me about her," I told her.

"She certainly had a smile on her face when you two came back to the pool." Sue Ellen laughed. "Mindy was a surprise."

I raised an eyebrow. "You invited her, why was that?" I asked.

"Tony did," Sue Ellen corrected. "She's shy; really shy. A bad boyfriend, I think." I nodded, that's what Mindy had said. "And then, after you, Janey. Later, she helped with chips and dips, then she and Michelle vanished."

Speak of the devil; Mindy came walking out of the house. "Where's everyone?"

"Conjugating," I told her. Mindy giggled, then her eyes went to Sue Ellen.

"I fell asleep," Mindy sounded apologetic.

"Me too," I told her.

Mindy glanced at me, but her eyes returned to Sue Ellen. Fascinated, I thought, by Sue Ellen's breasts. The two traded a look that was strongly reminiscent of Mom and Melinda the other day. Sure enough, Mindy held out her party hat to Sue Ellen, who looked at it, surprised. The two traded another series of looks, and then Sue Ellen glanced apologetically at me. "Later, Tom." I nodded, and the two of them went towards the house, hand in hand.

I contemplated what I should do; I decided that since nothing was going on at the pool, I should check out the house myself, so I trailed along after a minute or two.

There was no one in the kitchen. I found a glass, got a drink of water, and then another. I was surprised that I was suddenly thirsty. Then I mentally kicked myself; in a while, I was going to have to go pee. With luck, the urge wouldn't come at the wrong time. I walked into the theater room; the only person there was Janey Sussman, who was sitting alone on the couch, dozing. I started to back out, and as I did, her eyes snapped open.

"I'm awake," she said softly.

"Sorry," I said apologetically.

She glanced around. "What time is it?"

"After midnight."

She patted the couch next to her. "I have a proposition for you," she said as I sat down.

"I'm always interested in propositions," I replied, a grin on my face.

"I hear you are supposed to be the cat's meow when it comes to muff diving."

I shrugged. "No complaints."

"You think you could bring me off?" she asked, challenging me.

Again I shrugged. "That would be pretty much up to you," I told her.

"You bring me off first, and I'll let you fuck me."

"Well gosh, Janey," I said as sarcastically as I could. "What a deal! Why would I want to fuck you?"

She blinked, looked down at my groin. Nope, not hard. She laughed, then. "I could blow you, and get your interest up."

"Maybe," I told her. "How about this? I eat you up, and then you can do whatever you please."

She looked at me. "You'd do it? Even if I got up and walked away and found Sue Ellen or someone else afterwards?"

I nodded. "Yep. Tell you what; you can pretend I'm a new candidate for the cheerleading squad. You've picked me; I'm the one you want to go down on you."

Janey nodded, then slid forward on the sofa, and I knelt down on the floor at her feet. I leaned close, stroking her inner thighs, thighs that she had spread wide to welcome me. She had, I realized as I ran my tongue over her pubes, shaved her pussy hair. Her slit was as featureless as JR's. I gently pried it open with my fingers, revealing a small clit, and a little flower of skin surrounding it. I licked her clit, and then applied my mouth to her vaginal opening, sending my tongue as deep into her as I could reach.

For maybe half a minute, I did that, awareness growing only slowly. Before, when I'd done this with a girl, she would move, make soft sounds, talk to me. Janey was like a frozen statue, no sound and no movement. I glanced up at her; she sat still, looking ahead, no real expression on her face. As I realized this wasn't doing anything for her, I also realized I was still as limp as a noodle. That was bizarre; I'd never had that trouble before, except for Elizabeth. I wasn't entirely certain, but I didn't think this was the same.

Janey was a little moist, but not as much as Fleur. Janey had washed recently, using some sort of herbal soap. She

smelled fresh and nice; so that wasn't it. I pushed deeper, rubbing her clit with my thumb; then I tried lifting her bottom, to push my tongue deeper yet. Two minutes into eating her out, I admitted defeat. Neither one of us was moved in the least.

I pulled back, looked up at her. "This isn't good for you."

Janey smiled, but said, "You have the longest tongue. God, no one has tongue fucked me that deep before!" She sighed, "But..."

"If it's doing nothing for you, and it's not doing anything for me... a good reason to consider doing nothing." She nodded, and I rocked back on my heels and stood up. Janey was still sitting with her legs spread wide. For the life of me, I couldn't understand why I didn't want to at least suck her pussy. But I didn't.

"I'm sorry," Janey whispered. "I'm really sorry."

I shook my head. "No regrets, Janey. None. It just didn't work. Better to realize it and stop than continue frustrating ourselves."

She moved her hands, start to rub her pussy with one hand, her breasts with the other. After a second, she gave a little gasp, then met my eyes. She'd let me watch her masturbate to orgasm, I thought, and it hadn't taken very long at all. Maybe this was like Elizabeth after all.

She met my eyes. "Everything still works."

I nodded and decided not to laugh. "Later, Janey."

I turned around to go, and then stopped. Jenny was standing a few feet away, hand in hand with Katrina.

"I was looking for you," Jenny said with a smile. Her eyes went past me to Janey who had gone back to dozing. "Want to do something kinky?" Jenny asked. I looked at her; my earlier problem, not having an erection, had proved temporary. Katrina saw the change and blushed.

"Come," Jenny said, reaching out for my hand.

She led Katrina and me through the house, down a hallway. I'd seen the bathroom at the end of the hall; I hadn't realized there was another bedroom, just to the left of the bathroom. Jenny pushed the door open, and I saw the biggest bed I'd ever seen in my life; king sized and then some. Sitting side by side on the side closest to the door were Gaby Sanchez and Fay Church, although they weren't so much sitting as making out.

Jenny squeezed my hand and whispered in my ear, her breasts against my arm. "It's a big bed. Gaby said we shouldn't let all that room go to waste. We were going to catch some Z's."

I nodded, feeling a little weary right then myself. Gaby was a nice looking girl, medium size, with pert breasts and dark nipples. They weren't as dark as Anna or Sally's had been, though. Long black hair, a little on the coarse side, but pretty anyway.

Fay was as blonde as Gaby was dark; corn silk blonde, almost white hair, hair every bit as long as Gaby's. Gaby had a dark mat of pussy hair, Fay's was almost transparent, and there wasn't much of it. Fay's pussy was like Janey's, a small flower of skin folds. In Fay's case, you didn't have to pull her pussy lips back to see it; her beautiful flower was easily visible.

What had Sue Ellen said, way back when? She'd given a list of the lesbians, a list that had included Jenny and Gaby... but not Fay. Or Katrina. I felt someone touch my shoulder, from behind me. I turned and saw Janey.

"Room for one more?" I saw Gaby glance at Jenny, saw Jenny nod the least bit.

"There's always room for one more," I said softly, "at least that's what my dad says when he's stuffing a suitcase."

There were chuckles and, for a second, I got the weird idea that they were talking amongst themselves, without saying a word. I'd noticed that with Mom and Melinda, Sue Ellen and Mindy. Now there were five girls in the room, using the same communication. I stood there, mostly clueless, wondering what they were saying to each other.

Gaby got up from the bed and joined the four of us, standing by the door. She went to Katrina and smiled. "Ready for bed, sweetie?" Katrina blushed lightly, but stepped



forward. Gaby pulled Katrina the last few steps, and wrapped her arms around Katrina's waist. Katrina lifted her lips to be kissed, and Gaby obliged her. Two seconds later the two of them had their hands on each other's bottoms, pulling themselves tightly into pussy-to-pussy contact; a kiss that measured a million degrees centigrade, I thought.

I glanced out of the corner of my eye and saw Janey kissing Jenny's breasts. It too was a seriously hot kiss; and Jenny's fingers were already headed for Janey's pussy. I watched that for a second, and then saw Fay was still sitting on the edge of the bed. What was I supposed to do?

Maybe I didn't understand the language women used among themselves, but I think Fay could speak mine. Like Janey a few minutes before, she spread her legs wide, using her hands to hold them apart. I walked the six steps to her and, as I had for Janey, knelt on the floor. I headed for the little flower petals, sucking gently on them, using my tongue to lave and caress her. Fay let out a sibilant sound of pleasure; her hand left her breast to run through my hair. Her clit was shaped like a miniature penis; instead of being turned off, though, I was turned on, rubbing its length with my finger, then taking it into my mouth and sucking on it.

Fay sighed again, and then I felt her shake. That easy to make you come? I chuckled to myself. I'm going to make you beg me to stop! I started seriously pushing my tongue inside her, my hands busy on their own with her relatively small breasts. Fay pressed her hands atop mine at one point, upping the pressure on her breasts to something that must have been just short of painful; she let out a little cry of pleasure, then another as I tweaked her hard nipples.

Behind her, I could hear Jenny's oooohhhs! and ahhhhs! start up, and right in the middle of things, Katrina's voice, clear and bright. "Oh! That tickles! Don't stop!" I nearly giggled aloud myself, and I could tell that Fay was experiencing spasms different from her orgasms up to then. I moved my hands under her bottom, lifting her to my tongue, and she shrieked with pleasure as I reached deep inside her with my tongue.

With a move like an eel, Fay slid forward abruptly, pushing me down and back, onto the carpeted floor of the bedroom. I lay on my back, and for a moment she kissed me, hard and hungry. "Grrrrrr," she said in a mock growl. "I want to eat you, too."

She coiled around, presenting me with her bottom again, while taking my hard on in her hand, and a second later, her mouth.

Every girl I'd been with had had slightly different anatomy. Fay's was the worst for this position; there was almost nothing I could reach with my tongue without bending myself into a pretzel, a position I could only hold for a few minutes. So I finger fucked her while she sucked me. From someplace in the depths of my memory I heard Jenny's voice say, 'use two fingers!' I did that; which sent Fay corkscrewing and twisting, putting my erection in dire jeopardy of abrupt truncation by her teeth.

She quickly regained control, but that was because she let go of my cock to enjoy what was going on inside her pussy. Her movements became more frenzied; then she gave a little squeak, completely at odds with the sounds she'd been making before, then collapsed down across my body.

After a second, she clumsily got off; I took a few knees and elbows in places that didn't need them, then Fay helped me up. She kissed me, her hand going to rub my cock. "I'm tempted, really tempted," Fay whispered in my ear, lightly blowing in it, her tongue running around the curve. I nearly shot off, God, that was sexy!

She went on, "The one time I tried it with a guy, we did sixty-nine and he shot off in two seconds. He didn't even lick me once. Oh baby, what a licking you gave me! Then it got better and better!" I smiled at her, and her fingers curled around me. "Now I'm tempted to try again."

I reached down; her fingers were cupping my balls now, and I moved my cock to rub that little flower between her legs; then her clit. I moved a few inches towards Fay, sliding my erection between her legs; not where it would normally go, but between her thighs. I stroked into her as if I was pushing into her vagina, slowly at first, then a little faster.

"Mmmm!" Fay sighed in pleasure, and I moved again, deliberately rubbing my cock head through the folds of her pussy, paying special devotion to the flower there. I looked past Fay, saw Janey between Jenny's legs, eating her up; Gaby was doing the same thing to Katrina. Fay leaned close, her fingers trailing across my cheek; her lips came to my ear.

"How many pussys has that been in today?" her voice was whisper soft.

I decided that Mom didn't count; Fay was asking about the party. Mindy, Fleur, Anna, Sally, Sue Ellen, Nancy. Fay would be number seven, and I told her. "Seven is my lucky number," Fay said, and then moved a little so that my cock head penetrated her slightly. She was very wet, and I moved just a bit myself, and it was further inside her. She moved again and I moved, and before you knew it, I was in all the way.

She smiled at me, "Can we do this standing up?"

I nodded but added, "It's better in bed."

She giggled. "Isn't it always?" She moved back, and we managed to lay down, me on top. We commenced some serious lovemaking, both of us getting wound up and cumming twice, although at different times. After the second time I'd spent myself into her, Fay grinned and I saw she was looking towards Jenny and Janey. I looked; not only were the two of them watching us, so were Gaby and Katrina.

Fay giggled again, and once more I thought it was an interesting sensation when you are inside a girl. She lifted with her hips, and I knew it was a get off sign, not a let's-do-it-again hint. I pulled out, and Fay rolled off the bed. "Scoot over," she told the others, and everyone scooted over one position. Now I was next to Jenny; then there was another movement, and Janey ended up on the other side of Katrina.

In a moment, Fay and Janey were each suckling on Gaby's breasts. Jenny saw it, grinned. "Me too." I met Katrina's eyes across Jenny's body, asking the question. Her eyes went to Jenny's breasts, then a shy nod. For some time, we both made love to Jenny's breasts; I could see that Katrina was finger fucking Jenny as well. Jenny in turn was single-mindedly enjoying the attention.

Several times when I was licking and kissing Jenny, I could see Katrina's eyes on me. Our faces were only inches apart, and one of those times it looked to me like Katrina offered up a kiss to me. I accepted, brushing my lips across hers. Then a moment later, again; this time the kiss was longer, more intense. When I pulled back for a moment, there was a dreamy look on Katrina's face; helped, no doubt by the fact that Jenny

was no longer single-minded about her own pleasure, she was finger fucking Katrina.

"Go ahead, sweetie," Jenny murmured quietly in Katrina's ear. "Go ahead." Katrina looked at me, thinking about it. Then Jenny moved sliding atop Katrina, briefly pausing to rub her pussy against Katrina's. Then Katrina was next to me, and Jenny and I were kissing her breasts as we'd kissed Jenny's a few moments before.

Katrina's breasts were small like I preferred; light nipples, lighter in color than mine. There was one big difference though, from any other girl whose nipples I'd sucked on. With Katrina there was a definite taste. An odd, soft sweetness that was definitely interesting. I kept sucking for a while, more than I usually would, then Jenny whispered in Katrina's ear, "Sit on Tom's face."

I saw indecision on Katrina's face, then she looked at me; the indecision remained. Jenny sensed it too, leaned close and whispered something to Katrina I couldn't hear. Katrina whispered back and Jenny kissed her, caressing her breasts. "Sorry, Tom," Katrina said quietly. "I just..."

I smiled at her. "No need to apologize. None." Katrina got up then, walked to the door, Jenny trailing along. Now I was the only male in bed with three girls; one of whom I'd made love to, and I was tolerably sure I was never going to be with either of the other two. I got up too, and followed Jenny and Katrina out the door.

I glanced at the clock in the living room, it was after two. There was a couple lying on the couch, vertically imposed, both asleep. I walked into the home theater and the TV was off, but Jenny and Katrina were kissing on the couch. I continued on, going back to the pool area and sat down in a deck chair, staring out over the water. The moon was up, casting a clear white light down on the pool and the small patch of grass that was the back yard.

I watched the moon dance on the occasional wave in the pool; the world was silent, the night cool but not cold. I glanced up, but between the moon and the city, only one or two stars were visible. Tom Ferguson, boy wonder. Seducer of women. Well, maybe not.

Who had I actually seduced? Maybe Shannon. Not Marsha, I suppose you could make a case I seduced JR, but she had agreed awfully fast. There was a case that could be made about Penny, too. But she had been the one who came back and said let's do it. Mom? Mary? Kim? Nope, I thought, I'm not one to seduce someone, but I definitely am there when I'm wanted. Mutual agreement to make love, I thought. That's pretty much my hallmark.

I remembered things Shannon had said about how she'd progressed to sex the first time; Mindy had spoken of the same things. I'd never done it that way; I'd never spent weeks or months working up to it with someone. Was that wrong? I couldn't hardly see that it was. Then there was Sally. Dear Sally, who spoke a simple word, a word that at long last I was beginning to get a grip on its true meaning.

Sally had been a virgin, but I hadn't seduced her. She'd come fully primed, ready. Too ready, it turned out, having a stupid idea; not the sex, but the play-acting.

I heard a rustle, sensed someone come up behind me. I glanced back over my shoulder, but all I could see was the lower part of her body, the rest was hidden in the shadows. "Don't look." Her voice was unfamiliar.

I wasn't certain what she meant, but there was a modest patch of pubic hair, so she was definitely a she. She came up directly behind me, straddling the chair with her legs, then she started rubbing my neck and shoulders. It was pleasant, and after a bit, very relaxing. I drifted again, watching the sparkles on the water.

Was this it, I thought. I'm reduced to sitting here, with a girl I don't recognize; much less know her name, rubbing my back. There were a lot of things I wasn't sure of, but I was tolerably sure that the sun was going to rise in the east in a few hours, and that sooner than that this girl and I would be making love. Was this a good thing? With someone I didn't know? I'd undoubtedly seen her face at some point tonight, but from the brief glimpse, it wasn't someone I knew. I almost laughed aloud; all I'd seen was the area between her legs. Just how many girls would I recognize by that alone?

I felt my arousal increasing as her fingers worked on my neck and shoulders, then down my spine. This was, I thought,

hormones and nothing but hormones. Were hormones a good enough reason to make love to someone? I'd always told myself they weren't, yet here I sat, once again getting very close to the moment where I'd turn around and start kissing her pussy, her breasts; who knew, maybe she'd let me make love to her backside, if the hormones moved both of us that direction, as they had with Fleur.

The girl behind me moved closer, and I felt her breasts press against my back for a moment, then her nipples, erect, moved across my skin. No doubt about it, I thought. Another girl who was as ready as I was; and there was no doubt that I was ready, either. This wasn't like it had been with Janey, I felt nothing like hesitation. In fact, I wanted to turn and suckle those wonderful nipples titillating my back. Then she was rubbing her bush against my lower back; a bush with a strong trace of moisture.

The girl spoke suddenly, her voice different than I'd expected; only Melinda, the TV reporter had anything like the full, rich, lush tones in her voice. "All my life I wanted things: this, that, the other. And I would ask my mom or dad, and there it would be. When I got to junior high, I started looking at boys, and sure enough, it didn't take long before I wanted one in particular.

"My dad, for the first time I could ever remember, told me no, my boyfriend couldn't sleep over. My mom, for the first time I could remember, told me that I wasn't enough old to understand such things. She told me about babies and AIDS and all of that, but I'd heard about it in school. Take me to the doctor, I told her. He can fix me up. Except my parents wouldn't take me, so one day I made my own appointment on a Saturday, went in and asked the doctor for birth control."

She chuckled lightly. "He said I was too young, he couldn't give me something like that without my parent's permission.

"So I told myself, screw them. I'm going to do it; so I brought the boy home one day after school and we did it.

"Except, he'd never done it before, and neither had I. The rubber leaked, and the second time he didn't even bother." I sighed, afraid where the story was going; I'd heard it from my mom.

"Nothing happened; I didn't catch any disease, I didn't get pregnant. But more importantly, he hadn't done anything for me; it was more fun masturbating myself.

"A few weeks later, I met a man, a nice older man. He knew how to use a rubber right, he knew a doctor who fitted me for a diaphragm. And he sure did something for me; God, it was great sex! Then, one day his wife came home early, and caught us. That wasn't good."

"I imagine not," I said quietly.

I heard a huffed sigh. "But, I'd learned the lessons I needed to learn. After that, the sex still ranged from bad to good to beyond good; then I met someone I really liked, and we got married. Now and again, my husband lets me jump the fence. Get out a little."

I'd been trying to make sense of her words in the context of Sue Ellen and Janey's party; I realized that in this case she meant that phrase about jumping the fence, literally.

"So, do you have any problems with making love to an older woman? A party crasher?" She was rubbing her breasts against my back again.

"No," I said softly.

Then I did turn, and for the first time saw the black hair, the brown eyes of a woman of twenty-eight or so, a startlingly beautiful woman. I leaned close to her, kissing her lips lightly.

Our arms went around each other, and we kissed and kissed, tongues and bodies moving against each other. I smiled at her at one point when we paused. "What's your name?"

"Sonia Travis." Our voices were hushed against a backdrop of the still night.

"Tom Ferguson." I paused slightly, my eyes on breasts that were medium sized hemispheres, without a hint of sag; thick erect nipples. "Sonia?" My voice trailed away. "Why do you think I might not be one of the bad sex guys?"

She smiled slightly. "One thing I've found is that it takes someone who's interested in what I feel to do it right. A sign of that is no hurry for personal gratification. When I was rubbing your back, even when I was going out of my way to make it sexy, you simply enjoyed it; not in a hurry. And now, you are as happy with kissing and hugging as I am. You're not in a hurry, even a little."

I smiled at her. "Well, I don't want to still be here when the sun comes up." Sonia laughed and put her arms around my neck. I kissed her again, and she pulled me tightly to her lips, and for another goodly long time we did just that.

When we broke, I reached out and touched her breasts for the first time. "On second thought, we can take all the time we want."

She touched the back of my hand lightly with her fingers. "Tom Ferguson, have you ever gone down on a girl?"

I smiled and nodded in reply. "And did you like it?"

I grinned again. "I wouldn't mind in the least going down on you," I told Sonia.

A few seconds later, I was kneeling between her legs, laving her pussy. Her pussy hair was the thickest yet; but now I was prepared. I used my fingers to pull most to one side, using my tongue on the biggest clit I'd ever seen. It looked startlingly like a penis, except the head didn't have a slit in it, just a round red knob at the tip of long folds of flesh that resembled a man's length.

I'd never wanted to suck on another guy. I told myself this was a woman, not a man. I tried to tell myself her clit looked more like a thumb; surely I could suck a thumb! I'm not sure what worked; something did. I pulled on it with my lips; stretching the skin, let it pop noisily out of my mouth, then I repeated with variations.

Sonia came with a trembling sigh, and then pressed her hips forward wanting me to do it again. Her breathing caught, she trembled again. She pulled me up to kiss her. It was lovely, sweet and my hands worked her breasts, stroking her nipples; I have never felt more content, more comfortable.



Too comfortable, it turned out.

I awoke slowly, savoring the languor in my body. I yawned and stretched, then looked around. I was lying stretched out on the pool chair, alone. The sun was starting to come up in the east; the sky already lightly colored. I sighed and shook my head, then smiled. Well, Sonia had said she liked it when a man wasn't in a hurry for personal gratification. Evidently, there were limits to my stamina after all. How many times had I come since I'd gone to bed Friday night? Is it polite to count such a thing? I thought back on the last day and shook my head. Not only not polite, not smart and probably not possible.

I looked up at the sunrise; there were quite a few clouds in the sky, there was a lot of color in it. I was still sitting, watching those colors when Jenny and Katrina came out of the house. Without a word, Jenny came right over to me and kissed me heartily.

"Missed you," she hugged me tightly as she spoke.

I glanced at Katrina, standing next to us, and Jenny giggled.

"A little, anyway." Jenny's hand wrapped itself around my penis, which promptly rose. "I thought I'd give you a little wake up." Again my eyes went to Katrina, who blushed.

"Katrina says she wants to watch," Jenny said, as she moved down the chair. I remembered the time Jenny had watched JR doing this to me; I remembered her masturbating to it. Would Katrina do the same thing?

Jenny took me in her mouth, and I leaned back with a sigh of pleasure. So many, and yet it was as good as ever. Would there ever come a time when it wasn't? Then I remembered Janey, and knew that it was as good as the people sharing it; if it was what they wanted, it was magic. If it was something else, it was less than magic.

This was magic, no doubt about it. In spite of my exertions of the last few weeks, I could feel the pleasure rise inside of me. I realized I had my eyes closed, and I opened them. Katrina wasn't rubbing herself, she was finger fucking Jenny from behind, and rubbing her breasts across Jenny's back, as Sonia had done to me not so long before.

I met Katrina's eyes, and for a moment, the two of us spoke without words, sharing ourselves in a way I never would have thought possible. Katrina loved Jenny, loved making her happy; whatever Jenny wanted was what she wanted.

Jenny's attention to my turgid member flagged, she started to pant "Oh! Ah! Oooh! Aaaaah!" and I could see Katrina's fingers moving faster inside Jenny, two fingers I thought. Jenny came, and I smiled at Katrina, who smiled shyly back. Shy, but proud. Above all, happy.

After a bit, Jenny looked at me, apologetic. "I kind of lost track."

I smiled at her. "Jenny, if nothing else, tonight I've learned that while having more than one person making love to you at a time is nice, it is also too easy to get distracted. I think I'm going to sit here and watch the sunrise."

"I like sunrises," Katrina said softly. The two of them went a few feet away, sat down on a lounge chair, Jenny in back, her arms around Katrina.

A while later, Sue Ellen came out, hand in hand with Mindy. I'd moved to a picnic table, sitting backwards on the top, watching the sunrise put color into the sky. Sue Ellen looked and saw what I was watching, and without a word, she sat on the top of the table next to me with Mindy sitting in front of Sue Ellen on the bench.

We watched without talking for a while; then Tony and Fleur came out, and they too found a spot at the table and watched.

Finally the light show was over, and Sue Ellen was the first to break the spell of silence. "This is it, just us. Everyone else has left, even Janey."

Tony and I, and five girls. Three couples and me. I smiled and Sue Ellen laughed. "This didn't turn out at all like I thought it would." She gripped me on the shoulder. "But it was fun."

"I've learned a lot of French," Tony said with a laugh. Fleur hit him, but it was in fun.

"The other day, I was at Tom's, early in the morning. He made some of us breakfast. I think it only fair that I return the favor," Sue Ellen said, standing up and heading for the house. Mindy quickly caught up to Sue Ellen, the two already talking menu.

Jenny whispered something to Katrina, and the two of them followed Sue Ellen and Mindy inside, Fleur trailing the others.

After a second, Tony sat down on a chair a few feet away. "You okay, Tom?"

I shook my head, laughing. "There is okay, Tony and then there is better than ok. This is better than better than ok."

"I mean..." He waved at where Fleur had gone a moment before.

I shook my head more vigorously. "I told you, Tony, that isn't a problem. Fleur is nice."

"But I mean, Jennifer and the other girl, Sue Ellen with Mindy. You're by yourself."

Again I shook my head. "Tony, I don't think I will ever be by myself again. I have friends, Tony; some close, some closer, all a lot better than ok. I'm fine, Tony, just fine."

"I just wanted to be sure," he paused. "You and me, we go back a long time. Longer even, than Sue Ellen and me. In the last couple of weeks, though, I've gotten to know you better than I ever did. You've said some things to me lately..." He blushed, shook his head. "I'm a lot better now, I think. Thanks, thanks a million for being my friend."

You can't really say something to follow that, so I stuck with the truth. "Tony, you're my friend as well."

"Fleur's really special, Tom. Maybe she's not as pretty as Sue Ellen, but..."

"Special," I agreed. "Tony, that kitchen right now has a lot of special people in it. There were more special people here yesterday, and we'll go home to special, wonderful people and in the future we'll meet more of them. It's my idea of heaven on Earth, Tony."

He nodded, grinned and looked around. The sun was well up, high enough in fact to be adding a little warmth already to the day.

Tony looked at me. "Last year, at the team party after our last game; you know what the cheerleaders do, don't you?"

I nodded. "Kevin Short pulled my name," he said, looking at me. I looked back, curious, but sure where the story was going. "I let him; I mean, I could have said no, but he was all sad and apologetic. I felt bad for him. So I let him." Tony sighed.

"Sue Ellen does it better. Sue Ellen does it a lot better. Nancy Driscoll does it better; just about every girl who's done it to me does better. So I showed him some things. Afterwards, I felt weird. Like I'd been someone else, that it wasn't really me. A couple of weeks later, he called and wanted to come over. I told him that it had been nice, but no thanks."

He waved towards the house. "Fleur knows lots of things about sex, things Sue Ellen doesn't know. She showed me one..." He blushed red. I tried to keep a straight face, as I was pretty sure what Fleur had shown him. She'd liked it too?

"She let me do it... you know, behind like."

"I know what you mean," I said quietly.

"It was incredible," Tony murmured. "I really got off, and Fleur got really hot and excited." He looked at me. "Do you think, maybe, I'm queer?"

The last word was said in a deathly serious tone, as if he was diagnosing his imminent death.

"Tony, Sue Ellen likes Janey. Mindy. Same thing."

"They're girls."

"It's the same thing," I insisted. "Yeah, I have the same hang-ups as you do about guys and guys. But it's just a hang-up, Tony. And, Tony," I tapped my forehead, "I know it's a hang-up, but that doesn't mean I want to get rid of it. Stupid? Probably. But making love to a girl like that doesn't mean you

are something you're not."

"I just never thought I'd like something like that. I mean, isn't there just the one way you're supposed to do it?"

I nearly strangled, trying not to laugh. "Tony, there are a million ways to do it. The only thing you are 'supposed' to do, is both of you enjoy it. My favorite is when the girl is on top."

"On top?" He blinked, startled. "You can do that?"

"Oh yeah," I said and added. "You talked about the cheerleaders; I bet Kevin wasn't the only cheerleader that went down on you."

Tony nodded. "Tony, I've done the same thing for a girl, too. If you think about what two girls do together, you realize that girls like a lot of different things. Including being kissed..." I waved at my midsection.

He stared at me, and then looked at the pool, already sunlight glints were visible. "I never thought about it," he said quietly. "I never thought about it all. I mean, the idea is to get off."

"Not just you, Tony. The person you're with needs some loving, too. The joy of sex is in both the giving and the receiving."

Tony looked stricken. "My God! All those times with Sue Ellen! No wonder she took up with Janey and who knows who else!"

He stopped, stared at the house. "God, I'm the biggest asshole in the universe!"

"Oh, I think Parker, Driscoll and Sam Reese have pretty much got a lock on that, Tony. Sometimes we fall into ruts, don't see the forest for the trees. You, Tony, have run into a tree. I'd be willing to bet, though, you do something about it."

"Those guys?" I laughed sarcastically. "They don't see squat! Now they've run into the buzz saw. It won't be pretty, but maybe they'll learn something."

Tony started laughing, shaking his head. "Tom, if you'd have asked me a couple of weeks ago when I set you up with Marsha that in a few weeks you'd be giving me lessons on sex... I'd have laughed my damn fool head off. Because I am a fool."

Sue Ellen stuck her head out the kitchen door. "Yoo hoo! Studs! Your ladies await within, without your company!"

We got up and went inside. Fleur had whipped up waffle batter, while Jenny and Katrina had fried some sausage links. Mindy was watching Fleur make waffles wide-eyed.

Katrina glanced at me. "My dad loves to cook; Mom says fine, let him. She knows how to microwave a potato or water for tea. Me? I'm curious about everything."

Jenny laughed. "At Tom's house, everyone takes turns at everything, even the cooking."

Sue Ellen shook her head. "My dad's one claim to fame is the barbeque, and half the time what he cooks is charcoal broiled this or that. My mom doesn't let him in the kitchen."

"In France, it is usually the woman who cooks, but sometimes the men." She nodded at Katrina. "Then usually the woman doesn't cook."

Tony had a stupid grin on his face. "I love the way the French do just about everything."

We laughed and joked; it was a great breakfast with good friends. By a little after eight, we'd finished it, cleaned up the kitchen and then went around the house straightening up; I was surprised, there wasn't that much.

I helped pull off linens in the pool house; Sue Ellen was loading the washing machine when I brought in an armload. She smiled at me and shook her head. "I can't believe Janey left her own party."

"I think she's working on some issues," I told her. Sue Ellen nodded.

"She wasn't thinking very straight last night," Sue Ellen agreed. She looked at me. "We were going to give a prize this morning to the girl and guy who got around the most." She

sighed. "That was a really lame idea."

I nodded, aware that I'd have gotten another t-shirt. And, if what I'd heard had been true, so would Janey.

Eventually, we finished. I saw Jenny give Katrina a look, and I knew in a minute the two of them would vanish. Tony was in a corner with Fleur, 'practicing French.' Kissing, anyway. Mindy whispered something to Sue Ellen, who smiled back at her, and the two of them giggled and started talking about going shopping.

I stood by myself, looking around. Not bad, I thought, not bad. Yeah, I wish I had someone right this second, but maybe not having someone was a good thing.

From the front came the ring of the doorbell; we'd all put on clothes for breakfast, but I decided to go answer it, because everyone else was occupied.

I went to the door, opened it with a smile...

Sam Reese put the pistol in the middle of my forehead.

"Where's my fuckin' cunt sister?"

I took a step backwards, startled. He took a step forward, keeping the barrel solidly against my forehead. "You're Ferguson, right?" I could see his finger on the trigger; I could see every minute detail of the gun.

"Sam, this isn't a good idea," I said as quietly as I could.

"Listen to me, you fuckin' asshole! I want my queer sister! Already talked to one queer today; fuckin' bitch wouldn't say anything, even when I put this up her fuck hole!" He wiggled the pistol barrel against my head. "So I blew her fuckin' cunt out her brains! Now asshole, I'm going to blow your fucking head off if you don't tell me where my sister is!"

I wanted to die; I wanted to be some place else. Who had Sam hurt this time? What had ever possessed them to let this maniac loose?

I met his eyes. "I'm not in charge of keeping track of

your sister."

Right then, Tony stepped out of the back. "Hey Tom, who's that at the door?"

He had to know; Sam had been screaming.

Sam glanced at Tony, standing in the door to the living room, a baseball bat and ball in his hands. "We've got to get going Tom, if we're going to get in some batting practice."

The mundaneness of it didn't fool Sam for an instant; he pointed the pistol at Tony. "I want my fuckin' queer sister!"

Tony laughed, "I don't know who you are, but if I had a queer sister, I sure wouldn't want her." He laughed again, "Guy, my love muscle goes where it is going to be appreciated!" He said the last word with great exaggeration.

"Jennifer Reese!" Sam screamed. "I want to find that bitch and blow her pussy out her brains too! Just like the other bitch!"

My mind was torn between wondering who it was Sam had hurt, and the more immediate danger.

Tony let the baseball slip from his fingers; it hit the floor, bounced and started rolling to his right. Sam's eyes turned to follow it and I put one hand on the hand that held the pistol, and slammed into his arm as hard as I could, until his arm connected with the doorjamb.

Sam screamed and I heard a crack; I felt his arm break. I was sick to my stomach; but the pistol firing focused my attention back on the sick bastard. Except he wasn't holding the pistol anymore, it had fallen to the floor.

Behind me, I heard Tony say in an astonished voice, "Shit! That stings!"

I looked at Sam Reese; I don't know what he saw in my eyes, but he paled, turned to run and stumbled and sprawled on the sidewalk outside the front door. I leaped at him, landing with both my knees on his back; I didn't break anything of mine, but it hurt him, I could tell it hurt because he screamed again. I put my hands; both of them, on the back of his head, and ground



his face into the concrete of the sidewalk.

"Move! Twitch another muscle! I'll beat your head into the concrete until the shit for brains you have between your ears is oozing on the ground!"

This time I was conscious of each and every second until the police arrived; it seemed like an eternity. I saw Tony standing a little to one side, swinging the baseball bat loosely in his hand, saying nothing.

The eternity ended and a police car pulled up, siren going. Unlike last time, I watched the man every step of the way. He pulled out his pistol, waved it at Tony.

"Drop the bat, and step back!"

Tony dropped the bat, laughing. "Jeez, don't you shoot my bat too!"

"Now you," the policeman said, pointing his gun at me. "Get back away from the other kid, keep your hands where I can see them."

"This is Sam Reese. He said he shot a girl this morning. He said he came here to shoot his sister. I'll get up when he's in handcuffs."

Another police car came up, siren going. The officer got out, walked over to the first one, and said something I couldn't hear. The first cop waved at me. "He says that's the perp, there."

It took a while, but finally Sam was loaded into an ambulance with two cops to attend him.

Once again there was interminable discussion; this time though, it was at the police station. As soon as I got there, two detectives took me into a room and started asking me questions.

Eventually, I tired of the questions.

"Look, let's spare everyone here a lot of wasted time," I said after they'd asked me for the third time what I'd been doing at Sue Ellen's. "I told you twice. Twice is enough. If

you've done your homework, you know I have a little history this week. Keep pushing like you have been, and one I'll ask for my lawyer and two I'll give a TV interview mentioning just how despicable you two are, by name. None of which will get you any answers.

"We had a party last night. Some of us came to breakfast this morning, and then helped to clean Sue Ellen's house up. Reese showed up and put a gun to my head. My head, guys. I didn't put a gun to his head; I didn't threaten to shoot someone! I didn't say I'd killed someone else earlier! Wake up! Smell the roses! Sam Reese came with malice to hurt Jennifer Reese, who is under my parents' guardianship because hers are nuts and her brother is nuttier."

Someone else came in as I was talking, and I saw the police officer from earlier in the week. "Good work, Tom."

"Thanks, Officer Moss," I told him. I saw his eyes on the two detectives. I'd always thought that detectives were higher on the totem pole than street cops, but the two detectives were obviously fidgeting.

Joe Moss smiled. "Did I mention, Tom, that I'm one of the FOP representatives?"

I shook my head, not understanding what he meant. Joe nodded at the two detectives. "You'd be surprised how nice people are to me; I'm the one who has to go to bat for them if they get jammed up with the bosses. That happens to detectives oh, what, a couple times a year?"

I saw his eyes grow tighter. "Did you ask Mr. Ferguson for a statement?"

"Yes."

"And he gave it?"

"Yes."

"Then I think it's time for you guys to get started on the paper. Thanks, I appreciate it."

He waved me through the door, and I went out.

Everyone who'd been at the house this morning was waiting outside, including Jenny, my parents and our lawyer.

Tony grinned at me.

"I thought you were shot," I told him quietly, reaching out to shake his hand. "Thanks, Tony."

He laughed. "Naw, the bullet clipped the bat. Wow, what a buzz it gave my hands! Like the worst broken bat in the world!"

I looked at Officer Moss, who had followed me out of the interrogation room. "Sam said he shot someone else. I know you're not supposed to talk about it, but I promise no one here is going to say anything."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Tom, that's out of policy. If I told you Janey Sussman had been wounded, but not seriously, I could get in trouble."

I turned to Sue Ellen. "Sorry."

"Sorry?" she asked. "You're sorry? We could hear him all the way in the back of the house. Tony told us to run, I led everyone else over to Sonia's, the next-door neighbor. She called 911, even before the shot. I was worried sick about you two." She paused, sighed. "I called my parents, they started back from Rocky Point." She met my eyes. "Dad said to tell you from him, thanks so very much for keeping his daughter safe, her friends safe. I already thanked Tony."

I remembered Tony and his issues with his father vis a vis Sue Ellen, and looked at him. This probably wasn't the place to get into that.

It didn't take long after that; I'd been the one they'd talked to the longest. I was the one who'd talked to Sam the most, the one who'd broken his arm, bruised his ribs and broke his nose.

On the way to the resort hotel, I sat next to Jenny, who simply held my hand, not saying anything. I don't think anyone said more than about two words. When I got there, JR hugged me, also without speaking.

"Jennifer, why don't you and Joanna go down to the coffee

shop for some ice cream?" Dad said.

Jenny nodded, looked at me. "Tom's not in trouble?"

"No, but Ellen and I need to talk to him."

They left, and Dad waved for me to sit on the couch in the suite's living room. "When they told me the injuries to Sam Reese, I was flat out shocked." Dad's voice was quiet. "I couldn't imagine my son doing something like that. Then, gradually, I learned what had happened."

"I was surprised too," I told him. "There were a couple of times where I could have made it worse; I couldn't do it. But I didn't want him getting up and going after Jenny or anyone else again."

Mom leaned close, kissed me on the forehead. "You did the right thing, Tom." She nodded at Dad. "This really isn't about that, though. I hope you were careful about what you said to the police."

"Very."

"You shouldn't have talked to them without the lawyer," Dad said quietly.

"They were very belligerent; from the first, the police were acting like I was as much at fault as Sam. If the lawyer had been there, he'd have told me not to say anything; that seems to be his approach to problems. I want Sam Reese in jail as quickly as possible, and for him to stay there. I thought this would be the best way. I promise to talk to the lawyer before I talk to the police again."

There was a knock on the door, and Dad got up. In was the blonde woman from Children's Services, Eleanor Johannsen.

"Is Jennifer Reese here?"

"She's out having some ice cream," Mom said quietly. "She'll be back directly."

"May I come in and talk to you now? Then Jennifer when she comes back?"

Mom nodded, and let her in.

"This is better, really. I know Jennifer hasn't had it easy lately; this isn't making her life any better," Eleanor told us.

Dad nodded.

I, in the meantime, watched Eleanor Johanssen's breasts out of the corner of my eye. It had been a long weekend, I thought, you'd think I'd had enough.

"Late yesterday afternoon, they finished the paperwork on Sam Reese's bond. I was there with our legal people when he was released to his parent's custody; there was considerable emphasis placed on the conditions of his parole, and his parent's responsibilities in that regard. Not the least of which, he was not to see or try to see his sister."

She looked at Dad, then me. "There is no easy way to say this, and I will repeat it to Jennifer if you wish. Officers were dispatched to the Reese home, to bring them in for questioning as soon as we knew who it was that had been arrested. The Reese parents weren't there. A short while ago, the police department officially listed them as 'missing' and has been asking Sam Reese about them. He says he left the house early this morning, before they got up; he hasn't seen them.

"The police feel, in light of the events, there is a serious possibility of foul play involved with their disappearance."

She looked me square in the eye. "How has been Jennifer been, the last few days?"

"Getting better. Adjusting to what Sam had done to her; wanting to put it behind her."

She nodded. "This isn't going to help," I told the social worker.

Mom shrugged. "I don't think it'll hurt as much as it could."

"Perhaps. My supervisor told me last night that if any of the terms of the parole were contravened, we would immediately

seek a formal court order severing the Reese's parental ties. That motion will be filed early tomorrow in the Superior Court."

"We would like to formalize our relationship with Jennifer, in that case," Mom said firmly.

"I expected you would. I have papers to start the process; I'll leave them with you."

"Our attorney will be in touch. At the very least he'll have someone at the hearing tomorrow," Dad added.

"What," I said, mildly belligerent, "are the odds of Sam getting out again?"

"Well, nil, at least on bond. Even if his parents simply are off shopping or at a movie and haven't gotten home yet, that would violate the supervision terms of the parole, and shows evidence of their irresponsibility. With the violent attack on the girl, the attempt on Jennifer, having a firearm, discharging the weapon... no, he won't be out on the street any time in the foreseeable future."

There was more talk; when Jenny came back with JR, Dad told her about her parents being missing and that in any case, the state was going to revoke their parental rights. Miss Johannsen left, and for a while we all hugged Jenny.

After a bit, Jenny pled fatigue, and asked me to cuddle with her. I did, putting my arm around her; Jenny was asleep two seconds later. It took me longer to fall asleep, but not much.

I don't remember what I dreamed, but suddenly, out of nowhere, Sam was there in my dream, his eyes gleaming like a maniac in a cartoon, the gun against my forehead.

I woke up in a cold sweat; it was dark outside and for a moment I was disoriented. I looked down at Jenny, trying to get my emotions in order. I thought I understood what your life has been like. It is one thing, I thought, to think about something awful happening to someone, but to actually live it is a thousand times worse. A million times worse.

Jenny had told me about the death of her cat; how many dead cats have I seen along the road? Dogs? All manner of animals.

It didn't mean to me, what it had meant to her. Even awake, maybe particularly because I was awake, I remembered the pressure of the gun barrel on my forehead, the look in his eyes.

There was no doubt in my mind, none. Tony had saved my life. At some point, Sam was going to have had enough of our bullshit and obfuscation; he'd have left me behind, dead. Maybe I'd have gotten lucky and something else could have distracted him, but that would have been like winning the lottery twice on the same day. It was still like winning the lottery, but I had Tony Richardson to thank for it.

Once more, I remembered what I'd done to Sam. Each and every instant.

In retrospect, as I had thought at the time, I knew I could have killed him. I was angry enough, scared enough. I hadn't hit his arm as hard as I could have; I didn't land on his back as hard as I could have; I could have killed him simply by beating his head against the sidewalk. He'd been dazed and groggy, unable to fight back.

But I wasn't Sam Reese. I had the chance to kill him, and I'd chosen not to. It simply hadn't been necessary. Stop him, make sure he wasn't going to be a threat to anyone else; yes, that had been necessary.

There was a soft sound at the door, and I looked up, my heart in my throat. Sam had escaped!

Instead, Elizabeth came in, saw me sitting up. She came up to me without a sound, hugged me. "Thanks for keeping Jenny safe, Tom."

"Elizabeth..." Her name froze in my throat; I'd left her Friday night, and until this moment, I hadn't thought of her, Mary or Shannon.

"I want to trade places with you," she said quietly, and I nodded. I got out of the bed as gently as I could and Elizabeth climbed in next to Jenny, kissing her on the nose. Jenny murmured something, and simply pulled Elizabeth's hand around her, and continued sleeping.

I tiptoed out, finding an empty living room. I went to my room, showered and changed clothes, went down to the hotel

coffee shop and ordered a club sandwich.

I sat there in a restaurant that was moderately busy. I looked around; here I am, eating a sandwich. Here you are, going about your daily lives. Earlier today a mad man held a gun to my forehead; would have shot me but for the intervention of a friend. How many of you have been there, done that? How many of you have awful stories of your own, events where I wasn't there and never did that? A lot to think about, a lot.

I went back to the room, picked up the phone and called St Joseph's hospital, where I thought Janey might be. Eventually, I talked to Gaby, who was with the other cheerleaders, waiting for Janey to get out of surgery. She told me that Janey was fine, okay. The cheerleaders were going to return the next afternoon, and I should come by and see her. That surprised me. Gaby repeated that Janey had been insistent, that she wanted to see me.

Mom stuck her head in the door, saw me talking on the phone, walked over and wrote a room number on a piece of paper and handed it to me. I took it and smiled, and she left.

I told Gaby to tell Janey that I'd visit her the next day.

I found the room down the corridor that I'd been pointed to, found Mary and Shannon, Mom and Dad and JR there. I got big hugs from everyone, even Dad.

"Elizabeth?" I asked.

"With Jenny," Mary told me, then smiled enigmatically.

"How's Jenny?" JR asked.

"Okay. Sue Ellen got her out the back door, she never saw Sam. The rest?" I shrugged. "I think she's just glad she got away from her parents when she did."

"Amen," Mom said softly. "Amen."

"Am I in trouble?" I asked, looking around the room.  
"With anyone here?"

Mary shook her head, JR contributed an emphatic "Not!"



Shannon said quietly, "No."

Mom had shaken her head, and then looked at me. "Should you be?"

"I hurt Sam; I don't regret that. But this weekend it was... " I nearly lost my voice. "Like a fantasy. All the girls I wanted, until I finally fell asleep, exhausted."

"Next time," JR piped up, "take me!"

Mom gave her a look, and JR looked down, abashed.

"And Jenny?" Dad asked.

I blinked; he should have known better. I shook my head.

Mom was upset too. "David!"

Dad looked at Mom, "We are responsible for her."

"True," Mom said, "and if that question was bothering you, it should have come before, not after."

"We're going to have the Children's Services people dropping in to visit us at all hours for the next year or so. It's going to put a major crimp in things," Dad said, a bit peevishly.

"So, we go visit Kim, we go visit Craig, we go visit Mary. We go to a hotel," Mom told him. "The rest of the time, we can be like Caesar's wife."

"I'm being an ass, aren't I?" he asked.

"Yep," Mom replied, looking at him. "I think, dear, tonight you and I will go to bed and have a long talk." He brightened up and Mary laughed.

"You people! I don't think I've ever heard of such sex maniacs in my entire life!" Mary said with a grin.

She nodded at Shannon, who'd been sitting quietly to one side. "Shannon, do you have anything to say to Tom? Or anyone?"

Shannon met my eyes briefly, and then looked back at her mother. "I know everyone thinks I'm a stick in the mud, a spoil sport. I wish Tom was my boyfriend; I do. But he's pretty clear I'd have to share him. I can't do that, I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry," I told her. "Shannon, I want to be your friend, okay?" She nodded. "Then don't worry about being a stick in the mud."

She looked at me, and then said softly. "Tom, could you and I sleep together tonight? Like you slept with Jennifer? Just cuddle?"

I nodded, and then yawned. "Easiest thing in the world, just now," I said. Mom and Mary giggled. Dad looked at JR who shrugged and smiled. Was I supposed to be with JR instead? That was odd; I thought about it for a second, but I couldn't be sure.

I went into my room, Shannon right behind me. I stripped down to my jockey shorts, Shannon to panties. I held up the covers for her, and she climbed in and I joined her. She leaned close, kissing me gently. "Thanks."

"It's nice to have a warm body to snuggle up to," I told her.

"For this, yeah. But your mom and dad talked to my mom last night about money, about music lessons. I don't know how to tell you how grateful I am."

"And Mary?" I asked, worried.

"Mom?" Shannon smiled. "She was surprised, particularly when your dad told her you were going to buy our old house and rent it to us. Mom said not to bother, because we talked about it, and we want to find another." Shannon kissed me lightly again.

"Mom told us she'd talked to your mom earlier; she wished there was a way we could all marry each other." Shannon kissed me again, still tender, on the cheek. "I know your dad has slept with Joanna and Jennifer, even Mom."

"Does it bother you?" I asked.

"No; I'm not sure why. You'd think it would, if I don't want to share you, why should I be okay with Mom being with a whole bunch of people? But, I am okay with it. And Elizabeth..." Shannon shook her head. "That was the biggest surprise of all. I imagined it would be you or Jennifer or Joanna who'd be with her first. Mom..." She sighed. "I don't understand it; I don't. But we've been so happy the last week; even with Dad gone." She looked away, obviously near tears.

"I didn't like Dad. I know Elizabeth liked him, I thought Mom did. I thought it was just bad between Dad and me."

"It's okay, Shannon," I whispered, suddenly more tired than I had been. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I'm about an eye blink from falling asleep."

She nodded. "I'd have been scared to death. Thanks Tom, thanks from all of us, thanks for standing up against Roger and Sam and Keith. Thanks. It means a lot to me, and I know it does for Elizabeth and Mom, too. What it means for Jennifer... God, I hope I never find out!"

I nodded, sleepier than ever. "I'll be back in a second," Shannon said, lightly kissing me. Shannon slid out of bed and walked towards the door. I watched with just one eye partly open as she moved away, but my eyes closed before she was out the door. I slept.

Monday, April 1, 2002

When I awoke, I was aware of soft movement in the bed, soft sounds of passion. I was a little surprised, because I was lying there not involved. Then I heard JR murmur, "I'm glad you like this."

Shannon sighed. "What's not to like?" Her breath caught and I knew she'd had a climax. "When Tom did this the first time, I couldn't believe how good it felt. Oh Joanna, I like this so much!"

JR giggled lightly, but I could tell her mouth was busy. "Tom's the best. Mom's almost as good. Dad too. Jennifer as well, if she takes a few more lessons from Tom."

"I feel bad. I like this, love this; I wish I wanted to do it back."

There was another gasp from Shannon. "Mmmm," she murmured.

"Shannon, Tom might be the best there is at going down on a girl, but when it comes to finger fucking, no one, no one at all, is close to what you do. Trust me Shannon, do me the way you do me best, and I'll go down on you all you want."

Shannon's breathing took off, rapid and shallow, until she was gasping. I heard JR chuckle. "We'll wake Tom up yet."

"Ahhhhh, yesssss!" Shannon muttered. "And he should sleep. It must have been horrible, what happened yesterday."

I felt the bed move; I realized JR was getting off the end. "I'm going to get some sleep, Shannon. Later, come to my room and we can do this again."

Shannon got up, went to her. I could see them kissing in the dim light of the room. After a second, Shannon whispered in wonder, "Joanna... I'm falling in love with you."

Joanna sighed and I could see the kiss was going into overdrive; I saw JR's hands running over Shannon's butt, hot and horny. After a few minutes, I heard JR come loudly; evidently Shannon had been fingering her during the kiss. "Night, sweet Shannon. I want you. Again and again." Then JR was gone, silently out the door.

Shannon crawled back into the bed, rolled in next to me and put her arm around my chest, drawing herself close. It was like earlier; I was warm, loved, and that sufficed for me. I was asleep again moments later.

The next time I awoke was much later, and I was alone in bed. Mary knocked again on the door and repeated my name. "I'm awake," I told her, and getting up to let her in.

"Ellen wanted me to wake you up if you weren't already," she said. This morning Mary was wearing black slacks and a nice blouse.

I smiled at her and patted the bed. Mary laughed and shook her head. "Ms. Johannsen will be here in about forty-five minutes. You need a shower, then get dressed and have a little breakfast. I'm off to work in a few minutes. Dave is staying

here to run you around until you can get your car. It's going to be a long day, I'm afraid."

I stroked her cheek and grinned. "I'll save some energy for later."

She nodded, her eyes searching mine. "I met you little more than a week ago."

"I still don't know what I've liked the most about it. Making love to you. Making love to Ellen, to David." She kissed me lightly. "Most amazing, I think, is being seduced by Elizabeth. My own daughter, the virgin." Our eyes met as she shook her head in wonder. "I know Ellen has been with Joanna and Jennifer, Penny with her mom. But shy Elizabeth with me, like that..." She shook her head. "And tomorrow, Elizabeth wants us to sleep together. You, me and her."

I blinked. Mary sensed my hesitation and shrugged. "I told her I didn't think it would work; I don't see how it would work with three people trying to love each other at once."

I was tempted to say that in my experience, mostly not all that well, but decided at the last minute that there were some things Mary didn't need to know.

Mary turned serious. "What with one thing and another yesterday, I didn't get to tell you. We're going to have a memorial service for Bill tomorrow morning. Ellen and Dave have begged off, so has Jennifer. JR said she'd ride with you."

"No problem," I told Mary. JR knew me better than anyone, she knew I'd go. I could tell Mary wasn't comfortable asking me, but it didn't matter. Of all the things I'd learned since Tony asked me to escort Marsha to a basketball game and a dance, being there for a friend was what I'd learned first and best.

Mary grinned suddenly. "Now, get going! We both have things to do! Places to go! And if Elizabeth wants to try this, I'll try it." I nodded, and she was gone.

I showered, put on jeans and a better shirt than usual.

The meeting with Eleanor Johannsen took almost two hours, going over the legal issues involved with becoming foster parents for Jenny. Dad and our lawyer, Bill Carstairs, did most

of the talking, Jenny and I did most of the sitting quietly. JR, Elizabeth and Shannon spent most of the morning in the pool.

That finished almost in time for lunch; the lawyer told me that I had an appointment downtown with the police at one. After that, Dad and I conferred. I had my police interview and I had to pick up my car from Sue Ellen's. The girls wanted to be dropped off at Scottsdale Mall for the afternoon.

Dad drove them there first, and gave JR money for lunch at the food court. Dad and I ate a Church's Fried Chicken place for lunch, followed by another hour with the police.

They finally had someone competent to ask questions; although when I said something about it later, Bill Carstairs told me it was a deputy city attorney who'd been the intelligent one asking questions, not one of the detectives.

Afterwards, I asked Dad if we could stop off and visit Janey before we got my car.

Sure enough, there were a few cheerleaders there, including Gloria and Sue Ellen. Sue Ellen all but dragged me in to see Janey.

Janey was lying on her side, and when she saw me she grimaced. "I suppose if any guy should see me like this, it should be you." I wasn't sure what she meant; Sam's disgusting words still echoed in my ears. Janey waved at her midsection. "The bastard shot me in the ass. In one side, out the other."

I blushed, and Janey laughed. "Stupid son of a bitch!" Janey looked at me, shaking her finger at me in anger. "I wish you'd have killed him!"

I shook my head. "Even now, I don't want that." I looked at her, and decided that the police could go fuck themselves. "Janey, Sam's parents are missing. The police think he killed them; they're going to charge him with first-degree murder; special circumstances and all of that. Sam's on course for a lethal injection in a couple of years."

She looked at me, and then shook her head. "I've never had much use for my father, but he told me something that I've never forgotten when Mom wanted him to call in sick for her, because she had a hangover. 'Never do someone else's dirty work for

them. You make it easier for them the next time to have you do it for them.' Six weeks later, my mother was busted for DWI; she could have killed someone. I'm sorry, Tom, it was a stupid thing to say. I wish I'd had a shot at him, though."

She looked at Sue Ellen, Gloria and two other girls. "The rest of you, let me have some time with Tom." The cheerleaders promptly filed out.

"I'm sorry about the other night," Janey told me.

"You don't have anything to apologize for."

"Oh," Janey murmured, "Sue Ellen had some words for me about leaving early. I had to think; life's been a bitch lately, and that's no shit."

I nodded. "Yeah!" We traded looks of mutual understanding.

"I don't think I'll ever be with a guy, not even going down on them any more." She waved at my midsection. "But if I do, he's going to have a hell of an act to follow, Tom."

"I just try to do the best I can," I told her. "That, and since I didn't perform at all, I'll be easy to beat."

"All these years, I never gave a shit, never thought about other people. I thought everyone was like me, just wanting to have fun. Now I don't even have Sue Ellen." Janey grimaced. "She and Tony are going to get back together."

I shrugged; what about Sue Ellen and Mindy? They'd been pretty tight at the party.

"I'm going to be here for a while, they have to do reconstructive surgery on my ass," she said with a grimace. "Damned son of a bitch!"

"But I'll be out by the middle of the month. Then I have to take it easy for another couple of weeks. That'll run it out until the end of May. I'm going to have a party, a Janey party. Sue Ellen and I learned a lot from our party. So not all night, and not an orgy. Just a party for friends. You and Jennifer are invited."

"Thanks, Janey," I told her. As I said that, a nurse came in the room, looked at me pointedly. I told Janey to take care, and went back out in the hallway. Sue Ellen took me by the hand and dragged me to an empty waiting room a ways down the hall.

"It's been hell, let me tell you," Sue Ellen told me. "My parents think I did okay, but Tony's father grounded him."

Sue Ellen grinned at me. "I reminded my parents that I'd asked for and gotten their permission for the party. That it wasn't my fault, or anyone else's fault that Sam crashed it. But, somehow a lot of parents didn't hear about it being a coed sleep over. I pointed out to my parents that they'd known and approved, and told me I didn't need to have a chaperone if we would behave responsibly. As far as I'm concerned, we did."

I nodded; I wasn't entirely sure about my own actions, but in general, I thought she was right.

"Now, Janey's going to have another party after school is out. Coed, but no sleep over. Chaperones, so probably no hanky panky."

I laughed. "Three weeks ago, that was the kind of party I went to. Shouldn't be a big deal now."

"Tony and I are getting back together Friday night," Sue Ellen said, looking at me.

"I heard," I told her.

"Good. Poor Tony," Sue Ellen sighed. "Fleur's parents are only in town until the end of the week. Tony's grounded, and his father is determined to enforce it. I think that situation is about to explode; not a Sam Reese type explosion, but more like a Jennifer-type explosion. My dad told Tony that if he wanted, he could stay at our place. Kind of like Jennifer and you guys."

I wasn't sure that would work, but it might give Tony a chance to work something out with his father. There sure were a lot of tangled strands. Sue Ellen patted my cheek, "And thanks, Tom, for stopping Sam."

"I had help, and you sure did your part, too!"



She nodded, leaned close and hugged me. I felt her nipples come erect under her blouse and I backed away, embarrassed. Sue Ellen grinned, her voice dropped to a whisper. "Tom, like I said, Friday night for Tony. Before then, I want to be with you again. I don't know where, I don't know when just yet, but..."

Sue Ellen left, and I was left shaking my head in wonder. Why was it that one girl after another wanted to go to bed with me?

I was still standing there thinking, when Gloria came in; she'd been waiting in the hall. "Tom."

"Hi, Gloria!" I said with pleasure. She was looking much better than the last time I'd seen her. That and she was wearing shorts and a tank top; very, very nice!

"I got grounded," she told me.

"I figured."

"Then yesterday, that thing at Sue Ellen's. My parents think we are all wild and crazy."

"Sam's not going to be around again. Ever," I said with confident assurance, although I did add to myself, 'unless the police screw it up again.'

"Yeah," Gloria looked at me. "I wish I'd been there."

"Your family would have totally freaked out," I told her.

"Oh yeah!" Gloria said with emphasis. She looked at me for a long moment. "Could we go out sometime? I only got grounded for a week. Sue Ellen and Janey really went to bat for me with my parents."

My first thought was sarcastic and unworthy; no I didn't need to get an appointment book to keep track of my assignations. I met her eyes. "I'd like that," I told her.

"This Friday? You don't think it's too forward, me asking?"

"No," I told Gloria, "it's not too forward. In fact, one of these days real soon now, I should try asking a girl out."

I'd asked Shannon out, once. Other than that, it was always the other way; except Marsha and that had more or less been the other way, too.

I got her address and phone number, and then went down to where Dad was waiting. "Sorry it took so long," I told him.

Dad shook his head. "I hate these places, Tom. Can't stand them. But so long as I have a good book," he held up a David Weber Honor Herrington book, "I'm happy."

We started off towards Sue Ellen's, and Dad started talking.

"I've been thinking a lot the last few days. Your mom and I, you and Joanna, Kim and Penny, about everything and everyone. I thought Shirley and Kim were pushing it, doing the intergenerational thing," he paused, looking around at the traffic stopped along with us at a light. "Then I made love to Joanna; one sexy girl who enjoys being loved with as much uninhibited abandon as any of us adults ever did. She really reminds me more of Kim than your Mom, but all of us were comfortable with each other and we shared a lot of great sex.

"Then Penny; every bit the same as Joanna. Then Jennifer." He glanced at me and I realized he was worried about what I thought about Jennifer and him being together.

I met his eyes and shook my head. "Don't worry about it."

He laughed, "Oh, like I could do that! Jennifer was different; altogether different from any other woman I've ever made love to. She wanted me to make love to her as an affirmation of her faith in the world; it wasn't about sex, it was about love and faith. I can't put the difference in words, but oh boy! I knew it when I saw it! Jennifer told me that I will always have a special place in her heart; that we share a love that few will ever know. And that we would make love again -- but it wouldn't be often. Just, she told me, very special."

"Jenny is a very special person." I sighed. "On one hand, I wish she'd had a family like ours, where love was the driving force, not force doing the driving. Then I realized that if she'd lived in a family like ours, we'd probably never have met her."

"Probably not," Dad agreed.

"And on the last hand, I wouldn't wish Jenny's family on anyone, anyone at all."

"Well, with a little luck, that's behind her." He stopped talking, pulled the car over to the side of the road.

"Oh my God!" I'd never seen my dad in tears before, but they were flowing right then. "Odds are her parents are dead and her brother is going to be executed for their murders, if they are. How easy it is to say things that should never be said! So very easy!"

I reached out and touched his arm. "I'm not sure but Jenny wouldn't agree with you, though."

"That still doesn't make it right." There wasn't anything to say to that. Finally, he looked at me. "We will help our friend get through this time. To the best of our abilities."

"Yes!" I said, with more enthusiasm. "We will help all of our friends to the best of our abilities."

He dropped me off at Sue Ellen's, went to pick up the others across town at the mall.

Tony and Sue Ellen were sitting around her pool, with a couple of people from school over, including Mindy and the girl Mindy had met at the party, Michelle Paz. Fleur had been there for a little while, earlier. I just told everyone hello, then drove on back to the hotel.

When I arrived, I was treading the heels of the police, who'd come to tell Jenny that they had located her parents. Her parents had been shot, and then hidden in the attic crawl space of their house. The initial search of the house had missed the bodies; once again the police were less than impressive. Not for the first time I was surprised how people like Joe Moss, and the detective who'd come to tell Jenny about her mother being attacked, could do their job and I felt every urge to applaud. Then some clowns would come along, leaving me angry and frustrated.

Jenny clung to me for a while, then Elizabeth took Jenny into Jenny's room, and the two snuggled down for a nap.

It was a somber dinner in the hotel restaurant, but afterwards, we played a game JR had bought during the afternoon. It was Monopoly, only based on Phoenix. It was a mild hoot to play for places we knew; Elizabeth was incredibly lucky and ended up owning everything.

Mom and Dad pled fatigue and vanished into their room; JR and Shannon vanished as well. Mary, Elizabeth, Jenny and I sat up a while longer, talking. Elizabeth was sitting next to me on a couch, Mary on the other side of me and Jenny on the other side of Elizabeth.

Elizabeth turned to me, lifting her lips to be kissed; out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jenny kissing Mary. I kissed Elizabeth, soft and sweet. There was passion, but more, something very much more. Elizabeth smiled at me, and then unbuttoned her blouse, shrugging it off. I'd known she wasn't wearing a bra; now I looked at her beautiful breasts, the fading bruise between them. "You need to kiss them to make them better," Elizabeth whispered.

I dipped my head down; this time there wasn't the reluctance I'd felt before, instead I savored her nipple, flicking it with my tongue. There was a soft sigh from next to me, Jenny had undone Mary's blouse and was tasting her beautiful breasts. Elizabeth leaned close, whispering in my ear. "Tom, you have a special ability to make women realize fully who they are. Not all of us can hear you, but those of us who can are lucky beyond any rational measure. Love me, Tom. Love me!"

"I'll always love you!" I told her.

She smiled, and I nuzzled her breasts again, licking her nipples to erect firmness. Odd again, I thought. Both Mary and Shannon's breasts were small like Elizabeth's; both had pale nipples, both got hard tips when they were excited. Elizabeth's nipples, when erect, stood out considerably, perhaps a half-inch, and the erect part of her nipple was the same size as her whole nipple. It made for a very easy, lovely target for my tongue and I spent some time licking and tonguing them.

I was enjoying it immensely when Elizabeth reached down, ran her fingers through my hair, then gently pushed me back. I looked up at her, curious. She smiled, and motioned to the door to the bedroom. I looked over at Mary and Jenny; Mary's finger

was working inside Jenny's panties, Jenny's jeans had slid down a bit.

"Come," Elizabeth breathed.

I got up, held out my hand for Elizabeth and she took it. In a moment, the door was closed behind us, and Elizabeth started undoing my shirt, then my jeans. I slid her slacks down, and for a moment we stood nude, facing each other, each looking at the other.

"We need to talk again," Elizabeth told me. We walked hand in hand to the bed, sat down next to each other.

She faced me. "I'm not Shannon; I know it is your nature to love women and be loved in turn. I promise you, Tom, I'll love you forever; no matter how many you are with."

I reached up and stroked her cheek. "I don't know what to say. I can't believe that I've got two dates with other girls already lined up for this week. It seems unfaithful."

"Tom, you have to understand something. About me, about you. You and I, Tom, are going to share something wonderful. Not just children, but a deep love for each other that few people ever experience.

"My mom, Tom, gave herself, spent her life making Shannon and I as happy as kids could be. There were bumps, many bumps; more for Shannon than for me. Mom was always there, always taking care of us, looking out for us. That's a mom's job, Tom. Too many women want different things than a family and caring for them, these days. Worse, there are too many people like my father and Sam Reese; dark and lost. They are so twisted inside they can't see the world around them.

"The world can be a better place. I've thought about it now, since Dad died. I know he was angry and frustrated; his life seemed to be meaningless. Except he wasn't looking in the right place. My life has meaning! Shannon's life has meaning! Mom brought us into the world! Of all of us, she has the most meaning...

"One day, I'm going to be a famous mathematician. Shannon is going to be a world-class violinist! That's meaning! But Dad got all twisted; he didn't see us, he didn't see Mom, he

just saw himself, alone.

"You can't measure your life, Tom, looking in the mirror. Each of us is part of the world; we have to look around us, Tom. Look at the people around us, see what effect we have on their lives.

"And that's why I've come to love you so much. You understand, Tom. You look at people and see them in the world. You aren't afraid to stand up and be counted, you're not afraid to tell people the truth, even if they don't want to hear it. You are kind, gentle and loving.

"Mom is in a special place right now; kind of in shock. Her world was destroyed. One minute she was comfortable, the next she was turned upside down and dumped in the trash, heedless and carelessly. Mom needs you, Tom. She needs you desperately to affirm her as a woman, as a human being. And Tom, I tell you true, I am going to help with that. The three of us, Tom. Together until..." Elizabeth gently kissed my forehead. "Well, it's going to be a long time the three of us will have each other. You'll be surprised at how long.

"Jennifer has met Katrina, the true love of her life. You Tom, you pulled Jennifer back from the blackest abyss of the human mind and spirit as exists. If it wasn't for you, she'd have been as black and twisted as her brother. You healed her, Tom. Nothing in your life will exceed that miracle.

"Both Jennifer and Katrina will be great moms. And both will want you to father their children. One day, Jennifer will rise up on a pillar of fire into space, and do great things for humanity, Tom. Because of you. You saved her for all of us, and that will mean more than you can imagine.

"Shannon and Joanna will also love each other for eternity. One day they will be happily married to the kind of men your father and uncle are, they will have children like you and she, like Penny. As will you and I, Tom.

"And in time to come, you will meet others you can help, others you can heal. Tom, never ever will I begrudge you; I know what you mean to me, to others. And all of us, Tom, all of us, Mom, me, Shannon, Joanna, Jennifer... we'll always be there for you, too."

It had been an astounding litany; I felt stunned and awed. So many things!

Was it really possible to see the future? I'd been there, next to Elizabeth, when she nearly died; there was no doubt in my mind, none, that her heart attack had happened the instant her father had been stabbed to death. That the feelings she'd had, had been the same things her father had experienced in his last minutes.

I remembered Elizabeth telling me that this night she and I would love each other; that tomorrow night there would be three of us. I looked at her, smiling and radiant. I leaned close, kissing her. The kiss was the most passionate kiss of my life; I do not think that anything will ever be its equal.

I've seen campfires, watched flames spiral and curl around each other. Our tongues did that, then our spirits. I can't explain in words what it was like; I could feel her spirit reach out, wrap around me. It lifted me, intertwined with mine, whirling and dancing, mixing through and through.

That first time with Elizabeth was true primal passion; my body seethed with emotions and hormones, there was nothing else in the universe but Elizabeth. Our bodies met, matched; I slid inside her easily and more naturally than any woman I'd known. And even as intense as it was, I felt the obstruction; as I'd done with Sally, I couldn't bring myself to press through. And as with Sally, I wasn't in control, not for that. Elizabeth wrapped her hands around my bottom and pulled me deep into her.

Then it was velvet heaven; the sweetest vessel a man ever filled, perfectly formed and perfectly primed. She lifted against me, I drove down into her, passionate plunges and surges. Our arms were around each other, our legs woven together.

I have no idea how long we made love that time; it was quick and bright, infinite and timeless. I spent myself into her as she rocked and shivered, trembling in bliss.

The blaze passed, and I was looking into Elizabeth's eyes. I remember two things, things I'll never forget. I remember leaning down, brushing her fine red hair with my lips. I remember my erection shriveling. Then I was asleep and remembered nothing.

Tuesday, April 2, 2002

There was faint light in the windows and Elizabeth was sitting on the biggest boner of my life. I watched her rub her own breasts while I stroked her clit; above all, I moved in and out of her until she came and then came again. I spent myself into her, before pulling her down to cradle those beautiful breasts against my chest, her nipples crushed against mine.

To say that getting out of bed was difficult is to say the sun is bright at high noon. But we did, spending a fair amount of time showering, then kissing with no intention of making love; as fine a form of kissing as there is.

We had breakfast with everyone; it was relaxed and cheerful, even if shortly we would be leaving for Bill's memorial service. Mary had told us that no one had to go; she'd prefer it, really if no one went. I wanted to anyway, if nothing else to just be there with my friends during something that wasn't going to be easy for them.

I'd never been to a memorial service before. It was, blessedly brief. No one had much to say, beyond a few trite phrases, except for Elizabeth. She stood up, walked forward and faced the dozen or so people gathered.

"My father was a man; human in his failings. He made some bad mistakes in the last few weeks of his life, but he was my father and I loved him. He paid for his mistakes with his life; they weren't the sort of mistakes that should merit such a terrible punishment. My father was lost, unable to see that in his family, he had those that could understand and forgive him. I understand, and I forgive him."

She sat back down, no one else spoke. We were all quiet on the way back to the hotel. Mary wanted to be alone; Shannon wanted to find JR and put it all behind her.

Elizabeth? The first few times I'd first met Elizabeth she had been pretty much expressionless. Only on the day she'd had her heart attack had there been much expression on her face; she had shown more since then. After the memorial service her face had gone back to stone, but she stayed a few feet away from me, even if all I was doing was reading while she stared into space.



We had a late lunch and things were better, more like they'd been. We talked about all sorts of things over the food, music tastes mostly. Elizabeth was sitting with Jenny, looking more cheerful, and by the end of the meal, was as bright as she'd been the last few days.

After lunch, Jenny went to visit Katrina, Dad doing the driving and explaining. A bit after that Mom vanished, telling me that Uncle Craig had arrived, and that she was going to fetch him from the airport. JR and Shannon went down to the hotel pool, taking Elizabeth with them. Mary and I followed them after a few minutes, sitting on the pool deck under an umbrella talking about a million things, none of them important.

Around four, Mom was back with Uncle Craig, Dad and Jenny were back; we all got together in the living room of one of the suites.

"A lot going on," Dad said. "About an hour ago, I got a call from Bill Carstairs." Dad walked over, took Jenny's hand. "There's no good way to tell you, Jennifer. Earlier today your brother went totally nuts; charged a half dozen of the jail deputies. They tried to get him under control, but he stuck a hypodermic needle into a man's throat. I'm sorry, really sorry, Jennifer. He's dead."

"I'm not sorry," Jenny said, shaking her head. "Not sorry at all; I wished to God he hadn't hurt someone again. Sam has hurt enough people. The thought of him never being able to do it again makes me want to applaud."

"The deputy is in the hospital, he's expected to be released later this evening. The lawyer says the things Sam has been charged with are now moot. Most likely, no testimony required from anyone.

"In addition, the police have traced the woman who killed Bill Leary to Kansas; she got away before they could catch up with her. They think she's trying to get to Canada." Dad looked at Mary. "They told him that there is little chance of any recovery of the money she stole from you."

Elizabeth spoke, "She killed my dad; I don't care what happens to her, so long as it's bad. The money isn't that important."

Dad walked over, sat down next to Elizabeth. "I'm not part of the gang of four." Elizabeth smiled slightly, her eyes tracking over Mary, Shannon and Jenny. "Elizabeth, I know it hurts, but you have to know, what's not important to you, might be important to Mary or Shannon."

Elizabeth looked him in the eye. "Money is a tool, like a hammer. Except, unlike a hammer, you need that tool to get by every day. We can get by with what Mom makes. No matter how much you and Tom want to help, you shouldn't try to take that away from Mom. Mom has a ways to go yet, to blossom again, but she will. And then..." Elizabeth smiled wanly. "Then is then. Things will be different."

"Suppose you're wrong?" Shannon asked. "I thought all this mystical shit would go away when..."

"When I was no longer a virgin?" Elizabeth completed the thought. "Shannon, I've lived a long time seeing things; mostly they didn't make any sense. Now, I have more context. There's a whole lot more, Shannon. Not mine to tell, I think I've told too much already. I love my family and the people around me; I can't stop myself from telling them about happiness ahead."

"Is there unhappiness ahead?" Shannon pressed.

Elizabeth smiled. "Is the sky blue? The grass green? The ocean wet? Yes, of course. Nothing like we've had, it will be things we can deal with. If we are steadfast and brave and keep loving each other, things will turn out better than our dreams. Shannon, I'll tell you true, if nothing else has come from the last two weeks, we've found there ain't any of us lacking in courage or steadfastness. And a lot of love."

"Crappy grammar, little sister."

"No shit," Elizabeth answered, convulsing everyone with laughter.

There was more talk, and then I was surprised when Uncle Craig gestured at me. "Tom, you and I need to take a walk."

I shrugged, and the two of us went out of the room, down the steps. He walked briskly, not saying anything. After a bit, we were on the golf course that adjoined the hotel; still he didn't stop. We finally came to a small area with picnic

benches, what is called a ramada in Phoenix. He waved at one of the tables. When we got there, he sat down opposite me.

"You've been a busy young man," he told me.

"Not entirely of my choosing," I replied.

"No one would choose this; even with the good, it would be like walking across a bed of coals with too many chances to misstep."

He was silent again, looking past me, out over the green of the course. "One of these days, Dave or I need to teach you to golf."

"You could have told me that back at the hotel," I told him, not sure why we were sitting by the golf course.

He laughed. "For sure. Tom..." He sighed. "Ellen told me about you and her."

"And she told me about you and her. JR told me about you and her. Penny told me about you and her. Kim told me about you and her. I think we talk too much about it."

He waved his hand. "No mas, Tom! No mas!" He laughed. "I didn't mean to sound disapproving."

"Many years ago, a total scumbag took advantage of Ellen. If she had left it to me, I'd have killed him. But Ellen isn't like that; she made it clear I wasn't to get involved with him. I beat him up anyway."

"Mom and Dad found out about Ellen's pregnancy; one of the guys who helped with money told his parents what it was for; in spite of having promised not to, they told on Ellen. Dad really got on Ellen's case. I was sixteen, Tom. You know about sixteen year olds; no one listens to you. Well, maybe not you, but for me that's the way it was."

"I know what you mean," I told him. It had been true a month ago, for me too.

"I did what I could; Ellen is Ellen, Tom. I make no apologies for loving her."

"And none are needed. I love her, too."

He nodded. "Still, Dad's will is crystal clear: nothing to Ellen. Do you understand why I've kept it that way?"

"No, sir."

"No, Craig," he corrected. "You Tom; you, Joanna and me are who Dad intends to leave his money to. His intention is that on your twenty-first birthday, or the day I'm convinced you are an adult, whichever comes first, you could control your share. Ditto Joanna. You, Joanna and I will each receive a third of Dad's estate."

I nodded; none of this was new.

"Do you understand what Dad's situation is now?" Craig asked.

"Mom told me he has Alzheimer's. That was a couple of years ago, and that he had to go into a nursing home after Grandmother died two years ago."

Craig nodded. "My parents, Tom, are, were, people of their time. Dad was thirty when I was born, thirty-three when Ellen was born. He's in his 70's now. His first years were rather heavily colored by the Great Depression, then the Second World War. So were Mom's, even though she's five years younger than Dad.

"They were firm believers in self-sufficiency, Tom. Not asking for help unless they needed it. Mom didn't think Dad's problems required our help; for two years she fooled Ellen and me. Then she had her stroke and it was pretty much too late. Alzheimer's isn't a pretty disease Tom; not if you are a strong, self-reliant person, like Dad. You have lucid moments; you have periods of dementia, with the dementia episodes growing in length. You know your brain is turning into mush, Tom."

I could only grimace. The thought was disquieting.

"So, neither of them said anything. Then one day, Mom was gone and there he was." Craig looked at me. "Two years ago, Dad was lucid about ten percent of the time. Now, it's rare that he has a good period, and then it's usually short. So, he's in a full care facility and I go visit him when I can. I

don't know what I'll do now that I'm going to move here. Probably move him. Odds are, he'll never know, though."

He reached out his hand, touched mine. "Ellen forgave him a long time ago, for what he did. He never forgave her, Tom. One of the last clear things he told me was that he didn't want to see Ellen."

We sat quietly, looking over the light green grass of the fairways, the emerald green of the greens.

"You follow current events?" he asked, finally.

"Oh, yes," I replied mildly. I had no idea what any of this was about, not any more.

"After Mom died, Tom, I took over managing everything. I went to court, and was appointed conservator of Dad's estate. The medical facts are that, like Reagan, he could live for another ten or fifteen years. Except for the Alzheimer's, Dad is in fairly good health.

"You heard about the dot com bubble, Tom?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's Craig, Tom. Don't be dense.

"I put a lot of the funds into some of those stocks; back in the nineties, more after Mom died. You understand that?"

"Yes, sir. I'm not dense."

"It's Craig, Tom. Your dad helped a little; your mom helped a lot. Tom, Ellen is the brains of the family. You understand that the bubble popped?"

"Yes, I know the bubble popped," I told him, wondering how badly we'd been hurt. I was tolerably sure that unless I'd been lied to, the twice a year payments into my trust funds had been made.

"Do you know what selling short is?"

"I know it's a way to make money when the market is going south; I don't pretend to understand."

"I thought that there would be more problems with Y2K than there were; I kept the investments where they were, even though I was getting very nervous. But Ellen told me not to worry.

"New Year's Day, 2000. You remember that?"

"Yes, Craig."

"A non-event, Tom. Nothing crashed."

I nodded, not sure what he was going with this.

"So, I looked around. I'd been nervous before, but everything right afterwards looked okay, the market was more or less flat. A lot of companies, I thought, had put off expansion projects to deal with Y2K, that in a few months the market would start surging ahead again. You know what Ellen told me?"

I shook my head; not much was making sense.

"She told me that only the fools had postponed much. Did I want to bet on the fools? She went on to say the market was flat because it was nearly out of steam. That once the steam was gone, it was going to collapse," he laughed. "Put like that, I bailed; moved the money to stuff I thought would be safe." His eyes met mine. "Not much happened. I contemplated that maybe I should jump back in; the market was stable, nothing seemed to be looming.

"Except Ellen told me that she could feel the first howls of the wind of change. Showed me a few things that I thought looked bad for a couple of the big companies; Enron," he laughed bitterly. "Not even a dot com stock, I told her."

"I make no bones about it, Tom. I love my sister, love her in ways no one else understands; in ways I've never loved another. So, in spite of my personal belief that things were fine, I stayed out.

"I could go on and on," he said, now speaking more quickly. "It would be a waste of time. Things started to twitch; I could see that some stocks were set to take a hit. We were in good shape, worth it, I thought, to take a risk. When had Ellen been wrong? I talked to Dave, we decided to make a pretty hefty bet Ellen was right."

"We sold the bull market short. Mainly the high flyers; Enron, World Com, AOL/Time Warner and some others.

"You would not believe, Tom, how much money we made in 2000; then it was clear where things were going. We sold short in 2001; didn't do too well until September the Eleventh. I take no pleasure from making a profit from that day, Tom, but the fact of the matter is, we made out like bandits."

"So, instead of having wads and wads of money, we have buckets and buckets?" I asked.

Uncle Craig laughed. "Oh no; oceans, Tom. Oceans. Of course, we are now subject to half a dozen SEC investigations about selling everything short when we did. Except none of us are insiders; they haven't a leg to stand on. Soon, the last of those investigations will be over and finished; we're already looking forward."

"And this has what to do with me?"

"Dad invested me with the right to decide when you could take control of your share; I've decided. Thursday, you and I will go over to the lawyers; you'll sign papers. I'll sign papers. Then we go to a local bank and sign more papers.

"Welcome to the world of the super rich, Tom."

"I'm not ready," I told him. In my mind I was wondering if Alzheimer's was hereditary.

"Probably," he said, improbably agreeing with me.

"But, Tom, there will be changes. Ellen says she wants to start home schooling you and Joanna. That she thinks you should spend half your time at home; under her control."

I nodded, still not sure what he was getting at.

"Sharon and I are relocating here. Starting next week Tom, your home schooling will be partly under my control. You will learn a lot about managing money."

"And if that isn't what I want to do with my life?"

He nodded. "Your choice, Tom. Once the papers are signed, it's up to you. You can do it yourself, hire me or your father to do it; failing that, hire someone else. Your choice."

"You can, Tom, go to any bank, any brokerage house, any financial management firm in the country and get their instant attention. You will have executives fawning over you; literally, they will get you whatever you want."

I contemplated that, met his eyes. "If I did that, it'd be pretty easy, wouldn't it? No fuss, no muss."

"Exactly," he told me. "They'll be happy to do it. Odds are, they'd be honest. You'd only need the most modest oversight to keep them so. But it wouldn't be their money, Tom. Trust me; I had dozens, hundreds of people tell me I was making a big mistake, a seriously big mistake selling the market short. Every step along the way in the last two years; and you know what? The funds they manage are about 70% of what they were before 2000; our funds are at 290%. About six times as good as what they did, Tom. It wasn't an accident. They were cautious and I wasn't."

"One thing I've learned about our family and life in general, Craig; how few accidents there are."

"Your mom getting pregnant."

"Ignorance isn't entirely the same as an accident."

"An accident, Tom," he corrected me, "is when the luck goes against you. Ellen made love to the asshole twice in three months; she missed the bullet half the time. An accident, Tom."

"You and Shirley are going to move here?"

"I'm here to stay; Shirley will be coming back with Kim and Penny. Keisha is thinking about moving, too. I told her that I can pretty well guarantee she and the others will find jobs as good or better than they've got now. I tell you true, Tom; it's been long overdue. California has become business unfriendly and then some. Arizona's not great, but infinitely better than California. We won't even talk about the morons in the Pacific Northwest."

"Dad said there was a lot of money," I said quietly.



"David is a fine fellow; I'd trust him with my life. Trusted him with my sister. Tom, David controls, right now, about 7% of what I do."

I blinked; Dad had given me a number. That was a sixteenth?

"Yes," Craig said softly. "The family is worth about two billion."

"That should show up in the list of the richest people in the country."

"It would, if I let it," he said with a laugh. "But hey, it's split up, there's an umbrella corporation that runs things. There are a couple, six, companies that deal with the different aspects. There are, Tom, dozens of companies like us, hiding under the radar; not wanting the publicity. It's really not all that much, when you consider how many people are involved. You, JR, your mom and dad, Shirley and I. Your dad and I have daughters by Keisha and her partner, they are all taken care of. Penny is mine, so she and Kim are taken care of. Quite a crew, Tom."

I stared off into the distance. "I still don't understand why you're doing this."

"Because, Tom, you need a rock to stand on, out there in the deep water. You've been swept up in events like few ever experience, and acquitted yourself about as well as a person can. It's kinda like fighting a war, Tom. One smart thing you can do is put your money on the guys who are winning all the time. That's you, Tom."

"If you take small steps at first, I'm betting you'll win here too. By the time you're ready to take big steps..." He grinned. "I'm not greedy, I'm not Midas or Scrooge; none of that. To me dollars on a balance sheet are like points in a big game. Maybe the biggest game of all. For one thing, those numbers tell me that my family is safe, barring catastrophe, from the ups and downs of life."

"I'm betting, Tom, based on my personal judgment, that you are going to be better at this than me. Your mom is one of the best financial advisors around; she loves modeling the economy."

With all of us together," he grinned, "we'll be unstoppable, Tom."

He paused, his eyes on me again. "So, we are back to where we were: why did I keep to the terms of Dad's will, even though he is no longer in a position to know or care?"

"You promised," I said, realizing in an instant before I spoke, that was really the core of it all.

"I promised. Besides, I knew that giving advice to David, plus a little help with financing, that he would take care of Ellen. And legally, in Arizona, half of anything of his is Ellen's. Not so where we originally came from, but true here. I could do as I promised and take care of her at the same time. It violated the spirit of what Dad wanted, but that's tough; I forgave Ellen, he should have too.

"So, next Monday we talk to your school."

"I don't want to quit school," I told him. "I have a lot of friends. A few responsibilities; I'm the chauffeur." I shook my head. "Next fall. Maybe."

"Tell you what; chauffeur in the morning, then come to the office I'll be setting up here. Then go back to school at lunchtime, spend the afternoon there. That'll give me three hours or so a day; that will suffice until the summer. Then, rather more time in the office."

"And if I don't want to do it?"

"Then you don't like it," he said. "At that point, we'll talk things over, decide what to do. I'm running things now, that can continue forever. I draw a comfortable, but not exorbitant salary. Low six figures; you aren't likely to find a cheaper money manager," he grinned.

I stood thinking about it, and then I looked him in the eye. "Okay, but not before the fall."

"You're making a mistake," he said quietly.

"Then I make a mistake. Craig, I don't think I am. I don't want to fight about it, either."

"Tom, pushing in business is as wrong as pushing in bed. Don't ever do it. If you tell me to stop, I'm going to stop. You know my opinion, you know where to find me if you change your mind. I can deal with that."

We went back and Uncle Craig called home. "Kim and Penny are both having a good time," he announced. "They should all be here on Sunday afternoon, with Shirley in tow."

Dad nodded. "We can probably all safely go back home by then."

"Things are going back to normal pretty fast," Mom chimed in.

"I expect."

There was a knock on the door, and when Mom opened it, it was Eleanor Johannsen, from Children Services. "May I have a moment of your time?" I was surprised that it was me she was asking.

I grinned inwardly. "Mind taking a walk?" I asked, and she nodded.

We went outside. "I've talked to Jennifer several times over the last few weeks," she told me. I waved to a table next to the pool; there wasn't anyone in the water right then, and no one at any of the other tables.

We sat down, and I tried to keep my eyes on hers, not on her breasts.

"Jennifer was pretty out of it at first," Eleanor went on. "Obviously terrified; I feared for her."

I nodded. "Jenny wasn't sure if she was going to run away or kill her brother. Neither was an appetizing choice; she says she didn't contemplate suicide but I'm not a 100% sure I believe her."

Her eyes bored into mine. "Yet, today I would have trouble believing that she came from such a background," she said. "Jennifer has changed. Almost day by day I could see it. Gaining confidence, losing her fear. Looking forward instead of back."

She stopped talking, still looking at me.

"I did what I could to help Jenny," I told her.

"And I don't ever want to know what all you did," she said with a small smile. "Not that it would mean anything in this case, but because it's private."

"It is," I agreed.

"And I'm sure I know who was responsible for most of the changes."

"I told her I'd never let Sam or anyone else bother her again. Period. All I did was keep that promise."

"Which is why I'm surprised Sam survived Sunday," she said.

I shook my head. "I'm not Sam, Roger or Keith. Not hardly. I knew perfectly well that I could hurt Sam as badly as I wanted to Sunday. I thought about it; trust me, I thought about it. Instead, I just made sure there was no way he was going to get back up and go after Jenny again."

She nodded. "I am going to have one more talk with Jennifer, probably at the end of the week. The fact is, Tom, people like me have more work than we can handle."

"A sad commentary on what we've become." I felt it in my bones, all through me. More than sad.

"Yes, but I'm sure Jennifer is in good hands. So, don't expect quite as many visits as you've been told to expect. You'll probably only see me a couple of times in the next year."

My eyes dropped to her breasts; I saw her nipples were erect. She laughed. "And that's another reason why you won't see me very often," her voice was suddenly soft. "I don't understand why it is, but every time you look at my breasts," she laughed again, "I get very damp panties. It's interfering with my vows."

"Vows?" I asked, not sure what she meant.

"I'm a Carmelite nun, Tom."

I was really confused, looking at her again. I said the first stupid thing that came into my head. "You don't look like a nun."

"I'm going to take that to mean because I don't wear a habit." She was laughing, at me I was sure.

I nodded. That too, but she didn't look like my idea of a nun for other reasons.

"We don't have to any more; it makes life so much easier. Another sad commentary on the world today, Tom, a lot of people are prejudiced against religious people and organizations. Particularly mine," she smiled as she spoke. "My religion and my organization."

She grinned. "I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate your changing the subject to something less..." Her voice trailed away.

"I'm not prejudiced," I told her.

"You aren't religious, are you?" she asked.

"No, but that doesn't mean I don't believe in God; I surely do."

"Well, that's something."

I thought for a second, decided that it was either start a religious discussion or check to see if her nipples were still erect. "I don't believe you need religion to be able to live a moral life. I know I pretty much echo my parent's feelings on the subject; they don't much like any of the organized religions. Their disagreements range from philosophical to practical," I told her. "I haven't seen anything to change my mind."

"One of the things I'm required to do," she said quietly, "is leave my religion out of the job."

It was easier this time to meet her eyes. "Me?" I asked. "If it was me in your shoes, I'd wear my habit. I'd tell them that religion was an integral part of my life -- if it really was. Too much of what's happened, Eleanor, has happened because

people have taken the easy way out. Refusing to stand up and be counted, refusing to make hard decisions. Sam's parents. Keith Driscoll's entire family. They knew, pretty much what was going on. If they'd intervened, spoken out..." I shook my head. "There'd be people alive and well today who aren't."

"If I did that, I'd be fired," she said softly. "What good would I be to the kids who need help then?" She made a nervous, obviously frustrated gesture.

"I don't believe Children's Services is the only place you can help kids, Ms. Johannsen." I paused. I wished Uncle Craig was here; I needed to ask him a question. "I have a favor to ask." She met my eyes.

"A favor?"

"Well, it's something to think about. Think about how you'd want to set up a private charity that would help troubled kids. What you'd like to see, how you'd like to see it run, staffed," I swallowed. "Funded."

She was silent for a moment, and then met my eyes again. "And what use would that be?"

Time, I thought, to get personal. "Eleanor, I doubt very much if you've spent enough time checking on my parents' financial standing. I can tell."

"Tell what?"

"You asked what use it would be. If you'd checked, you'd never have asked."

"I verified what your parents filled out in the financial disclosure forms about their incomes and employment."

"Dad and Mom's brother have a little thing going on the side," I said with a grin. "You'd be surprised at how big a thing. Imagine finding something like the Great Pyramid at Giza, but with only just a few inches of the top sticking out of the sand. Yep, you'd have seen it -- but you'd be a quite few inches short of a mile from understanding what you'd seen."

"Take some time, think about it."

She was silent, then looked at me. "It's the substance of dreams, Tom."

"So are damp panties," I said with a straight face. "But, your vows don't preclude all dreaming, Eleanor."

She stared at me, and then shook her head. "You are something else, Tom." She stood up. "I'll think about it, get back to you. If I stay much longer, dreams could get too real."

"I have every intention of making dreams come true, for Jenny, for you, for as many others as I can help," I told her, standing too.

She smiled wanly, turned and left. I smiled to myself; her nipples were even more erect than they had been.

I froze, suddenly aware that once again I was close to someplace I didn't want to go.

Tom, that woman has made a lifestyle choice; one that was hers to make. I shook my head. No she's made a life choice; I've heard that they call nuns 'the brides of Christ.' Her vows are just as real, just as important as any promises I've made. What would I think about someone trying to get me to break one of my promises? Like those I'd made to Jenny, Elizabeth, Mary? Mom, Dad, JR? All the others? That person would be despicable. What was I thinking about? Erect nipples and damp panties. I took a deep breath. Learn, Tom, not to run after every beautiful person in the world. Sometimes, yes. Carefully, above all.

I walked back to the hotel room; several people were missing, including Mary and Elizabeth, Shannon and JR. Mom and Dad were talking to Uncle Craig. "Craig, could we take another walk?" I asked.

He laughed, and started to stand up. "I was kidding," I said, and everyone laughed.

"Do Mom and Dad know what you told me just now?" I inquired.

"Yes!" Mom and Dad both chorused.

"Earlier, I'd told Dad I wanted to buy Mary's house; it was

my thought we could give them a very good price, then rent it back to them at something below market." Craig started to speak, but I held up my hand.

"That was wrong," I said, "for a couple of reasons. Mary doesn't want charity and they don't want to live there any more. We shouldn't buy it at a premium or rent it below market.

"So, we have people who acquire property, do we not?"

"Yes," Craig replied. "But we don't normally buy houses; apartments and strip malls, mostly. We have some small percentages of larger mall complexes. As diversified as we can get, in property as well as equities," he grimaced. "I think property prices are about to go bust here in a year or two. I don't want to put much in there right now."

"Well, tell someone to arrange the purchase of Mary's house. Don't tell them anything beyond that we are looking to go into single home properties now. And I think it wouldn't hurt if we did that, really."

"Tom," Mom said, "I think you're wrong."

"A few won't hurt," I told them. "And, I think there are other things in life than racking up points in the big game." I met my uncle's eyes. He didn't look away.

"Then, I want to know what we do for charity."

"Charity?" Craig frowned. "We're a business, Tom. We make money," he paused, saw my expression. "Say we have a turnover, that's a gross income, of a million dollars. Say the profit is a hundred thousand, of which Uncle takes a fifth. If we donated a tenth of our profit, we'd have ninety thousand dollars profit, instead of a hundred. Yes, we'd get a tax credit. If we gave away the ten thousand, we'd have 72,000 left after taxes, instead of 80,000. What happens, Tom, is essentially, the government kicks in a dollar for every four we give. But in the end we have less money than if we'd given nothing at all."

"And what are you planning to do with all of those points?" I asked, my voice sarcastic. "I've played Nintendo, Craig. I've racked up a few points in my time. Then I turned the machine off and got on with my life."



"I don't entirely understand what you are getting at," he was speaking carefully. I realized that he was getting angry.

"Craig," Dad spoke up, "I think Tom is hinting that maybe we should try to do a little good with some of that money."

"Jobs are good," Craig said, his voice tightly controlled.

"Jobs are very good," Mom interjected. "But there are people for whom jobs aren't the answer, Craig. Jennifer comes to mind."

"And Mary?" Uncle Craig asked. "What about her? She needed a job."

"What about her?" Dad said. "Craig, you drive a Ford Explorer. Shirley has a Lexus. Do you think she wants an Explorer?"

"No, she won't even try to drive mine. Too big." You could see he was off balance, now. I remembered the tag teams I'd seen in the last few weeks. It was kind of fun to be on the team.

"You need more tools than a hammer to build a house," I told him. "You can't saw a board with a hammer. You can't level a foundation with a hammer. You don't want to do electrical installation with a hammer. Or the plumbing."

"I think you're stretching the metaphor," Craig replied, though he did seem less angry than a moment before. "You're saying we should give money to charity."

"Worked for Bill Gates," Dad laughed. "Got his name in the paper in a big way."

"That's what I've been trying to avoid," Craig said dryly. "Not to mention I've been focused on growing the total. All I've heard from Tom are ways to spend it."

"Craig," Dad's voice was confident and firm. "You told me when we first invested in my company, why I was content to just be another worker bee: I like doing things, not thinking about them. Me? I thought it was because I'm fond of details; while you were intent on the big picture. That and I love being an

engineer, getting my hands dirty.

"Now, Craig, I've a bit of news. I'm now the Vice President of Engineering Operations. It's just been a few days, but I can already tell I like this a whole lot more than I ever did looking at my little details. It's not as much fun as engineering, but I think it's time I tasted something besides chocolate chip ice cream.

"I was wrong, Craig, so were you. Yes, I like doing things, but I find I have a taste for doing things right that seems to scale up very well. And there are just as many details in the big picture as when you are looking at the little one."

Craig shrugged. "I'm sure you're getting to the point."

"I'm saying Tom's right, Craig. At a certain point, piling up more points becomes an objective in and of itself and you stop looking at the rest of the picture."

Craig turned to Mom. "Ellen?"

"Craig, I'm with the three men I love more than any others. Tom isn't telling us that he wants to give away the farm. He's saying that we need to diversify even more than we have. I've recommended it a time or two, as you'll recall. Dave," Mom smiled at Dad, "isn't stupid either, Craig. Nor am I. You need to spend some time thinking, Craig."

"And you think it's time to invest in single family homes?" It wasn't quite a sneer. "Give away some of the family money?"

"I'm thinking that I haven't given it a lot of thought. Like you, I think home prices are going to start coming down uniformly, and in some oversold markets, drastically. So, in theory we'd lose money. I need to think about it though; home prices are integral to the economy, Craig. If they fell very much, it could hurt things quite a bit."

"I live in LA," Craig said, his voice tight, but not as tight as he'd been a bit before. "In the late 80's, early 90's home prices crashed. It did more than hurt. Fortunately, the market's pretty much recovered."

He paused, looked at Mom, at Dad, then me. "I suppose I need to think things through, don't I? Because I just made your

case."

"Craig," that was Dad, "in the last few weeks things have changed for me, for Ellen, for Tom, for JR. For all of us. You know my feelings about the intergenerational relationships."

Craig nodded, started to speak, but Dad cut him off.

"Yes, I know. Now I'm a hypocrite, right?" Craig shrugged and Dad laughed. "No, I'm not a hypocrite, because back then I wasn't sure it was right and was quite certain it wasn't worth the risk. Today, I've had a chance to understand it a little better. By all the lights of our society's mores and laws, I am despicable scum who has made love to not only my daughter, but to others as young, or nearly as young.

"Ellen, the same thing. Our son and daughter, others; all way too young, according to society.

"Society says it's abuse when such things happen. And I say that it depends on whether or not there is abuse. People abuse others, of course. Parents abuse children, sexually and physically. But other parents love their children. People do violence to others, people they don't know, people they do know. People show kindness to people they don't know as well as to those they know.

"It's useless, in my humble opinion, to make a single rule that is supposed to apply to everyone. Jennifer's brother abused her; in their own way, her parents did too.

"But if I wanted to, if Jennifer or Joanna or Penny wanted to, we would spend the night together and it would be because we wanted it. Not abuse."

"It's what we've said for years, particularly Shirley," Craig interjected.

"That's right. But not all of us are gifted with full and complete understanding all the time, Craig. For some of us, it takes us a while to get there. Well, I'm there now," Dad waved at me.

"Tom has come along even faster than any of us, Craig. And realized something that was a hard slog for some of us. Outsiders, Craig, are people too. We've taken a few tentative

steps that way before, but now there's Jennifer, Mary, Shannon and Elizabeth. Now Jennifer has a friend, too. A friend whose parents are having to come to grips with a gay daughter. It takes some of us longer to get there, Craig, than others."

"Some never get there," Uncle Craig said.

"Oh my, yes!" Dad agreed. "Jennifer's parents, and it killed them. Bill Leary, killed him too. Usually the consequences of ignorance aren't so harsh, but sometimes they are.

"Craig, Ellen has a new friend herself," Dad told him.

The last seemed to freeze Craig. He looked at Mom.

"Several new friends," Mom told her brother, "including someone new, my age. Not Mary."

"At a certain point, it will get out," Craig said softly.

"Perhaps," Dad said.

"Perhaps not," Mom said firmly. "I think this is something the three of us, along with Kim, Shirley and Keisha need to talk about."

"Mary too," I told them, speaking for the first time in a while.

"Yes," Mom nodded.

"And the rest of us," I finished my thought.

"About what we decide," Mom agreed. "It does concern you, I understand Tom. But for the time being, let us talk about it."

I made a private vow to talk to people about it; I didn't want to be out of the loop. And if JR, Penny, Jenny, Shannon and Elizabeth knew what they were going to be talking about it, they'd be interested too. Probably.

We broke up then, and we all ended up in a nice restaurant eating dinner. A logistical nightmare, I thought. Five of us, Mary and her daughters, Craig. Nine for dinner. Throw in Kim

and Penny, Shirley and the rest of the LA cast of thousands: nine more. Eighteen. Suppose we had some friends over? Katrina, Tony and Sue Ellen. Tony's cousin. Mindy and Fleur, Anna and her sister. Shucks, everyone I was with Saturday. Thirty or so for dinner. How do you spell unworkable?

We were heading back to the hotel, Elizabeth was sitting on my lap, and Jenny was in Mary's, JR in Shannon's. Mom in Craig's, and Dad driving; it was just a little crowded in the car. We got back to the hotel, started to fission almost at once. Mom and Craig; Dad surprised me, sitting between JR and Shannon, kissing mostly JR, but Shannon was snuggled up against him.

Elizabeth, Jenny, Mary and I ended up in Mary's room. Jenny started kissing Elizabeth; Mary and I started making out. It didn't take long before we were all undressed, lying next to each other on the bed, kissing and stroking our partners. Then it was Jenny and I, Elizabeth and Mary. Somehow we'd kept it to passionate make out, but every now and again I'd drop my eyes to Elizabeth's breasts or Mary's. I had a glorious view of Jenny's pert bottom, and at one point when I was kissing Mary, I ran my hand over Jenny's rounded and firm buttocks.

Jenny giggled when I did that, then startled me by getting up, moving to sit down next to me. "I'm going to do something different tonight," Jenny told me as I turned to her.

Jenny smiled at me, leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. "For some time, I've gotten to sleep with you. Or Ellen or Joanna; all sorts of people. Before that, I'd never slept with anyone. Tonight, I want to be alone," she chuckled. "I don't think I will feel like this very often, but tonight..." She kissed me lightly, then Mary, then Elizabeth.

"I love you all. Now, I'm going to sleep." She got up and walked out, taking her clothes with her.

There was a bit of squirming on the bed, and I found myself between Elizabeth and Mary.

"I want to talk," Elizabeth said, her head pillowed on my chest.

"Sure." I put my arm around her shoulder, my other around Mary's.

"Mom and I have talked," Elizabeth went on after we were all comfortably settled. "I know she told you that you and she getting married was pretty impossible."

I nodded. It was, unless I was a lot older, certain to get Mary into trouble.

"There are rules, Tom, that are arbitrary, but not obeying them would be pretty stupid. Like driving on the right side of the street, stopping at red lights and stop signs."

I nodded, curious where she was going, considering where she was coming from, and where she was. Elizabeth is always a delight, taking you places you never imagined.

"Other rules seem arbitrary, like whether or not you can sleep with your sister, your parents. Like only a man and woman can get married, and they have to be a certain age. Certainly our own history has varied that age, rather widely. Truth is, Tom, if you look at all the cultures on the planet, you quickly learn that one man, and one woman isn't the only way, and that age has always been flexible.

"That said, while the marriage rules really are arbitrary, there are good reasons why fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, brothers and sisters..." She glanced at her mom, grinned, "Mothers and daughters shouldn't marry or have children together, even if they could. Then there are a great many people who use their relationships with others to exploit them; so again, those rules aren't as arbitrary as they seem.

"But the fact remains that no matter what the downside to such relationships may be, they are possible to have without the negative consequences. People all too often take the easy way out when they have to make decisions; in fact, most people put them off or simply turn their heads so they don't have to deal with it, which is why there aren't any societies where you can do as you please."

She chuckled again. "That's called anarchy, and has a very bad name."

"No rules at all?" I asked. "I don't think that would be right."

"It depends on who you ask, Tom, what's right. Go out and ask a hundred people on the street, show them a picture of the three of us, naked in bed, making love. Trust me Tom, all of them will think you're breaking the rules. They might also decide Mom's breaking the rules; virtually all of them would see me as a victim. And that's just not the truth. I seduced Mom; she didn't start things, I did. And with you, you wanted to, but until I said yes, nothing happened. There is no victim here, with me furthest of all from being the victim. Yet society would say that it's me."

Mary spoke for the first time. "Is there a point to all of this philosophy, Elizabeth? I have to admit right now I'd rather practice new ways of doing things than talk about them."

We all laughed, and Elizabeth nodded. "One day, you'll see. The three of us will be happily married. I will have babies and we will all care for them. Other babies will be around too! Ellen..." I saw Elizabeth's eyes glow. "I want to grow up to be just like her!"

Mary reached over and ran her hand down my stomach. My erection had long since faded, but rejuvenated quickly given the least encouragement; Mary's hand was a long ways from 'least encouragement.'

How I thought, as the world started to fade to blissful enjoyment, am I going to explain to Elizabeth what I'd explained to Shannon not so long ago? That a person who's not ready to decide what he wants to do in college, much less what he wants to do with his life; how could he, me, commit to marriage?

Elizabeth's lips found mine; her hand trailed around my side, mildly tickling, mildly sensual at the same time. Odd, I thought. Mary can be doing lascivious things with her hand to my erection, but I can feel a gentle tickle at the same time and enjoy it, if not in the same measure, at least in proportional measure.

I reached out and stroked Elizabeth's face with my fingertips; our kiss grew more torrid, her fingers were rubbing one of my nipples that promptly turned taut as a drum. Elizabeth lifted her lips from mine, leaned across and found Mary's to kiss; her fingertip stayed on my nipple, Mary's hand remained on my erection.

"I'd like three favors, Tom," Elizabeth said after a second. I opened my eyes and looked at her, at Mary.

"Pretty much anything you want, my love," I told her. Elizabeth smiled at the last word.

"I want to watch you make love to my mom. Then I want her to watch you make love to me. Then I want you to watch me make love to her."

I shrugged. "I don't have a problem with audience participation."

"If this never happens again, that's okay. But this once. I want Mom to see the look on my face, and on yours, when we're together. I want to watch her and you as you are together. Then I want you to see us together. Afterwards," she smiled, "none of us will have doubts again." She blew Mary a kiss, then me. "I know you have doubts; don't tell me you don't, both of you."

"I'd never say that," Mary said dryly.

"Oh yeah!" I agreed.

"Then please, this once."

I nodded, Mary was a little more reluctant, but she too nodded. Elizabeth actually got out of bed and moved a few feet away; I mentally chuckled. This was called getting a better view, a much better view!

I kissed Mary, then using my eyes and fingers, I checked her out. Her lovely face, old, yet so young; small breasts with such large nipples. A flat stomach that any girl of any age would die for, all covered with golden down. I idly wondered why it wasn't red, it was but a passing thought, ephemeral and gone in an instant. Delightfully red pussy hair, thin and elegant; no wild riot like some I'd seen, but enough to hide the inner pink folds of her sex. Then down her legs, smooth and hairless; that brought a smile to my face. Would it be sexy to watch a woman shave her legs? Her pussy? I'd heard that some women thought watching a man shave was sexy.

Eventually, I was stroking and caressing her feet, her toes. I put a dainty kiss on one of her ankles, and then moved



back up her body, this time being overtly sexual.

Mary had been quiet throughout, now when I was kissing her lips, still without a word, she pressed me back and proceeded to treat me to my own medicine. On the return trip though, she stopped and gazed long and hard at my erection.

"The only problem I think I have any more with Elizabeth's view of the future is that I can't have babies of my own."

Elizabeth giggled. "You won't say that after you see how many babies there will be."

Mary lifted her head and met my eyes. "When I was growing up, I was raised Catholic; I long ago left the church. But one thing I remember was overhearing an admonition a Priest was giving a young man, someone I never saw. Something I overheard at confession," she grinned. "Catholics believe sex is about procreation, and the boy had confessed to masturbating. The Priest assigned him a penance for what he called, 'wasting seed.'" She leaned close, used her tongue to trace a line up my erection. "I'm here to waste some more."

With that, she took me in her mouth. I saw her cheeks dimple as she applied suction; her fingers cupped my balls. Even with two and a half weeks practice, the pleasure she brought to me was wonderful, I was able to hold back only a few minutes before I came, showering the inside of her mouth with my sperm.

She moved so that she was sitting across my hips. I pressed inside of her. Mary was filled with slippery moisture that lubricated access into her vagina; in one long smooth stroke, I pressed as deep inside her as I could, feeling the tip of my cock touching her cervix. My hands went to her breasts, stroking her nipples until they were erect, and Mary had a glazed, happy expression on her face as we slowly moved together.

I turned my head, and saw Elizabeth standing a few feet away, the expression on her face mirroring Mary's, both of her hands pressing down between her legs.

Mary and I rose quickly to a warm blaze of desire and passion; I heard a sound and opened my eyes. Mary's expression was something I'll never fully be able to put into words. Her

tongue was partly out of her mouth as she fully concentrated on her pleasure; she looked happy, content, loved. Like what we were doing was the most pleasurable experience of her life.

I shot, my sperm meeting her warm embrace of my erection. Mary's smile broadened, her entire being seemed to glow with pleasure. I was afraid she hadn't come, but I realized the little tremors I felt in her body were the legacy of an orgasm that had rocked her to her core.

Mary took some deep breaths; I could see tears in her eyes. "I am complete," Mary whispered. "Elizabeth is right, I can't imagine living without you, Tom. In bed, together with you, as much as I can possibly manage." She shook her head. "It's so beautiful. And when we aren't in bed, just talking together..." She shook her head again. "Your words Tom, one day I'll write them all down." She giggled, another nice feeling, when I was buried inside her. "I'll make you a prophet of love."

Elizabeth came up and put her hand on Mary's shoulder, leaned close and kissed. It was quite a passionate kiss, albeit just a minute or so.

Mary smiled at her. "I can't believe I have sexual thoughts about my daughter, about you Elizabeth," Mary sighed. "Odder still, I don't feel any such attraction to Shannon; I love her but I don't want to make love to her."

"Shannon has place for just one at a time in her heart," Elizabeth said quietly. "She isn't like the rest of us who can hold more than one person that close. She isn't defective or less for that, just different. Tom nurtured a particularly difficult flower; now Joanna has made it bloom. There is no love that you, I and Tom will share that they won't."

Mary lifted off my erection and they kissed again, even more briefly than before. Mary brushed one of Elizabeth's breasts. "I do want you."

Elizabeth absolutely glowed. "And I am yours, now and always."

Elizabeth climbed on the bed, significantly north of where Mary had been, and I started kissing the insides of her thighs, then using my tongue to draw little wet lines, all pointing towards the same place.

My tongue reached that place, pausing to get to know her clit better, then much better. Elizabeth was rubbing her own breasts, not as hard as most girls seemed to do it, but just as obviously enjoying what she was doing.

For a long time, I licked and pressed, twice Elizabeth climbed the mountain, and the second time I nearly spurted myself from the power of her orgasm. She leaned down, dragging her pussy across my chest and abdomen, then surprising me, by rolling off to one side.

"Tom," Elizabeth's voice was soft and gentle; I looked into her eyes and fell, it seemed, a very long ways.

"I want you to love me that special way," she moved, rolling over on her stomach.

I blinked, and then blushed in embarrassment as I realized what Elizabeth meant. Tom, Tom, Tom! I thought. The girl sees the future, has for a long time! Why are you surprised to find out she knows your most secret pleasure?

I ran my hands over her ass cheeks, considerably diminished since she was laying face down on the bed. She lifted her hips up a bit, and I saw she had two fingers in her crack, pulling her cheeks apart, showing me the brown dimple.

I looked at Mary, who was blushing from head to toe. "Go," I saw on her lips. "Go." I leaned close to Elizabeth's backside, letting my cock brush against Elizabeth. She pushed back and I pushed ahead; gradually I sank deeper. The others had been a little tight back there, but Elizabeth was very tight; it took a while. Then her ass cheeks were nestled against my abdomen and we began to move together.

I could tell that Elizabeth was aroused; she could sense my arousal. I realized she had her hand underneath her, working her clit, working inside of herself; it was too much, entirely too much and I came and came, spurring as much or more inside her than I'd ever done.

For some time, the only things I was aware of was our rasping breathing and the press of her buttocks against my midsection. This is totally kinky, I thought. This is the position I like best, that gets my rod the hardest, for the

longest. But it's not for everyone; I'd better never, ever, forget it.

"I must be mushing you flat," I said, leaning down and kissing the nape of Elizabeth's neck.

"Oh, yes. But Tom, you don't know how wonderful this feels!"

Still, I knew she wanted me to get up, and I did. And like the others before her, she led me to the bathroom and washed us up, quickly and efficiently.

She went back into the bedroom, directly to Mary. There was no hesitation on either of their parts; they met in the middle of the room, wrapped their arms around each other and kissed whole-heartedly. Hands were on breasts, bottoms, and between legs at once; it reminded me a little of watching Janey masturbate briefly Saturday night.

Several times people had hinted I might like to watch them making love to someone besides me; seeing Elizabeth and Mary together, I knew this was another secret pleasure that wouldn't work with everyone, but one that I liked.

Mary came first, but it just spurred her on, and then Elizabeth came; the two tumbled into bed, kissing and touching; a whirlwind of passion, a roller coaster of orgasms given and experienced, until a final moment when they both froze, their bodies locked in the moment, frozen and unmoving, but certainly not unfeeling.

Elizabeth looked at me, a Mona-Lisa smile on her lips. She spoke softly. "Tom, hold Mom."

I turned off the one light, crawled into bed. Mary was already asleep, for a moment Elizabeth's hand was on my arm, then it fell away as she too was overcome with exhaustion.

I wrapped my arm around Mary, no longer concerned where my hand ended up. I cupped one of her small breasts, the one that Elizabeth wasn't using as a pillow. Then I slept.

Wednesday, April 3, 2002

There may be something better than waking up next to the

person you love; if there is, it's waking up with two of them next to you.

I spent close to a half hour just looking at Mary and Elizabeth, each separately and both together. Elizabeth's words about our future together echoed again and again in my mind. Sure, I didn't want to commit to the future, but here it was, right in front of me.

Finally, I lay back, unable to come to terms with the conflict between desire and reason. I'd stopped being a virgin less than three weeks ago; I had, since then, had more than my fair share of experience. In my heart, I knew I loved Elizabeth and Mary more than I could ever love anyone else. And yet my brain insistently whispered treason: This is the first month; what do you know of the future?

Uncle Craig wanted me to be a money manager. My parents expected me to go to college; it didn't matter what I studied, I'd been told. The goal is to find something I liked and then finish my degree, Dad had told me more than once. Fine, I could do that. And if I couldn't marry Mary, I could sure get hitched to Elizabeth. Yeah, I might have a few jokes come my way about having a live-in mother-in-law but I could smile to myself and ignore them.

How could I know now, today, what was going to be good for me in a year? Five? When I hit the big three-oh people talked about? Eligible for AARP?

I nearly laughed out loud, glancing at Elizabeth as I did. You say you can see the future; that the future is us, the three of us, plus some unspecified number of babies. Maybe you can see the future, Elizabeth. But the rest of us can't. The answer, when I thought about it, was clear: Most people look at today, and base their plans for the future on that.

I had my answer when I woke up and looked at Mary and Elizabeth. Nothing was better than this. It was up to us to make the future as happy as the present. Time, I thought, to get started on the future.

I leaned close to Mary, using just the tip of my tongue to lightly tease around one of her awesomely large nipples. I'd been at it for just a few minutes when her arm snaked around my head, her fingers running through my hair.

I licked her nipples harder, and Mary leaned close. "I love you, darling."

Elizabeth from the far side of Mary reached over, and ran her hand along my shoulder, then kissed Mary on the neck. "You two, enjoy. I'm going to get a warm shower, then go outside and read."

I smiled at Elizabeth, happy in my heart.

I think I have fought all the devils I need to fight, inside my head. The devil that beset Jenny has been vanquished; the shattering hurt to Mary and her daughters assuaged. There would be time and enough for both of them.

I rolled to meet Mary, my arms going around her. It was like a whole new world opened up for me. Her skin was warm and alive, and I couldn't get enough of stroking and kissing her. I rubbed my hands against her; I rubbed my body against hers. Even my legs rubbed up and down hers; I was besotted with the contact of her warm, living body against mine.

It was like every inch of my body wanted to get involved with making love to Mary. I wanted to touch her, caress her, feel her warmth; I wanted to bask in the warmth that was my love for her and hers for me.

Mary seemed to pick up on it. The two of us became a squirming mass of touches and kisses. She licked me places I'd never been licked, then I sent goose-bumps popping up all over her body when I danced and wiggled my tongue along the length of her spine.

Then with hardly any warning, she moved and I was inside her, once again penetrating her to the depths of her womanhood. I'd been with tall women, I'd been with short women; Mary was perfect, utterly perfect.

I kept pushing deep inside of her, concentrating on making each stroke an artwork, a precise statement of my love for her, to be savored for an instant, and then I would try to improve upon it.

Once, early on, I felt her arms clamp down against my shoulders, and I knew she'd come. I didn't slow or speed up,

but kept to a deliberate pace enjoying each delicious second as I roused her. I knew I was arousing Mary, I could feel it in her body; I loved the sensation, knowing it was me, Tom Ferguson, that was making her feel like this.

For the first time, I started to vary my pace, wanting to build her up to just before her climax, then let her pause there while mine built up as well. I'd had tremendous orgasms before; making love to Elizabeth had been like being struck by lightning, going up in a spiral of fire. This was just a steady buildup that stretched my senses, clawed at my self-control. The cave man inside of me wanted to pound into Mary to gain my own release; the man who loved Mary wanted her to fly as high as the moon and stars.

I pushed deep inside her one last time, pressing down on her clit as I did. Pleasure shot through me, and as tremendous as that was, I felt Mary's orgasm as well. The reflection of that added to mine and for a tumultuous second I could barely remain conscious.

Then the two of us lay together, still joined. I smiled slightly to myself. I was breathing hard, but not as hard as other times. But what had just passed between Mary and I was about the best sex could possibly be.

I lightly ran my fingertips languidly over Mary's back, pleased and happy. Hey future, ready or not! Here comes Tom Ferguson, the happiest guy on earth!

Even so, I was unprepared a few minutes later when I felt a series of odd sensations from down below. At first I thought Mary was clenching her vaginal muscles around my erection; I was sure ready to do it again!

Then I realized she was laughing.

"What?" I asked curious, running my hand down and coming to rest on her bottom.

"Oh, thinking about this and that." This time she did squeeze down on my cock. "Don't worry, I'm not laughing at you."

"The other day, when we first came to visit your house, Ellen made me welcome; I felt so horribly guilty for using her teen-age son to build up my self-esteem. We were in the

kitchen, getting snacks for everyone, and I apologized to her.

"She looked me up and down, and I swear, she licked her lips. 'My son has exquisite taste,' she told me. I was a little slow to realize what she was doing, after that. Kisses, small hugs. At first I thought they were meant to be reassuring, that she was trying to tell me she didn't mind what had happened between us.

"It wasn't until she kissed me and started to rub my breasts, that I realized she wanted to make love to me.

"I didn't know what to do," Mary laughed again. "I felt a little hesitant with you, Tom. Not that it mattered. And the first time with Bill, I was more hesitant then, and it didn't matter. I thought with Ellen, I should take my time, be sure what I wanted..." She chuckled again.

"She who hesitates around Ellen is sure to get what she wants, even if that want is buried in a secret part of her heart that she never wanted to admit existed."

"Around my family," I told her, "secret wants tend to have a way of getting realized."

Mary touched my face. "I know I don't have to ask, but this is still so new, and you're so good. It seems terrible to ask something like this from someone who's brought me so much joy and love... who's taken me to places sexually I never imagined existed."

"You want to be with my mom," I told her, nodding.

"Yes."

I hugged her. "Yes," my reply was as simple as hers had been.

"I'm not sure if I want to be with Dave again," she added quietly.

I grinned. "A French girl told me not so long ago, that until you try something, you don't know if you'll like it or not. She didn't say anything beyond that, but it's pretty clear that if you don't like something, you shouldn't."



Mary leaned down and kissed me hard, but curiously unsexual at the same time.

"Last night," she whispered, "I watched you and Elizabeth. This morning when you were kissing me on the back, I was afraid you wanted to..."

I smiled at her. "Elizabeth says she can see the future. I don't pretend to do that. But there is something inside of me that doesn't let me get started if I'm not wanted. Mary, I swear to you, I never thought of that."

"It seems more than a little..."

"Ickie," I completed the thought. "I understand. Please, when I make love to you, to anyone, I want us to lie together afterwards, big smiles on our faces, as happy as we can be. Going someplace someone doesn't want you to go? Sounds very ickie to me!"

Mary got up and headed for the shower; I did the same, but in my own room. As I was getting undressed, I saw the message light blinking on the room phone; that turned out to be a message from Tony, asking if I wanted to come over to Sue Ellen's around one in the afternoon to swim. Oh yeah, he'd moved in with her.

I'd been thinking quite a bit about Tony and I decided what I'd rather do is look him in the eye, shake his hand and tell him thanks again for saving my life on Sunday. Instead of an immediate shower, I picked up the new cell phone from off the charger stand and called Tony at Sue Ellen's right then.

The phone on the other end was picked up on the first ring and a very chipper Sue Ellen said, "Top of the morning to ya!"

I laughed. "Top of the morning right back, Sue Ellen. Is Tony up?"

Sue Ellen howled with laughter. "We talked about nick-naming you Indie Ferguson, but I'm changing my vote to Aphrodisiac Ferguson. Tony's been up for hours and hours now!"

I was still trying to get my jaw off the floor when Tony came on. "Hey Tom, how are they hanging?"

"Pretty good, I guess. Say, Tony, would you mind if I came by this morning? I don't know what we've got going this afternoon, but I'd like to stop in and say hello."

"Sure, Sue Ellen was about to fix some breakfast. If you drive real fast, you might get some," Tony chuckled at that.

"You know me, Tony. Ol' safe and steady Tom. I'll be over in a few."

I showered, dressed and found that the only people up and about were Jenny and Elizabeth, sitting cross-legged next to the pool. Jenny was reading another of my dad's Economist magazines, Elizabeth a textbook. I told them I expected to be back around ten or eleven, got in my car and drove across town to Sue Ellen's.

I was, it turned out, in time to catch the tail end of breakfast and Sue Ellen was happy to zap a couple of waffles in the microwave and pour me a glass of orange juice.

The three of us talked about school, about Sue Ellen going back to being a cheerleader, which Tony seemed to really like. Finally, I did what I came for, shook Tony's hand.

"I really didn't do anything," he told me.

I smiled at him. "Like it was hard for me to give the police an address for Roger Parker? Or when Elizabeth collapsed, I had to think about what to do? No Tony, you came back for me. You've got big balls, my friend. And coming back, that's really what friends are for."

Sue Ellen hugged both of us, and as I headed outside I was feeling good. Really good. I was getting right with the world. I was coming to terms with everything. I got into the Camry and started back to the hotel.

I wasn't distracted; I swear. It was, literally, an eye blink.

Ahead of me, the traffic light turned green; there was no one between me and the intersection. I'd been slowing for the red; I remember taking my foot off the brake...

I opened my eyes. It felt odd. Everything was odd. There

was no sense of movement; there were odd pressures here and there, everywhere. My eyes focused about a foot and half away from me, on black asphalt. I remember noting the light and dark pieces of gravel embedded in the dark matrix; there was a white bit to one side, with a dark mark diagonally across part of it.

That's the street. My mind refused to accept I was looking at the street, just inches from my face. And the white line is some of the striping; the black mark was a skid mark.

My mind leaped from there. I'd crashed! I'd hit someone in the intersection! Dear God! Had I killed someone?

For the first time, I tried to move.

And have never, ever, been so frustrated in my life.

I could twist my upper torso about an inch, my head about six inches. I got a view of more road, a little further from my eyes; nothing else. My arms didn't move, my legs didn't move. I swallowed, felt icy prickles run up and down my spine.

Very deliberately, I concentrated on my right foot. I could feel my toes wiggle; I could move my foot at the ankle. I just couldn't move my leg. I could mildly flex my knee, but just a tiny bit. My left leg, my foot could move, just not as much. There was a little more play for my knee, but not much. My hands were fine; I could flex my fingers, my wrists and elbows just fine. But move them? Nope.

I heard a sound a few inches from my head. I tried to look. For the first time there was a soft giving that let my head turn. I found myself looking at someone outside the car. I frowned. He was upside down!

He saw my eyes on him, I saw him lean closer, to look at me. Muffled through the window, I heard him call loudly, "This one's alive!"

I tried to set my shoulders back. Those words hurt me in a way I'd never been hurt before. 'This one is alive.' That had to mean others weren't. I'd killed someone. Maybe several some ones. Inside, I shriveled and died; I felt tears running in funny directions, over my forehead instead of down my cheeks.

There was a knock on the car window glass, "How badly are

you hurt?" A loud voice came from outside.

There was a rustle and another face appeared. The man had to be, I realized, stretched out on the pavement. Jeez, I thought, that must sting! It wasn't a really hot day, but black asphalt in Phoenix is something you avoid even in the winter! Anything to avoid thinking about the winter of despair in my heart!

"Where does it hurt, son?" the voice said.

With a start, I realized I recognized the voice, the cadence of his words. I tried to twist my head around to look at him better, but I still could hardly move. "You're the fireman," I told him, amazed, "The boss fireman from the other day."

"Battalion Chief Denny Wheeler," he confirmed. "Where do you remember me from?"

"The girl with the heart attack."

"Ah!" he looked closer. "And you are Tom... I'm sorry I don't remember your last name."

"Ferguson, sir. Tom Ferguson."

He smiled, although it took an effort to realize that's what he was doing.

"Tom, you've been in an accident. I've got help rolling, and some EMTs will be here in a minute or two. But right now you need to focus and tell me how bad you're hurt."

I tried not to sound as frustrated as I felt. "I can move everything. Everything moves, I just can't move any of it very far. Weird."

"Does anything hurt, Tom?"

I shook my head. "I don't feel real good. I'm upside down, aren't I?"

"Yes. Are you sure you're not hurting? Can you tell if you're bleeding?"

"I got hit once by a hit baseball," I told him. "For a second, I thought I was okay, but then it started to hurt. Really hurt. Nothing hurts now. I don't think I'm bleeding. I don't feel anything like bleeding."

"Tom, I'm going to have to go for a minute. It'll be a minute before someone can get back to you. Tom, listen real close. Stay calm, stay cool. Don't try to move, okay?"

"I can't move," I repeated to him.

"I understand. You have to understand too, Tom. I'll be back in a minute." He paused, I know now he was psyching himself up to give me some really bad news. "Tom, can you smell gas?"

I nodded. Then it hit me. Gas. All those cars in movies and things. Exploding balls of fire. "Yes, I smell it. Go, please go. I'll be okay." If I couldn't run, he could. Should. Ran far, far away; Tom Ferguson's luck has run out.

Funny how things work. 'Go, please go.' Three simple words that have made me a friend for life.

He did leave, I watched him pull back, get up to his knees and move away from the car.

I tried hard then, to pull myself together. Sure, I understand a whole lot more about shock now than I did right then, but I'm not sure that understanding would have made the process quicker.

Once again I took stock of my body. There were a few places where things were poking me that were uncomfortable, but not truly painful. Everything still wiggled and moved fine. Just not in a larger sense. The smell of gasoline kept me from trying too hard to push the envelope.

I didn't have much to look at; I did turn my head around to where it had been at first. That was another really bad moment. For the first time, I realized the hood of the Camry was missing; everything in front of me was missing. How many times had I popped the hood up to check the water and oil? Put fluid in the washer? Dad had shown me all of that when he and Mom had been teaching me to drive. It was a check mark on the 'To Do' list Mom printed up every week. And Mom had said how many times

that the reason she liked the Camry was that it had a long hood?

Now, quite simply, the front end of the car was gone. I turned my head back to where I'd seen the fireman, but it was hard to see anything at a distance, because the window glass was cracked and buckled. So too, I noted, was the car door, although I couldn't see much of it.

Again, I was terrified that I'd fallen asleep or just hadn't been paying attention, that I'd hit someone in the intersection. I was sure, positive beyond reasonable doubt, that I'd killed someone. Ripped a living, breathing human being from life, from family and friends. I felt like sobbing, but there was nothing there; the well was dry. I just sat there, alone, grieving. Promising I would do my level best to do what I could for anyone I'd hurt.

There was a sound again, and I turned back. It was the boss fireman again. "How are you doing, Tom?"

"Fine, sir." I decided that it was something I had to know. Had to. "How many people did I kill?"

I saw his eyes on me, saw him shake his head. "Tom, do you remember anything?"

"No." I already knew the futility of trying to move my head. "I was coming up on Indian School, the light turned green. I took my foot off the brake, then I opened my eyes and I was here. Please, I won't go crazy, how many people did I hurt?"

"Tom, two men robbed a bank down at Indian School and Twentieth. They were driving a Ford Explorer. Probably, from what the witnesses said, they were going about a hundred miles an hour when they came through here. They clipped the rear of your car, spun you into the oncoming traffic. They smashed into a small Civic and then turned north. The police are after them now."

I tried to concentrate on what I remembered, but there was nothing. Just the light turning green, my foot coming off the brake. I'd been hit in the rear end? I tried to put it all together; I couldn't.

"Tom, listen to me."

I turned my attention back to him. "We have some other people we have to help first. You don't appear to be seriously injured and they are. You're going to have to wait here for a bit more, okay?"

"Okay. You should go, it's not safe." I didn't feel elated at the news it wasn't my fault; disbelief was the dominant emotion at that moment, terror for those who were hurt. Concern for someone else, close to me, who should be safe.

"I'll try to find someone to come stay with you, Tom. You understand why it's not safe?"

"I understand." For sure, the gas smell was there, pretty heavy too. "You don't have to do anything for me."

There had been sirens earlier, I'd heard them. There were more, plus loud sounds that I thought were fire trucks. Odd, I thought, really odd, how much we depend on our eyes. I had a small circumscribed world, a worldview that was distorted and shattered. I closed my eyes, wanting it all to just go away.

There was a 'chunk' sound a few inches from my head. I opened my eyes and saw a policeman; again it took a second to recognize him. "Officer Moss."

I saw him pull back his nightstick. "Chief Wheeler says you're okay, Tom. You sure?"

I smiled. "I decided to take a nap; not much is going on."

I wiggled everything again. "Nothing hurts. I can wiggle but not move."

"Jeez! We took some pictures of your car. Afterwards, you can look at them."

I contemplated what it meant for a policeman to look at a car and go, 'Jeez!' Maybe there are things we're not meant to know.

"They've put foam down around your car; they're working on getting the scene safe to work on. The Chief says you understand that they have some other people they have to help first."

"I don't know what happened, Officer Moss. I swear, I don't remember."

"Tom, it's Joe. There was nothing you could have done, Tom. They were going too fast."

"I just don't remember." I wasn't crying, not quite anyway.

"Tom, tell me what you would have done coming up on an intersection like that?"

My dad had made sure of any number of things before he thought I was ready to drive solo. Having the right habits was number one on his list. "I don't speed up until I've looked right, then left, then back ahead."

"So, you look right first?"

"Yeah."

"Tom, do you know how far a car travels in a second at 60 miles an hour?"

"No."

"Almost a hundred feet. Tom, they were going at least a hundred, not sixty miles an hour. Tom, if you looked right, they'd have been three to five hundred feet away, when you looked. From that far away, it's really hard to judge speed."

I've always been surprised how my mind works. I spent the next minute doing the math. Thinking about how I turned my head, how long to push down on the gas pedal. Elizabeth, I thought, would have been able to do the math in quick time; so could Jenny.

For the first time, I thought about my family, my friends. I looked at Officer Moss. "What time is it?"

"A little before eleven." It had been half past ten when I'd left Tony's.

"Could you call my dad? Just him. Tell him what's happened? He's at work."



"I can do that." I gave him the number, and for a few minutes, I was alone again.

I wanted to close my eyes and rest some more; the temptation was nearly overwhelming. It was, I thought, like running away. Awake or asleep, here I was. What had I told Fleur? You deal with the things you can deal with and let those things you can't change take care of themselves. I heaved a sigh. Well, Tom, you can talk a good line. This is your chance to do what you've asked others to do. Don't run away.

Officer Moss was back. "He's going to come. I told him that it's going to be the Fire Department's call if he can talk to you or not."

My mind had settled, my ability to connect dots was returning. "I'm going to be here for a while," I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Tom, your car is a mangled piece of junk. I saw it and wrote you off. Every fireman and cop here looks at it, and shakes their head. The human body is simply amazing, Tom. Takes a licking and keeps on ticking.

"That bad?"

"Oh yeah! Like I said, later, if you're up to it, I'll show you the pictures."

"So what's going to happen?"

"They are working to get a mother and daughter out of their car; there was a granddaughter, an infant, in there, but she's already out. Shaken, but not injured; car seats are like cocoons. Mom and grandmom, not doing so well, but they'll probably be okay."

"Probably?" I asked.

He sighed loud enough for me to hear. "Like I said, Tom, the human body is an amazing thing. It can take damage that you would think would surely be fatal, and then the person gets up and walks away. Other times just a minor blow and a person drops dead. I've learned not to rush to judgment about how good a shape someone is in, or how bad it is, until we get them to

the hospital and the docs have a look at them."

"And me?"

"You? You sit here a while longer. There's enough time, they've rolled Johnnie Dugan on this. He's the best hand in the west when it comes to cutting someone loose from a wreck. He'll be here in another few minutes, then they will, very carefully, cut you out of there."

I contemplated the metal all around me. The sun had been beating down on the car for some time now; it was, for the first time, a little uncomfortable.

"I wouldn't mind a drink," I told Officer Moss. "It's a little warm."

"We have to wait for Johnnie Dugan," he said firmly. "I know it's no fun in there, but he's a genius, Tom. Right now there's a half dozen men and two women standing around your car with foam extinguishers aimed at it. Odds are they can get a fire before it gets out of hand."

"Tell them thanks," I asked him.

He laughed, "Already promised them all a barbeque and beer bust."

"I'll buy," I laughed. "Well, I'll buy what I can buy."

He laughed too. "And we'll get Johnnie Dugan a big ol' case of scotch. Lord, that man can drink!"

"Maybe I'll contribute a case of Grape Nehi, instead."

We traded a few more jokes, and then Officer Moss spoke one last time. "Time for me to get out of the way, Tom. You listen to Johnnie, Tom. He's good, really good. Good luck!"

A minute later, Officer Moss was replaced by a large man with sandy red hair, not at all like Mary or her daughters.

"Johnnie Dugan," he said, his voice like gravel. "You're Tom."

"Yes, sir," I told him.

"I have a request from a cop, another from a Battalion Chief: try to get you out in one piece. Usually don't get the time of day from either. Just a 'Get it going, Dugan.'"

"Sir, if you don't mind, 'Get it going.'" I said with a laugh. "It's getting warm in here."

"Yeah, I imagine so. Let me explain how this works. I've got saws, crunchers, pullers, Jaws of Life, all that. The saws particularly, but all the rest too, give off sparks. Sparks aren't our friends right now. We're going to spend a few more minutes here, making it just a bit safer to work. Safer for me, anyway. You understand, that if it goes, you're in deep shit?"

"Yes, sir."

"First thing, I'm going to ask if you can turn your face away from the window."

"I can, yes."

"You do that, then I'm going to be getting this window out of the way. We'll give you a little drink, then I'll start to work."

I turned my face, heard some faint noises, then crunching sounds. He used, he told me later, suction devices that pulled the glass away from me, then he carefully pulled what remained away by hand.

"Okay, look back at me."

I did, and he held a juice box close to my lips, and I sucked it dry in about a second.

"Can't give you too much, the doc's don't like it," he said, tossing the box away. "I'm going to be explaining what I do as I work. You don't have to listen, but I like to talk. Sometimes I realize I'm doin' it wrong, and I catch a mistake. So that's why I talk. Just relax, Tom." He laughed. "Oh, when I'm done, you'll have completed Johnnie Dugan's short course on car cutting."

I'd realized early on that if I wiggled my toes, my legs felt better, so I laid there, upside down, wiggling my toes and

listening to Johnnie Dugan talk. I'd heard the term 'stream of consciousness' before, but I'd not really understood what it meant. After Johnnie Dugan, I knew. It was one, long continuous statement of what he was thinking.

"Lessee, there's that little bugger! Ah! Got ya! Now, we get to look a little, see what's up!"

"Me," I told him, "Although I appear to be upside down!"

He chuckled, "Well, just so you know, don't take a piss!"

"I figured," I told him.

More light appeared, he'd undone the door side panel. He leaned closer, "Hmmm. I'll be damned!" He pulled back, looked at me. "And it doesn't hurt?"

"Should it hurt?" I asked, concerned.

"Well, let's just say if I were you, I'd not bother with buying even one lottery ticket in your life. You already won the big jackpot, Tom. Be right back."

He moved away, leaving me to watch the sunlight, just inches away. So near, yet so far. Odd, if I was in the direct sun, it would make it even more uncomfortable than it was. And yet, I love to look at it.

Johnnie Dugan was back. "They're gonna take a few pictures here, Tom. Relax for a second. You're goin' in the history books here, guy!"

I heard someone call his name, and he was gone again. A minute later, it was Dad, crawling down next to me.

"Tom..."

"Sorry about the car, Dad."

"Don't even think about it. The police told me," I saw his expression. "Gosh, I was thinking I should call Ellen and Craig about this, now I'm glad I didn't."

"I'm fine," I told him. "I'm really sorry about the car."

"Forget it, Tom. I'm not going to be far, but they need me to move to work. You do what you're told, okay?"

"Not much I can do but sit here and wiggle things," I told him.

"And everything wiggles," I added, as he moved back.

Then Johnnie Dugan was back, with more rambling conversation. Then, "Okay, now we're gonna take a bite out of this. Tom, listen to me."

"Yes, sir."

"It's Johnnie, boy. This is real important. I've got things braced so, in theory, nothing will move but what I want. If you start to feel any pressure at all, you sing out real quick. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Johnnie."

"It's really important, Tom. Any change in pressure, even the least little bit, you yell. Don't try to be a tough guy; don't be anything but a little baby. If something moves, you tell me! Scream at the top of your lungs!"

I contemplated the car, I contemplated myself lying squinched inside the car. With complete clarity, I knew what he was concerned about. "Trust me," I said, trying hard to clear my throat, "the least thing."

There was a buzzing whine, then the scream of metal cutting metal. I held my breath, every sense tuned to the slightest movement.

"Okay, now I'm going to start to move it," Johnnie said. I was tempted to stick out my tongue. I thought the hard part had come and gone.

I felt a tremor of movement, heard metal crunch. I checked everything again, nothing seemed to have changed. For the next five minutes, small crunches of sound, more frantic wiggles on my part.

Then, the door was pulled away in a clean movement, and I was now much closer to the sunlight, just a few inches in

places.

Johnnie Dugan looked at me, grinned, and then started looking at the rest of me; he took his time about it, too. "Camera," he called. He took a half dozen quick shots, and then gave the camera to someone else.

"I think you are probably as lucky as a person can get, Tom. I'm going to pass some straps around your shoulders, your waist and legs. I'm going to need a little help from you getting them around you. Just hang tight, and I'll have you out of there in a jiffy!"

He pushed a strap beneath me, lifting my shoulders up a fraction of an inch to get it underneath me, then stood, reached over and around, pulling it up and around to lay on my chest. He moved back to another position, wiggled his fingers across my chest, got it and pulled it through.

He spent a few minutes pushing and prodding pieces of metal, then went to work on my waist. That was easier; there was more room between me and the seat, more room in front of me. The last strip was the slowest, but I think he was just being careful. Then three husky men were tugging on the straps, and I was wiggling at the same time.

I popped out, onto the ground, a little stunned with the abruptness. I smiled, holding out my hand to Johnnie Dugan. "Thanks," I told him, "thanks from the bottom of my heart."

He rolled his eyes as we shook hands. "You just hold still, the EMTs are going to be on my case for letting you move!"

He was right, two men and a woman were right there with a gurney, pushing me to lie down. I glanced back at the car. It was, I found, really easy to sit down, and then lay back. I'd known about the front of the car; but I'd never been able to see behind me. From just behind the driver's door the metal was twisted and bent, just scraps and tatters. If someone had been riding shotgun or in the back seat, they'd have been killed instantly. And looking at where I'd been, I had no idea why I hadn't been killed instantly myself.

One of the men was checking my blood pressure and heartbeat; the other two were running their hands over my body,

looking for injuries. The woman ran her hand from my ankle up past my knee; she didn't have to get her hand close to my groin, I came erect in a flash.

She grinned, "I guess everything still works."

I blushed, and the other EMTs laughed at me. Well, that worked; something worked. I deflated almost as fast as I'd risen to the moment.

Dad appeared, and one of the EMTs explained to him where I was being taken. "No visible signs of trauma. We still need to have the docs look your young man over."

"Wait," I said, "is Chief Wheeler still here?"

He was, and I got to shake his hand and tell him thanks too. The Chief handed me a business card, and so did Johnnie Dugan. Again I was effusive in my thanks.

The Chief waved at my car, at the two other cars not far away. "Just doing my job. Like before, Tom, you did yours. It's all that any of us can do. Don't forget that Tom, when you think about this. If you had panicked, if you hadn't kept your cool, it would have been very easy to hurt yourself. You did good, young man! Don't kick yourself about any of this!"

Riding in an ambulance, siren or not, isn't as much fun as it's supposed to be. You can't see anything, all you do is lurch this way or that way as the ambulance cuts through traffic. I wouldn't, in fact, recommend it to anyone as a preferred way to travel.

You get fairly decent service in an Emergency Room when they bring you in from an ambulance direct from a major traffic accident.

Still, I had to convince them not to cut my clothes off, and they hovered anxiously as I sat up on the gurney and undressed completely.

Careful examination revealed two bruises, both small. Officer Moss was just outside. The doctors finally cleared me, and we moved to another room where he talked to me for a bit, with Dad sitting just a few feet away. I felt really bad that I couldn't remember anything, but Officer Moss explained it.

"It's not uncommon. In fact, it's not even a little unusual. Our minute-to-minute memories go into short-term storage, like RAM in a computer. If the lights go out abruptly, that data just vanishes, if it hasn't been saved. It's just something that happens."

"Will it come back?" I asked him.

He shook his head negatively. "What I need from you, Tom, is a formal statement. Of what you remembered, before and after. There is no criminal liability that you're facing; too many witnesses saw what happened. Civil liability..." He sighed. "Almost certain."

"We'll deal with it," Dad told him. "Thanks, officer."

Officer Moss nodded, smiled at me. "Plug your ears, Tom." I blinked, not knowing what he meant.

"I talked to the detectives working on the Reese case; they're some of the best and brightest on the force. They have nothing but good things to say about Tom. Some detectives I personally think would make darn good traffic cops hate his guts. Battalion Chief Wheeler is another good guy; he has nothing but praise for your son. Johnnie Dugan? He's beyond good. He says anyone who can kid about it, tell jokes while being cut out of a wreck that should have killed him instantly, is an okay guy.

"Trust me, Mr. Ferguson, you need any help in the civil things, you let one of us know. We'll help in anyway we can."

Dad was about to say something, when his cell phone went off. Dad said hello, listened for a second. "Craig, just tell everyone to stay there. Call Ellen and have her pick up Mary at work and have them get over there. Tom and I are on our way, we'll be there shortly; we're just about finished here. Call Carstairs, have him come out."

A pause and Dad shook his head. I was tempted to laugh; it was nice to know I wasn't the only one who did that. "This is important Craig, we need the lawyer. I'll explain it when we get there. Order out for some pizza. Lot's of pizza, some Coke. I'm starved."



Dad closed the phone, nodded at Officer Moss. "My brother-in-law. I asked him to have the family get together. Some of them are getting a little concerned."

Well, concern or not, it was painfully slow getting out of the hospital.

Finally, we were on our way, but by then it was pushing two o'clock. Traffic didn't much cooperate, so we did get back to the hotel a little after three.

We went into Mom and Dad's room, as they had a nice sitting room. It was crowded with everyone there, including a lawyer, one I didn't recognize. Plus, there was a pile of pizza boxes on one of the tables, and no matter what, that was my first stop.

"David," Mom said quietly, "where have you been? Tom?"

"Tom," Dad said drolly, "has lost the use of his car."

I turned and stared at him in disbelief. I should have known he would jerk not only my chain, but everyone's.

I remembered tag teams; I remembered a lot of things. I smiled, "I was involved in a bank robbery."

"Drove into the getaway car," Dad added.

The room had gone silent, then it was Elizabeth who spoke, "They'll catch them tomorrow."

I nodded, I hoped they would. "And now," I told everyone, "Dad has had his little joke, and I've had mine. One person was killed, five injured. A toddler in a car seat came away with only minor bruises, just like me. It wasn't a joke at all."

I've never been tackled in a football game; I was then.

The next thing I knew, Mom, Mary, Shannon, Elizabeth, JR, and Jenny had me in death grips. If being tackled is anything like that, Tony can keep it.

It took a while, but eventually everyone was seated again. "I apologize," Dad said, contritely. "Tom's reminded me that I'm not nearly as funny as I think I am sometimes. Tom's car

was totaled. I mean, not just a little totaled, but totally totaled. The police and firemen at the scene told me to thank my lucky stars; Tom's survival was a one in a million shot. Uninjured? Flat out impossible.

"Yet, here he is."

I spent a few minutes giving a highly sanitized account of waking up, upside down, then getting cut out of the car. I finished with Officer Moss's statement about civil liability. After that, there was a protracted period of silence that ended with all of us looking at the lawyer.

"You're concerned about the legal issues," the lawyer said.

"Yes," I said, feeling sad. If it really hadn't been something I'd done, the thought that people would want to push part of the responsibility on me wasn't something I was ever going to be comfortable with. The thought that they would do it because I had money in the bank, made it more than uncomfortable.

"And what did the police say? Any tickets issued?"

"No," Dad told him. "They say that the robbery suspects had just held up a bank, were speeding away from the scene. At that time, there was no police pursuit, they were headed for the freeway, when they ran a red light, slammed into Tom's car, hit another car and continued on. Tom's car was spun into the oncoming traffic, involving another car. That car had three of the injured in it, although I was told the infant's injuries aren't serious. The other car the suspects hit had the fatality, and another serious injury. A father killed in front of his adult daughter."

There was nothing but silence, all of us lost in our own thoughts.

The lawyer stood up, looking around at us. "You are going to be sued. Part of my job is to know my clients as well as opponents. You are likely to be sued by all parties involved, their attorneys will do due diligence, learn how deep your pockets are, and go for broke."

"And the odds of someone winning that suit?" Mom asked.

The lawyer laughed. "Depends on how much you and they are willing to spend. Fifty-fifty."

"My son's car is smashed, he had no involvement in what happened, but he's going to be sued? And stands to lose?" Mom was incredulous.

"Yes," the lawyer was bluntly matter of fact. "That's exactly what's going to happen."

"I don't have any money," I told him. "I don't come into my trust funds until I'm twenty-one. Four and a half years. Uncle Craig can just tear up the papers he wanted me to sign."

It was Craig who shook his head. "Doesn't make any difference."

"Not for a number of reasons," the lawyer agreed. "For one thing, this will drag out for years. Tom will be much older before a final judgment is reached. Even if he's still a minor when it comes down, they would attach anything like a trust fund if the verdict is in their favor. Plus, David, Ellen, you have to face the fact that you'll be a party to the suit as well. As the responsible parents of a minor driver."

"Fifty-fifty?" Dad asked softly. "Aren't you guys better than that?"

"Like I said, it depends on what you and they are willing to spend. Considering what's at stake, I'd expect my firm to be water boys for the varsity. Even so..."

Dad held out a piece of paper to the lawyer. "This is the police case number. Why don't you go start doing the due diligence?"

The lawyer nodded, his eyes flicked around the room.

Dad stood watching him, and after a second the lawyer left.

"We should leave too," Mary said quietly.

"No!" I said instantly.

"No!" my parents chorused a fraction of a second later.

It was Mom who got up and went to Mary. She reached up, and stroked Mary's cheek. "You are, dear heart, always going to be welcome here. We all understand how much he hurt you. We do. We understand what you want to do, but please, this is family. Don't pull away."

"This is your family's business," Mary said, standing fast.

"Mary," she turned and looked at me when I spoke. "this is about something that happened to me. Please, I love you. Don't walk away now."

"I don't know what I can contribute."

"Love," Mom told her.

I was surprised when it was all of the rest of the Ferguson's, Dad, JR, Jenny as well as me, all of us nodding vigorously when Mom spoke.

I smiled at JR, and she smiled back. I found myself staring at JR. How long has it been since I made love to you? The sister that I was so eager to spend time with just a few weeks ago, what's happened? I'm busy, you're busy. We have new people in our lives. More and more I was realizing that my earlier breakneck pace through women and girls had resulted in people I cared about, that I couldn't devote the time I'd like to, to be with them.

And with JR came the thought of Marsha. Two weeks; I'd written her once, she'd written me once. I'd called her on the phone once and that was it. I closed my eyes for a second, trying to come to grips with all of the emotions that were suddenly popping up.

All of the women I'd made love to. Marsha, JR. Penny and Kim. Shannon, Mary and now Elizabeth. Jenny. Sue Ellen and the rest of the girls I'd been with at Sue Ellen's party, and yeah, another woman, Sonia, the fence-jumper. Tony's smile when he introduced me to Marsha; the look on JR's face the first time I went down on her. Penny coming and laying down beside me, telling me that JR and Roger hadn't stopped at oral sex.

It was vertigo of the first order; the world spinning and dancing in my head. Flashes of pictures, wisps of emotions and feelings, dribblets of conversations, things that I'd said, that

others had said. The hotel room vanished, my family vanished, the people I loved and respected vanished. There was just a whirlwind, with me caught up in it.

I realized I was swaying, but I didn't fall because there were too many eager hands close by. I don't know how long it was before I was sitting on a sofa, a cold washcloth on my forehead, surrounded by anxious family and friends.

I looked up at them and smiled. "I'm okay. It's just that a lot has caught up to me, all at once."

Dad sat down next to me on the couch. "I've been pretty lenient about letting you do things your own way, in your own time. Except for maybe homework and chores."

"I appreciate it," I said, agreeing.

"That said, now I'm going back to ogre Dad mode again. I want you to go to your room, put your head down on the pillow and rest. Sure, the doctors said you were fine, but you spent more than two hours hanging upside down today; you need some rest."

I could only nod.

Again, it was Elizabeth who spoke, and as usual, the unexpected. "Joanna, you should go with Tom. Be with him."

I looked around the room. Mom, the woman who'd nurtured me, raised me to be the person I'd become. The woman who I'd made love to with pleasure and enjoyment. Mary, half of the love of my life, and Elizabeth next to her. The two women I wanted close to me for the rest of my life.

Jenny, silent and wide-eyed, probably of all of them, the one closest to understanding what today had been like for me. I would never truly understand her life, but now I'd spent a few hours trapped and helpless; I knew how it felt for the brief time I'd been alone. Jenny, who'd stood alone, trapped and helpless for years. I'd had Chief Wheeler and Officer Moss there speaking words of reassurance and comfort, letting me know help was coming almost from the first.

And JR. My eyes stopped on her, seeing the concern and worry in her eyes, remembering the feel of her mouth wrapped

around my erection. The grin when she asked me if she'd done it right. I was pretty sure she'd known exactly how right she'd done it.

"I'm not sure Tom needs company, tonight," Mom said quietly.

"I am," I said with a smile. "I think it's only fair my little sister should get a turn at helping her big brother."

"Yes!" JR came and sat on my lap, "Now and any time!"

First, I had to get JR out of my lap, and then I stood up. "Thanks to all of you," I said with as much energy as I could muster. I was fading fast, and I knew it.

I smiled at everyone, felt a mild curiosity about who would be with who tonight, decided that it was none of my business, and staggered off with JR in tow.

I simply went into my bedroom, flopped on the bed, and was dead to the world in an instant.

When I woke, day had passed and night had fallen. JR had been a busy sister, as I was now undressed and tucked into the bed, then she'd gotten undressed and had joined me, and was hugging me from behind.

I lifted her fingers, kissed them gently.

"You must have been really tired," JR said quietly, kissing the nape of my neck.

I moved, rolling over onto my back. "I think it wouldn't hurt to get more sleep in a while. I've been pushing it."

JR's hand snaked down, caressed me. "And we've all loved it... you too, of course."

I smiled, and was content to simply lay there, with JR lightly running her fingers over my still flaccid penis. After a minute of that, she laughed. "You are tired, aren't you!"

"Let's see. I had a late breakfast at Sue Ellen's, waffles and syrup, some juice. Another box of juice sometime after noon. Some pizza and pop when I got here. I'd say my diet was

a little light today."

JR giggled. "Wouldn't want you to get pudgy."

"No danger of that."

Her grip firmed, but that was all that firmed. After a few strokes, JR sighed. "Tom, are you really okay?"

I stared up at the ceiling. "JR, I'm fine, physically. Just right now my mind is buzzing around in circles, trying to make sense out of everything. A while ago, I started thinking about Marsha, you, Penny... I didn't get very far before I realized that I've made love to too many people."

She was silent for a second, then asked quietly, "Am I one of the too many?"

"No. One of the problems I have right now is that there isn't a single person I've made love to that I wouldn't want to make love to again. There's not a single time I can think of where I wouldn't have done the same things as I did before.

"And that's just the simple things. Mary's husband is dead. Jenny's entire family, except for her. Some father today died in a traffic accident I was in, other people were hurt, hurt badly. Me?" I remembered looking at my car, nearly fainted away again.

I was breathing fast and hard, I could feel sweat pouring off my body. "I just don't understand any of this. I think I do, I talk to people like I do, but inside..." I closed my eyes, and it was like the last time I'd closed my eyes: sleep was there, without warning, to take me.

I'm sure I dreamed, but I don't remember anything about the dreams. When I woke up, JR still had her hand on me, was still stroking me.

"You're going to wear it out."

She laughed, "I don't want you wearing it out without my having a hand in it."

"I remember how happy I was when Mom said you could stay in my room. That it was okay for the two of us to make love, if

that's what we wanted. Tell me true, JR. That day when you first came to my room. You wanted me, didn't you?"

"Yes. Penny was doing it with Roger, Kim with Jennifer; I was getting pretty horny. Kim told me it would be all right if I was with you, that if I wanted you and you wanted me, that mattered more than if we were brother and sister. Just be careful about babies, she told me," JR chuckled. "Oh, and she told me that if I started a conversation about sex with just about anyone male, I could just about guarantee getting what I wanted."

She leaned close and kissed me on the cheek. "You're not upset with me, are you?"

"No, not even a little. Sometimes, I've found, it takes a push to get me moving."

She kissed me again, still on the cheek. "Once you get moving, though! Gosh wow!"

Gosh wow! I thought. Here I am, warm and comfortable, with someone I love stroking me; it wouldn't take much for me to roll over and make love to JR. Not much at all. Gosh wow. Then there were those people who were resting for eternity; those lying in the hospital, probably in pain. I'd seen it with Janey, when I'd visited her; I'd seen the pain Elizabeth had been in. Pain that I'd caused for Elizabeth.

I looked upwards, past the ceiling of the hotel room. "Can I tell you something, JR? Something serious?"

Her arm moved from my penis, to just north of my stomach, hugging me. "Sure, Tom."

"Mom and Dad taught us about religion. About God. Took us to some churches, so we could see what they were like. Read to us from the Bible, told us about other books from other religions.

"Always, they taught us, respect other people's beliefs, even if you don't share them. Today, JR, I've decided to disrespect those who believe in God. How can God be good, if he lets people like Sam Reese be born, go on to live and hurt people? Someone died today within feet of where I was; others were hurt. Me? I was inconvenienced, delayed; my car wrecked.



But I wasn't hurt. Why? Am I better than the man who was killed? I don't know anything about him, except he had his daughter with him! Why did I live and he die? What if that woman, Yolanda, had gone to work for Dad's company, and it was Dad who ran away and got killed? Why is Dad alive and Bill Leary dead?

"You and me, Jenny, Shannon and Elizabeth. Penny, Tony, Sue Ellen; all the kids we know and love. We were born, got to live; yet you and I have an older brother or sister who was killed, pulled out of Mom and killed. What did we do to deserve life, and what did that baby do to deserve death? I don't want to hear about 'God's Will' and all of that. How can God let a baby die for no reason?"

"Tom," JR whispered softly, "stop for a second."

It was a needful thing, I realized. I was way too worked up.

"From the time I was old enough to understand anything about babies and where they come from, Mom has explained things to me. Over and over and over again. Kim spoke to Penny the same way. Mom didn't understand what she was doing, Tom. She made very sure I would understand. So has Kim, making sure Penny understands.

"We're women, Tom. Most guys don't shoot blanks, they can get you pregnant. When Mom and Kim found out about Penny and me, they were pleased that we were together. Boys, we were told, should be put off as long as possible.

"We're both curious, Tom. Kim wasn't happy with Penny when she started dating Roger. She didn't like Roger; she didn't like Penny doing it with Roger. Mom and Kim made us sit down and listen again to the lecture about birth control and responsibility. Penny got this shot thing that lasts three months, as soon as I have my first period, I'll get it too.

"One thing Mom and Kim have made really clear: things happen, Tom. We can do all the things we have to, do them right, and it can still happen. Then we have a choice to make. It's our choice, they tell us. It's our lives, the baby's life. It's scary, Tom. I love you, I do. I love Dad. But it's scary, really scary. So I haven't been avoiding you, but I haven't been there as many times as I could have been. Penny

has been avoiding you a little, too. Jenny wanted you, but she knows what's at stake and she's been really careful. None of us have been as eager as we could have been."

I reached out and touched her fingers. "Thanks for telling me."

JR found my lips this time. "That doesn't mean we don't want to do it with you! Oh no! Not that! Never that! But we want to be careful, okay?"

"I want to be careful too."

"Penny and I; we've been friends since we were babies. We tell each other things we wouldn't tell anyone else. Our secrets, our hearts." I nodded in understanding. "We've watched you these last couple of weeks. Sure, we both wanted to make love to you; me in particular. I think I've always known that buried some place inside of you was someone exceedingly special, Tom.

"And now we can see how special. What you did for Jenny was really awesome, Tom. We've known her for months; none of us ever had a clue about what her life was like. Kim knew her even better; Penny told me on the phone the other day that Kim is more upset than all the rest of us, saying that she should have known. That she should have asked Jennifer more questions."

"Questions like that are hard to ask," I told her.

"Sure," JR agreed. "Way too hard. Which is why we never asked, but you did. And when Roger started after Shannon again, you didn't even need to ask. You just knew it was wrong and you stopped him. And you stopped Sam. Then with Shannon's Dad; gosh Tom, you knew and understood what we could do to help them, without crushing Shannon's mom. That was another wonderful thing. You do wonderful things for people, Tom."

"Wonderful things?" I mused aloud. "Tell that to the people who are in the hospital tonight, to the family of the man who died. What if I'd stayed home? Decided to go this afternoon when Tony and Sue Ellen were having people over to swim?"

"Don't beat yourself up over something you had no way to control," JR told me.

Okay, that's what I'd told Fleur. It's what I told myself earlier today, sitting trapped and helpless, waiting for the car to burst into flames around me. Why can't I take my own advice? How many ways can you spell hypocrite?

I remembered glancing around the intersection after I'd been pulled from my car. I'd seen the other cars, clearly enough; I'd driven through that intersection dozens of times by myself, hundreds of times with my parents. It was less than a mile away from the house, so I knew it. What would it have been like if I hadn't been there? That car would have hit the others even harder. Not one dead, more likely five. You could make the case, I supposed, that I'd saved lives, not killed and injured anyone.

This isn't who I am, I thought. I can face and take responsibility for the things I do. Yeah, I've had a good run here, helping people. Maybe, just maybe, I don't have to feel responsible for what happened today. Maybe. In my heart, I will always have a question, though. Always.

I relaxed then. It was one of those things that I would never be able to do anything about. Learn my lessons for the future; try not to dwell on the history that had taught me the lessons.

And of course, my penis came instantly erect. There really does seem to be something in my head that controls that part of me. I don't pretend to understand it. Nonetheless, I laughed.

"What?" JR asked.

I moved her hand down to my groin.

"Oh, the Tom I know and love is back!" JR squeezed me, for a second, then she squirmed around and took me in her mouth, while presenting her bare pussy to my lips.

I licked and sucked, she did the same. Unlike the first time JR had gone down on me, or any of the times since, I had no staying power. I shot after just a few seconds.

However, if there is one constant in the Ferguson gene line, it has to be persistence; particularly when it comes to sex. JR wasn't even slowed; swallowing my cum, continuing to

use her tongue to run around the head of my cock.

I might have slowed a bit when I came, but JR quickly roused my interest again; I kept on and on, licking her, pressing my tongue inside her.

I wasn't exactly sure why it happened; usually I kept my eyes shut a lot when I'm making love. There had been notable exceptions; Mary in the morning, for instance.

With a start, I realized those words reminded me of an LP record Dad had, a song sung by Ed Ames, called "Mary in the Morning." Why had I remembered that here and now? I ran over the lyrics in my head and knew.

/ And Mary's there in sunny days or stormy weather  
/ She doesn't care 'cause right or wrong the love we share,  
/ we share together

I smiled, decided that right then I should be thinking of JR. I ran my hand over her bottom, and then slid my middle finger in her, where my tongue had just been. I'd never fingered a girl from this position, couldn't help but notice my thumb was right over that other place. I tried not to think about it, but JR started rotating her hips around my finger, and my thumb moved across her anal opening as well.

I wasn't certain how JR felt about it, until I realized she was also pressing back against my thumb. I pressed down a little more, and JR kept squirming. I tried a second finger inside JR, but she was just too small. That was okay, because it was pretty clear she was enjoying just the one there, and the one that now slid in to the first knuckle into her backside.

"Where did you ever learn that?" JR's voice hissed, not in anger, but pleasure.

I smiled; for the first time I'd come across something that they hadn't talked about between themselves. Not Penny, not Jenny. Or Elizabeth.

"Just experimenting," I said, knowing it wasn't entirely a lie.

"Well, I'm thinking, if you were to experiment there with this," She licked and sucked my erection, "I wouldn't have to

worry about babies."

I ran my free hand over the round curves of JR's butt. Oh my, yes! I wanted to experiment with that!

"It's something you have to want."

"Tom, I want you any way I can get you! Someday, maybe we'll be able to have enough of each other, but right now, I want you everyway I can!"

It didn't take long for JR to roll on her stomach, and me to start rubbing her with my erection, It was slow pushing in; the ring of muscle around the entrance was tighter than anyone else's had been, and JR was smaller than the others too. I went slow, very slow and careful, not wanting to hurt her.

Eventually the cheeks of her ass were finally pressing against my groin in all the right places. I moved in her with long slow deep strokes, savoring each moment, particularly when I was in deep, feeling her bottom against me. JR clenched the muscles in her ass; it caused an explosion in my middle as I came into her.

JR grunted, I let out a long Ahhhhhhhh! of pleasure.

JR chuckled, "Well, it's sure different."

I managed to find my voice. "Yes." I know I sounded strangled.

"You really like it this way, don't you?" JR asked, squeezing her cheeks again, milking a tiny bit more cum from me.

"Oh yeah!" I sighed.

"Well," JR said pragmatically, "to tell you the truth, what I would like is to go take a shower, then crawl back here into bed, and have you spend the night in me."

"That sounds good." Deep, deep down, I knew I was close to exhaustion, that JR or making love the way we had aside, I was close to being completely out of it.

My first shower with my sister; another warm and wet experience, that I regretted having to keep short. It was

followed by my sliding inside a much drier than expected JR. It took some time to get fully inside her; time we both enjoyed. Still, as soon as I was inside her, I was asleep.

Thursday, April 4, 2002

Around three in the morning, JR got up to use the bathroom. In spite of the best intentions, the groan I let out when she moved was relief, not sadness at her departure. My mind was more on automatic than anything else; I simply rolled over onto my stomach and was fast asleep before she'd taken more than a couple of steps.

Someone knocking on the door woke me. I looked and saw JR was gone, so I pulled on some jeans and peeked around the door. "Tom," Uncle Craig said, "you need to get in gear. We have a 9:30 appointment with the lawyers, another meeting at 11:30 at the bank."

I opened the door a little wider. "I didn't think this was a good idea before yesterday. Now..." I shook my head.

"Tom, two things for you to think about. First, like the lawyer said; you'll be twenty-one before any lawsuit has a verdict. So don't worry about it. Also, consider damage control. If you have a pot of money, they are less likely to chase after David's, Joanna's or mine.

"Now, please get ready, we can get something to eat, if you like, on the way."

I really, really thought he was crazy, but what could I do? Be obstinate? What would that prove? Maybe it might prove I was unworthy of his trust, but would I really do that? No, another thing that wasn't in me.

I took a shower, considered the Bic shaver in my toiletry kit, and decided I didn't need it today. In fact, I looked around the hotel room and made up my mind. Uncle Craig wasn't the only one given to snap decisions.

A bit later, wearing Dockers and a nice long-sleeved shirt, I was knocking on Mom's door. She smiled at me, and I smiled back. "I want to go home," I told her without elaboration. "I'm going to pack my things, I'll put them in Uncle Craig's car. After we're done doing the paper signing, I'm going to have him

drop me off at home."

"You won't have a car," Mom reminded me, not that I wasn't reminded of it every time I looked around.

"Then I won't have a car. Tony does, I think Sue Ellen does, too. I can get a ride; I've gotten in pretty good shape lately with all of these walks."

Mom nodded. "Actually, it's not a bad idea. Mary was complaining this is a long way from work; even car-pooling with Dave. It's been a pain for me, too. I'll organize something. Expect company before the afternoon's out!"

I did pack, Uncle Craig was only a little curious when I put the suitcase in the back of his rental. We stopped at a supermarket, got some Krispy Kreme doughnuts and coffee; we were munching them before we got on the freeway for downtown.

The lawyer, Dwight Hammond, from yesterday was there, in a meeting room with a heavy wood table of some dark wood. The paneling was dark wood as well. All, I thought, pretty expensive. He'd introduced himself again, this time I made a point of remembering his name. There were three other lawyers as well, who sat at one end of the table, talking to Uncle Craig.

Everyone agreed that my statement about the traffic accident was important, and I should do that first. They had me write it up on a yellow pad, then a notary was called and embossed the original. They would, they told us, type up a copy and send it to us. I asked if I could get a copy to give to the police because they wanted a statement. There was a conference that I wasn't privy to, but then again, neither was Uncle Craig. They handed me several copies of my statement, done on legal paper, before I left. Uncle Craig asked for a few more copies as well, and he got those.

When I was done with that, it was my turn at Uncle Craig's end of the table. They had papers ready for me to sign; I was getting used to how much paperwork was involved with what I thought were the simplest things, like getting out of the hospital, getting Jenny permission to stay with us. This was even more tedious than the latter, not to mention there was no Eleanor Johannsen to distract my attention, either.

Still, a little before eleven we were back outside, blinking in the bright sun. Nothing had actually happened, that had been made clear to me. I'd signed papers to apply to a family court to be emancipated. The most important part about being emancipated was that it meant I could sign legally binding contracts, I was told. Well, most of them. Some things, like buying a house or renting a car, you had to be a certain age; I wouldn't be able to vote yet or buy alcohol or any of that. Once the court signed off on my emancipation, then I would actually be able to deal with Uncle Craig's financial matters on my own; at least the things I was judged old enough for. It seemed to me to be as arbitrary as everything else I'd experienced having to do with the government.

That was fine with me, I was getting more and more sure I didn't want any part of this. The worst thing? I was thinking I didn't want my Uncle to handle my affairs. I liked him, I knew Mom loved him, that Dad liked him a lot. JR hadn't mentioned Uncle Craig last night when she was talking about the people she was not that much of a hurry to get back into bed with, but it didn't strike me that Uncle Craig was going to be an exception to her general statement.

What really bothered me was his cavalier dismissal of what I'd said. Yes, we'd discussed it and he'd seemed to go along at the end. But that was Monday and today was Thursday. Since then, there had been no further discussion of anything I'd said. I was tolerably sure what he was hoping was that it hadn't been but a passing fancy of mine, and if he ignored it, it would go away.

We were early for our meeting at the bank, and Uncle Craig made a little detour to check out the Diamondback's baseball stadium. "I was thinking of getting season tickets," he told me. "You interested?"

I liked baseball, I thought it would be cool, so I agreed. We stopped and went up to the ticket office; I stopped being so agreeable when I saw what a season ticket cost. In fact, I told him that I'd pass, thanks. Nearly a thousand dollars a ticket? Even if it was a bunch of tickets? Uncle Craig bought two.

Then it was bank time and that was as eye opening as everything else I'd ever seen or done.

Plain business utilitarian in the outer areas, the higher



we moved, the finer the office, until finally we were in a small conference room, every bit as well appointed as we'd seen in the law offices. It seemed like lawyers flaunted their wealth, and bankers were embarrassed by it.

And, unlike the lawyers, the bank people had no idea what Uncle Craig wanted. "My name is Craig Summers, I wish to open an investment account," he'd said repeatedly. "Wells Fargo in Los Angeles was supposed to have notified you about this." Then they would ask him how much money the account would be for, then they would politely excuse themselves and seek guidance from someone higher up the food chain when they heard him answer "Around a hundred and fifty million."

While we were sitting in yet another conference room, I told Uncle Craig that it didn't appear as though they believed him.

"Probably not. On the other hand, I'm in slacks and a nice shirt, and you're not dressed like a Goth. It's something you need to learn, Tom, as early as possible. At some point we will find someone who knows the score; at that point, you will see some serious ass-kissing and apologies. The sooner you learn to deal with that sort of thing, the better. At this level, it is simply a fact of life."

Then he grinned. "Of course, at some point in time, if they continue to be total morons, I will reach the end of my patience and we'll try another bank."

Another trip, back to the elevators and up to more sumptuous offices, a smiling young man who shook our hands, asked for Craig's driver's license and left at once. He wasn't gone long, and when he handed my Uncle's license back, he told us someone would be with us shortly.

A bit later, a man in a suit, more hand shakes. He told us his name was Gavin Henderson, he apologized profusely, promised imminent job action against those who had misunderstood Uncle Craig's request. In short, Uncle Craig was right.

After about five minutes of that, Uncle Craig waved his hand.

"A hundred and fifty million dollars invested in the pathetic two and a quarter percent you offer on straight savings

would have earned me \$427 in the last half hour. Time, sir, is money. Time to get down to the matter at hand."

"You want to open an investment account?" Mr. Henderson inquired.

"What I want is to transfer a portfolio that belongs to my nephew here, from our California branch, to Phoenix. We are going to be relocating to Phoenix from LA in the next few weeks, there will be quite a bit more flowing, this is just the start."

Mr. Henderson started another round of thanks and apologies; Uncle Craig simply cut him off. "Enough! You've said it already. Right now, what I want to see are assholes and elbows, working on the issues at hand.

"Tom has applied for emancipation, I expect that to be complete in four to six weeks. From now to then, you'll have fiduciary responsibility for his account. Tom Ferguson might be young, but he's an incredibly capable individual. I would suggest that you don't start out by shifting the money around and running up transaction fees."

The banker nodded. It was obvious that Uncle Craig had won whatever battle he'd been fighting. The man was now focused and intent, as they went over the details. Phone calls were made, papers were faxed from LA to Phoenix. I'm not sure where they called for take out, but lunch was steak and vegetables, a glass of wine for Uncle Craig, a glass of tea for me.

After lunch, Uncle Craig got to the last important part of the business. "We need a capable account executive, one that can handle the day to day details, until Tom gets the emancipation issue cleared up."

Mr. Henderson looked at Uncle Craig carefully. "You would not be doing that?"

"No, once Tom has signature authority, it will be up to him to decide who will administer the portfolio. In the meantime, I want him to deal with you."

I saw the gleam in Mr. Henderson's eye; I mentally shook my head. I didn't like him either.

"What's an account executive?" I asked.

"The individual at the bank who would supervise the handling of your portfolio," Mr. Henderson told me.

"Think of them for the next few weeks as your check book," Uncle Craig added. "It should be an interesting relationship."

Never ever, I thought, forget that Uncle Craig wasn't stupid; that he didn't have his own agenda. It seemed pretty clear to me that Uncle Craig believed in learning by doing, that and toss you into the shark infested water to see if you can learn to swim. Would I do that with so much money involved? I didn't think so. Then, what was he trying to accomplish?

I half listened to the two adults talking about this or that person, while I mused on why Uncle Craig, who, he had told me, was interested in running up as many points in the game as he could, was now willing to trust me with more money than most people could ever dream of having. There absolutely, positively had to be a reason, and that reason just as assuredly had to involve him winning big.

The two of them had started writing names down on a list making pluses and minuses after each.

"Umm," I said, not entirely confident about interrupting them, "Do I get a say in this?"

"Oh, you have the final say, Tom," Uncle Craig told me.

"Cool!" I said with a fake smile. "Why don't we just invite them all in here, have each say a few words about themselves, and I'll pick. Unless, of course, your account executives have something more important to do than deal with already, than my portfolio." I kept my smile pasted on my face, remembering Melinda Carter's expression, just after I told her I'd forgotten her name.

"We'd be wasting a lot of people's time," Uncle Craig said mildly, "Why don't you let us narrow the field a little first?"

I let my smile go, frowned slightly. "So, I just get to approve, not pick?"

Mr. Henderson spoke up, "Well, I think young Tom's idea isn't bad at all. I'm sure you know, Craig, how important

personal chemistry is in relationships like this."

I could sense Uncle Craig's mild tension at the word 'chemistry' and then 'relationships.'

I made up my mind; unless all the account executives were male, fat or ugly women, I was going to pick a woman. And I was not, under any circumstances, going to feel the least sexual interest in her. None.

And so, it came to pass about a half hour later. One by one people came in, introduced themselves. I made my own notes, not plusses and minuses, but Y or N. Exactly two of the account executives caught my eye.

Rita Collingworth was a slight woman with light brown hair, and piercing blue eyes. She was nicely dressed in a knee length skirt and a navy blouse embroidered with bright flowers. From the instant I laid eyes on her, sparks were flying in the room. If she'd had been at Sue Ellen's party, I would have been panting at her feet in seconds, even if she was probably twice my age. I wrote down four N's after her name, even if I gave her a mental 'two thumbs up'.

Later, another woman came in. She was rather tall, perhaps five eleven. She had raven black hair, dark brown eyes, and was wearing a black dress with a short dark jacket. It was hard to tell much about her breasts, but they didn't seem to be large or small. Miriam Goldberg spoke as confidently as any of the others, but there was no list of great achievements that had been the hallmark of other presentations. She simply reported that she worked on 'small investor accounts' and that she enjoyed it thoroughly.

More important to me, was the fact that there were zero sparks. In fact, it was almost the opposite of Rita; Miriam seemed to have a wall around her, a wall that reminded me a little of the same wary caution that Jenny had had the first day I'd met her. Maybe, I realized, Miriam was a lot like Jenny. Tall and dark. Larger breasts, I thought, but nothing like Sue Ellen; probably nothing like Marsha, either.

Miriam left and Uncle Craig looked at Mr. Henderson. "There are a couple I'd like to have back, to re-interview," my Uncle said.

Mr. Henderson looked at me and I simply shook my head. "Miriam Goldberg. I don't think we need to waste anyone else's time." I paused, sought a bit of information from my pack rat memory. "Unless you think she might not be able to make the jump to handle a larger account?"

The banker shook his head. "No, Miri is, if anything, under-utilized. She likes working with small accounts, she is really good at it, and her clients really like her. The other account execs want to work with larger, splashier investors and tend to push the smaller ones off on her. Miriam is content to do a good job for her clients and for the bank."

I wondered if the man had any idea what he'd just said, in real terms.

"Her then," I told him confidently, then I looked at Uncle Craig, who shrugged.

I decided that it wouldn't hurt to mollify my Uncle a bit. "Could we have Ms. Goldberg back in? I'd like to ask a few more questions."

A minute later, she was back, her attention went to Mr. Henderson, who was obviously her boss. I'd just sat silently before, the only person who had spoken was Mr. Henderson, who had simply asked her to introduce herself and talk about her work.

"I'm Tom Ferguson," I said, standing up, proffering my hand for her to shake.

She looked at me, then at my hand. She wasn't reluctant to take it, but it was obviously something she hadn't expected.

"In a few weeks, I will be given the authority to manage my own portfolio," I went on. "I was wondering if you'd like to take responsibility for managing it for me until then?"

She nodded without hesitation. "I enjoy helping my clients realize their investment dreams," she told me, obviously a rote, stock phrase.

"I think you will find," I said wryly, "that my dreams have been realized. The question in front of me is what do I want to do with the responsibility and opportunity that has been handed

to me?"

Mr. Henderson spoke up. "A hundred and fifty million dollar portfolio, Miri." He gestured at Uncle Craig. "Right now, Craig Summers has been managing it. He is in the process of relocating to the Phoenix area, with about seven times that amount in play; this will give him a little less to worry about."

Maybe I would have noticed it if Uncle Craig hadn't spoken about it before; you'd like to think you'd notice when someone is kissing your ass. The big banker guy certainly was kissing mine, and a whole lot more effectively than he'd done earlier with Uncle Craig.

Miriam took the news without batting an eye. Instead, she turned back to me. "Would you like to spend some time discussing what you are looking for?"

"I would," I told her. "What have you got on the schedule for the rest of the day?"

"Research. I'd be happy to talk to you as long as you like."

"I have some errands I have to run," I told her. "Do you have a car?"

Miriam nodded.

"Would you be willing to chauffeur me around? We can talk and I can take care of my errands at the same time."

Again she looked at the boss banker who nodded. "Sure, no problem."

"I'm going to spend some money, start small, go up from there," I told her. "For one thing, I need a new car."

Uncle Craig started to speak, but I simply met his eyes and willed him to be quiet. Something worked; he closed his mouth.

"You can take care of the paper signing and all of that, right?" I pushed the woman.

"It would be part of Ms. Goldberg's duties," the boss

banker confirmed, "until your emancipation is signed off by the court."

"Cool," I said, knowing that every time I said that word, every adult in hearing winced.

"You can either drop my suitcase back at the house, Craig, or deliver it back to the hotel; although I do believe Mom was planning on checking out this afternoon. You might want to check with her first."

I got up. "Ms. Goldberg, why don't we go to your desk, and you do what you need to do to be out of the office for the rest of the afternoon. I have to make a few phone calls, then I'll be ready."

She nodded, watching me with curiosity.

She led me out of the office, and I smiled as the conference room door closed behind me, leaving Uncle Craig alone with the banker. I would probably never know for sure what was said in there, but I could be pretty sure of the outlines. There was no chance I was going to be allowed to do anything 'rash'.

I stood a few feet away from Miriam's desk. It was in something that was really just an elaborate cubical, for all that it had floor to ceiling panels. "I'd like to talk to a fireman, then I need to talk to a policeman. If I can get in to see either of them, we'll do that first. Last on the list is buying a car."

She nodded, and I pulled out the cell phone and dialed Johnnie Dugan's number off his card.

"Dugan, here," the familiar gravel rasp answered.

"Mr. Dugan, Tom Ferguson. You remember, from yesterday."

He laughed. "I'm not the one with messed up short term memory, Tom. What can I do for you?"

"Do you have some time this afternoon we could talk for a few minutes?"

"Right now, I have my feet up on my desk. Had a session

this morning with some rookie fireman." He laughed again, "Got my equipment all cleaned and stowed neat after yesterday. Lord, I love rookies! Sure, Tom, come on in. I'm downtown." He gave me the address and I wrote it down on the card.

Then I dialed the number Officer Moss had given me. I was told he wasn't in, but when I told the man on the other end that Officer Moss had wanted me to fill out a report on the accident yesterday, I was switched to a detective.

"Harris," a familiar voice said.

"Detective, this is Tom Ferguson. Officer Moss asked me to come in with a report on what I remembered from yesterday from the automobile accident I was in. I gave a statement to our lawyer, they say I can use that. I'd like to come in with it."

"After three," the Detective advised without hesitation. "Between three and five, the main police building downtown."

I told him I'd be there, found that Miriam was ready. She led me down into a subbasement parking structure; she drove a newer version of the Camry that had been wrecked the day before. I told her where I wanted to go, and she just started the car and drove there.

"Please, come along," I asked her when we arrived at the fire station. We walked inside; I don't know about Miriam, but I was a little nervous. Almost at once someone asked Miriam what she wanted and I answered that I was there to see Johnnie Dugan.

I saw the fireman look me up and down and saw him nod. A minute later, we were ushered into a large room filled with every sort of tool and cutting device known to man. Johnnie Dugan was sitting at a desk in a corner, talking on the phone. He saw me, waved, and finished up. He grabbed something from his desk, and handed it to me when I got to him.

I took it, and saw he was looking at Miriam; I smiled to myself.

What I held was a framed picture of my car; taken, I thought, early on. Not nearly as much foam as there had been when I'd gotten loose.



I stared at it for a minute, then handed the frame to Miriam and once again held out my hand. "Johnnie, I owe you."

He laughed, shaking his head but shaking my hand. "My job, Tom."

"What," I said, fairly sure of the answer I'd get, "are the chances I could ride along with you some time?"

"Not a chance. There was a reason you spent a lot of time alone."

"I don't understand."

Miriam was watching us, obviously curious. She glanced at the picture and I could see her shiver.

I looked closely at the picture, considered what I could see. Except for ruin, there wasn't much else. Then I noticed a small, light colored patch in the car window. I put my finger on it. "That's my elbow, I think."

Johnnie craned to look. "Yep, that's what it is."

Miriam looked at the picture, then back at me. "Yesterday," I said, trying to keep my voice sounding like things like that happened all the time.

"Yesterday?" Her face went pale, she handed me back the picture, almost shoving it into my hands.

I ignored her, wanting to get to my point with Johnnie Dugan. "I'd like to watch you again, Johnnie. Yesterday you told me I completed your short course in car cutting."

He grinned, but shook his head. "It's really dangerous, Tom. You have no idea, even the short course... it's not a warm up for the real thing."

I hadn't thought so, so I switched to something I felt more sure of. "I'm not stupid or insensitive, Johnnie. But Johnnie, I might have completed the course, but I don't believe I'm going to get the t-shirt, am I?"

He looked at me, a faint smile. He shook his head.

"So, I was thinking. My allowance could probably afford some t-shirts. I realize that maybe not everyone you help might be interested... or able to appreciate the humor. But some of us, Johnny, that's all we have out there."

"Amen," his voice was soft.

"Lucky me, today I have a friend who could help with that. Johnny, this is Miriam Goldberg. Think of her, at least right now, as my walking, talking, opinionated check book."

I turned to Miriam. "I'd you to get with Johnnie, work up a design for a t-shirt for Johnny to give to some of the people he helps. Johnnie's decision carries the day on the design, how many, who gets them."

Johnnie nodded. "You're right, Tom. Some, not many. But for some it'll mean a lot. Say, about two dozen a year."

"Please, Miriam. Work with Johnnie. Whatever he wants."

Miriam had nodded already, and they traded business cards. I thanked Johnnie again, then we went back to Miriam's car. It was a little before three, so I asked her to take me to the main police station.

"Is this about yesterday?" she asked.

"Partly. Partly there are people there too I want to thank." I grinned at her. "No t-shirts this time."

"Why did you tell him I'm opinionated?"

I grinned at her. "You either voice them or I fire you. I know you have them, I can see it in your eyes. Please, all I ask is for you to listen, and if you don't understand, ask questions. Then you decide."

Again, when we got to the police building I asked her to come with me. This time they were far more formal. We were given small badges that said, 'TEMPORARY' and escorted up to a floor with detectives.

I shook Detective Harris' hand. "Thanks for Dawn," I told him.

"Our job," he repeated the common refrain. "You did yours, and then some. Thanks, Tom."

"I filled out a statement about the accident at the law office this morning," I told him, then pulled a copy from the leather folder I'd gotten. "They didn't have a problem with my giving it to you." I met his eyes.

He laughed. "Thanks. There's hope for your generation, maybe, after all.

He gestured at his desk. "We found the car used in the robbery yesterday afternoon, there was considerable blood on the passenger side, plus some on the driver's side as well. We put out a bulletin to local hospitals and picked up two suspects this morning. One went to a Mesa hospital, the other went to Tempe. They are both in custody, both have long rap sheets. Not going to get out for years and years, if ever again."

I saw Polite and Surly, standing across the room, talking with a small group of others, who, I was sure, were police officers of one sort or another.

Detective Harris followed my gaze, shook his head. "We all have crosses to bear. Still, thanks." He waved the deposition I'd given.

"This too. Joe said he told you, but I'll repeat it. You ever need anything, just ask."

"I'm not going to get a ticket?"

Elizabeth had said the robbers would be arrested today; my mind was on that, instead of thinking about what I was saying. Asking about a ticket was just plain stupid. Coming after an offer of help, there was about one way a reasonable person could take the question.

He laughed. "Well, not for yesterday. You understand, Tom, when we get eye witness reports, sometimes the stories vary widely. Sixteen of seventeen said they saw you slow down for the light, fifteen of those said you didn't speed up until it had been green for a few seconds. Five or six seconds after it had changed and before you got into the intersection.

"On the other hand, don't get cocky. We cops think giving

a kid your age a ticket is doing you a favor. Scare you into taking care."

"Yesterday did all the scaring I'll ever need," I told him.

We were done, but I wanted to do something else. So I walked across the room and nodded to Polite. "I was wondering if there was any progress in finding William Leary's killer?"

Sure enough, Surly got his mouth open first. "We think she's going to Canada."

I simply stared at him for a second, then turned back to Polite. "I heard that the last time; I was wondering if there was any progress?"

"No, there's nothing."

"Thanks," I told him, and we retraced our way out of the building.

"I got the distinct impression you were baiting those last two policemen," Miriam said as we settled into her car, letting the air-conditioning work its miracle.

"That's right," I answered. "I don't like the way they do their job. I want them to know it."

Miriam looked at me like I was crazy.

I went on. "Just as I like the way Detective Harris does his job and I let him know."

"Where would you like to go now?" Miriam asked.

"Car shopping." I smiled at her. "Undoubtedly you have a question or two about what's going on. Welcome to the fellowship of your fellow confused. But I am not going to go crazy at a car lot and drive off with the most expensive car I can find. Or the fastest."

"That was really you? Yesterday?"

"Yes it was, Miriam." I could read what she was thinking in her eyes. "It's something you just have to do, Miriam. If you quit, if you give up... it would just make it easier to quit

the next time. So, if you know a good place to buy a larger size car or van, let's go. Or we can find a phone book someplace and look up a dealership."

"I have a cousin who's a salesman at Central Dodge. He could get you a deal," she told me.

"A deal's always good."

She put the car in motion, and I got out the cell phone and called Tony.

"Tony, what are your plans tomorrow night with Sue Ellen?"

"Sue Ellen's parents have invited me to dinner and then a movie. Then back here. Quality time with my girl."

"I was thinking it would be a lot of fun to get a bunch of people and go out together; dinner and a movie. Gloria Rodriguez and me, Mary and Elizabeth. You and Sue Ellen. JR and Shannon, Jenny and Katrina. Maybe we could invite Mindy, even if she doesn't have a date."

"She's been over a couple of times this week, Tom. She has a date, Michelle Paz. You met her." I remembered that I had met her at Sue Ellen's.

"Could you give me Mindy's phone number and I'll invite her?"

"Just how many people do you want on this?" Tony asked.

"As many as I can get." I paused, decided that while it would be nice to tell this to Tony face to face, this way was okay. And it was something I should do.

"Tony, yesterday after I left..."

"Yeah, we had a good time. You should have stayed."

"Tony, I should have." I swallowed, unsure why I felt so nervous. "Tony, I wrecked my car."

"You wrecked your car? Are you in trouble?"

"No, but the Camry is totaled, I'm about to go look for

something new."

"Cool, get something like a Spyder or an Eclipse!"

I laughed. "That's not me, Tony. I'm thinking a van. Something big and heavy, for sure."

I still couldn't come out and tell him. I was almost shaking, the temptation to shut off the phone and ask Miriam to take me home was nearly overpowering.

"You okay, Tom?" Tony asked, concern in his voice.

"Piece of cake, Tony," I said glibly. "I was upside for two and a half hours while they cut me from the car, smelling the leaking gasoline the whole time."

"Shit!" Tony exclaimed. "You sure you're okay?"

"Tony, I have two small bruises. One of the other people was killed, two more seriously hurt, two more hurt a little. And all I got was some minor bruises." I couldn't help it; hearing Tony's concern meant a lot to me. "I'm working on getting the t-shirt."

"Tony, tomorrow night, think of it like you'd think of celebrating the night you won the lottery. My treat for my friends. As many as we can get together."

Tony agreed, so I called Mary and asked if she would tell Elizabeth, and ask Jenny to talk to her friend, Shannon to get with JR.

When I'd finished giving instructions, I felt a little overwhelmed. The dream the other day had been right, getting together with my new friends was not going to be easy to do.

I called Gloria, made sure everything was set with her; I had lots of time, the traffic at 4 in the afternoon was pretty heavy. Eventually, we arrived at a car dealership, and sure enough, Miriam's cousin was no where to be found. "His day off," they told her.

"I'm looking for a van," I informed the salesman who we'd learned the good news from. "New, large, roomy."

He eyed me, then looked at Miriam, obviously trying to discern the relationship. "We have," he started to say, "a number of fine quality used vehicles..."

"New, large, roomy," I repeated.

"Humor him," Miriam added, "pretend like someone else will sign the papers. Me."

Reluctantly, I was shown several new large Dodge Caravan vans, even more reluctantly, I was allowed to drive one: around the car lot. Miriam was very effective, she simply told them that she wanted to test it too, so she got behind the wheel, we drove about a quarter of a mile away, she got out, and I took over, over the salesman's protests.

The van was large, it was roomy and handled well. I liked the feel of the large steering wheel, I liked the feeling the power brakes gave me. I was a very happy camper when we got back to the dealership.

And, of course, they had a lot of problems with selling a \$33,000 vehicle to a sixteen year old for cash.

Miriam was patient, firm, and every time they put in some BS delay, found another reason to knock down the price. Eventually, we were dealing with the 'sales manager' who 'knew someone' at Miriam's bank, and made a call.

After that, it was like at the bank, profuse apologies, what could he do for us... A while later I thanked Miriam, told her I'd be in touch, and I drove the new van home.

Uncle Craig was already there, and looked over the van without much expression. "Gosh, you could have got a Camry for half that, and bought everyone season tickets to the Diamondbacks," he said.

I smiled at him. Gosh, you people really do talk too much! That and you've forgotten how to keep a secret. You know how much the van cost, which means either the bank, Miriam or both, told you what it cost.

Mom showed up a bit later with JR, Jenny, Elizabeth and Shannon. For an hour, I carried luggage into the house, or transferred it to the van. By then, Dad and Mary got home, and

off I went with most everyone to Mary's to drop off their stuff, then back to the house to get everyone for dinner.

I was a little surprised when Dad claimed the wheel to drive us off to dinner, but I decided that I could ask him why later. I'd been feeling good all evening; I'm not sure what it is about the first expensive purchase you make all on your own, but I was definitely jazzed.

I didn't mind that Uncle Craig had decided to drive to the restaurant, found no takers and had to go by himself. Shannon was only too happy to have JR on her lap in the van; that too was a little amazing, as in spite of everything, they van only seated seven. And we were eight.

At dinner, I got to sit between Mary and Elizabeth, which made me happy as I could have wanted. Everything was, I thought, coming back together.

But, there was something more to think about too, because at the restaurant there were nine of us around the table. There was no way to talk privately to everyone, because JR and Shannon were too far away, towards one end, Mom and Dad too far the other way. And I didn't feel much like talking to Uncle Craig, who was across the table from me.

I dropped off Mary, Elizabeth and Shannon at their place, on the way home. I pleaded fatigue, which was true, and it was Jenny who followed me up to my room.

I wanted a shower, and Jenny wanted one too; we didn't spend overlong at it, being intent on getting done and into bed.

Before lights out, Mom, Dad and JR appeared and we got our good night hugs and kisses.

When they were gone, I sat down on the bed, Jenny stood silently, looking at me.

"It's been more than a week," I told her, waving towards the door where the others had just left, "since we did that the last time. God, I've missed it."

Jenny nodded silently.

I looked up at her, standing nude next to my bed. A week



ago, had I made love to Jenny, I'd have been content. Not quite a week ago, if I'd made love to Shannon, I'd have been content. JR would have contented me, Marsha would have. All in fact, had. Why wasn't I content?

"You and I think too much," Jenny said softly.

I focused on her, drinking in her beautiful breasts, her beautiful pussy; I'd not been erect at all during the evening; now I was, instantly. Jenny saw it and grinned.

Abruptly, she was doubled over, laughing. I tried to retain my composure, but while I might have retained that, my erection fled at her gale of laughter.

She finally drew herself up, looked at me, a big grin on her face. "I was going to do something pointless, Tom. Sorry." She waved at my flaccid lap toy. "I was going to ask you if we could pretend again. That I was me, and you were you... and Sam never existed.

"Tom, I swear, I wish none of this had ever happened. Not what happened to my parents, not what happened to Sam. I wish I could forget Sam existed, but I have the memories, up here." She tapped the side of her head. "You have memories, too. I know."

I could only nod.

Jenny came close, put her hand on my chest and lightly pushed. I leaned back, and she knelt down in front of me. "Tom, Sam doesn't exist any more. I don't have to pretend." Her fingers ran the length of my back-again erection, then she cupped my balls. "You, Tom. You brought me back. I love you, Tom. Not the way Elizabeth does, not the way any of your friends do; in my way.

"You brought me back, more importantly, you freed me from the devil's curse. You're a really decent human being, Tom. Then, you helped me meet someone else, someone I care for in a way I thought I'd never be able to."

"You love Katrina," I told her.

"Now you know about life partners," Jenny said. "Elizabeth and Mary have taught you, you've taught them. Katrina and I..."

Jenny grinned, even though her fingers were still wrapped around my balls, talking about her real lover. "You understand. You understand all sorts of things."

I contemplated that. If I'd have been asked, I'd have probably said no, I didn't understand all that much. I'd helped people, that I had. Sometimes I'd asked, sometimes, I'd just helped. I'd acted because someone needed help. Better, far better, if it had never been necessary. But things hadn't been kind, clean or simple.

"I can't think of anything I'd have done different, if I had to do it over again," I told her.

Jenny grinned, leaned close and planted a kiss on the head of my erection. "You are, Tom, a primal force. You could no more have done differently, than water could run uphill."

She leaned closer, taking me in her mouth.

I nearly died, then. Not in the sense you think, but because Jenny's teeth touched me in a way that got my attention instantly. "Ah!" It wasn't pleasurable pain I cried out in.

Jenny looked at me, concern writ large on her face. "What, Tom?"

"That hurt!" I hated to say it, but it had hurt. A lot.

Jenny looked at me, surprised. "Sam..." I saw her stop herself.

I reached out, pulled Jenny to me, hugging her. "Jenny, he's gone. Not only that, you have to think from now on, 'If this is something Sam liked, is it a good idea?'"

She started to cry, and I hugged her tighter.

"I wanted to go down on you," she said, looking at me. "I haven't. Joanna likes to do it. Shannon liked it... every one gets to do it, except me. I wanted so much for you to like it..."

"You remember a while ago you told me I understood things?" Jenny nodded, tears still trickling down her cheek.

"Jenny, I understand this. Not to mention, I've shown someone else how to do this, so I'm up to a refresher course for you too."

She leaned close, kissed me on my cheek. "Oh, Tom! I keep finding ways to hurt you!"

I kissed Jenny on the mouth, hard and horny. I'd kissed her like that when I'd been making love to her. But not like this, not when we weren't really started yet. Jenny promptly kissed back, our arms went around each other, and both of us squeezed tightly.

When I finally pulled back, I was grinning, my eyes were bright with passion, desire and love. For a moment, Jenny looked at me, then shook her head, smiling a little.

"When someone you love hurts you," I told her, "it happens. They didn't mean to, it just happens. And when it happens, why, you make it up. Let's make up some more."

She giggled hard, then used her size to lever me back, her tongue pushing into my mouth. And when she squirmed around and took me in her mouth, she was more careful, but there was nothing wrong with her enthusiasm. I remember the final blaze of pleasure as I peaked; I remember running my hand along her thigh, about all I could reach.

I was standing on a high cliff, the sun was high in the sky, a few puffy cumulus clouds hung here and there. The ocean stretched to infinity in front of me, behind me, hills bulked into blue distance.

"It is really pretty."

I turned to the voice, it was a woman I didn't recognize, eighteen or nineteen, I thought. She saw me looking at her, and grinned.

"A very pretty hotel," she told me, waving her hand around.

I looked more closely. We were standing on a roof of several acres. Swimming pool, tennis courts; something that looked like a giant sand box, but with a net. Volley ball? Quite a few people were doing one thing or another.

We were on a high cliff, atop a building set into the face of the rock. Below, at the base near the ocean, was a sliver of blinding white beach, a small half moon arc centered below where I stood.

I had no control, none. It was as though I was just sitting inside someone else. "Nothing is too good for my friends." I said it, it was my voice, but I had nothing to do with what words were spoken.

I felt someone come up next to me, I turned and saw Elizabeth. A glowing, radiant Elizabeth; older, mature, serene and confident. She linked arms with me.

"Jenny sent you a last minute request," Elizabeth said, squeezing my arm. I lifted an eyebrow. "Please see that Scotty is toilet-trained by the time she gets back."

"She's only going to be gone three months," what had to be me, said.

"Jenny says, when you put your mind to it, you can teach anyone, anything, overnight."

In the distance, far out to sea, a light shone. A shining flare that grew longer and longer, a tiny silvery sliver at the very apex of the flame. A beacon that came out of the sea, a shining sword that stabbed down as it lifted up.

"Keep her safe," I muttered.

"Keep all my sisters safe," Elizabeth breathed softly, next to me.

Dreams.

What do dreams mean? Anything! That you're asleep!

Friday, April 5, 2002

Elizabeth woke me up, her hand on my erection, a firm stroking grip that reminded me of Jenny's abilities in that arena. Thinking that led me to places I didn't want to go; however Elizabeth was a lot more determined than I was dissuaded.

"Are you getting close?" she whispered in my ear.

"Getting there!" I was too, in spite of distractions.

Elizabeth giggled. "Then it's my turn." She rolled away, sat up, shedding a pair of panties quickly.

"Where's Jenny?" I inquired, a little curious. I'd gone to sleep with Jenny, and had dreamed of Elizabeth. Now I was awake again and Jenny was gone, and Elizabeth was here.

"Taking a shower," Elizabeth said, as she moved to straddle my chest.

I reached out and pushed her closer, my hands running over her bottom, then up Elizabeth's back. Returning towards her waist, my thumbs took a few seconds to rub two small, pale rose nipples to hardness. My tongue was lapping at her clit, moving it back and forth, causing Elizabeth's hips to start moving. Elizabeth steadily grew more excited and I shifted my focus to Elizabeth's lovely pussy, forgetting the world, dreams, everything except what was in front of me.

Finally it was Elizabeth who shifted, moving down over my body, bringing her lips to lightly caress mine. "I need something more," she said, moving my erection so it slid neatly inside her. I pushed deep, then held my position, while using my hands on her bottom to pull her more tightly against me. Elizabeth gasped, and I felt her muscles tighten around me.

"Oh you!" she said with exasperation. "No fair! Too short!"

I pulled almost out, pushed back. "Short is it?"

She sighed with pleasure, "No, I guess not." Elizabeth was lying across my body; a position that was okay, but not in my top ten list. I felt her muscles contract again, and then she moved up a bit, and then pushed down herself.

"Before you came into my life." Elizabeth kissed me on the nose, while pushing me deeply into her. I realized it was a pun, and laughed. Another, odd, nice feeling. Usually, it was the woman I was with who laughed; this was a nice feeling too. "I didn't like what I saw around me. Girls who were too young, too immature, making love to boys who were significantly too

immature.

"I couldn't understand why they did it. I didn't understand my own sister. I'd masturbated a couple of times, and it was...ho hum. Eventually, I decided that I was frigid, or something like that. I didn't understand my dreams, Tom. I was like the high priestess of mathematics; I didn't know what to make of them. I thought I was going to be a nun, when I grew up."

She kissed me lightly. "And yet, always, there was someone there, just on the edge of my awareness. Someone whose presence made me feel good, someone who could, just by being there, make me feel warm and loved. I never could reconcile the cold analytical me with the part of me who loved the presence there, just slightly out of reach.

"And then one day, it wasn't a presence, it was you in my dreams. You and I were doing this." She wiggled to make sure I was following the story, to make sure I knew what she meant. "I laughed at myself; I'd figured it out. I just hadn't met the right person, yet. And it was that person I was going to feel warm and loved by, the way I felt in some of my dreams. And when we were apart, I'd be all cold and analytical, like in the rest of the dreams."

Elizabeth smiled and kissed me. "Imagine my surprise when I saw you the first time, and learned you weren't a figment of my imagination."

Elizabeth and I made love, beautiful love; it was like our first time together. We joined, spirits and bodies; I don't know how to describe how it works. If you've felt it, you'll know what I mean; if you haven't, you won't. All I can say is that I lay there afterwards, spent, as happy as a person can be, my arms wrapped around someone who I could not love more.

Elizabeth leaned close, kissed my cheek, put her arm around me. "You and me, Tom; we're like the Yin and Yang symbol from Asia. We fit together."

"Yes!" I said with pleasure. "Yes!"

"You are hot passion, deep love, mixed with compassionate concern. I'm cold calculation, careful thought and planning. Mixed with hot passion and deep love, too."

I grinned, pleased that someone like Elizabeth loved me the way I loved her.

"Tonight, Tom. We're going out."

I nodded and added my thoughts. "With all my friends. To celebrate good fortune, to put the bad behind us. Mine, Jenny's, your family's."

She nodded. "Your friends, to celebrate all of our good fortune. And tonight you'll be with Mom. Jenny and I will be together, Shannon and Joanna. Your parents."

That sounded pretty good to me, so I smiled. Elizabeth smiled enigmatically in return. "You have to remember, Tom, that I love you. Mom loves you. We both understand that we have to share you with others, and we accept that. Don't worry about us, Tom."

"Worry about what?" I asked, but I was fairly sure I knew what she meant.

"We'll always be here, we will always love you. Shannon doesn't understand how to do that, but Mom and I do."

I shook my head. "I'm learning things, Elizabeth. Sure, I've made love to a lot of girls in the last couple of weeks. I promise, I understand myself better now. It's not going to happen again. I've been too casual, letting my hormones do my thinking." I kissed her. "Trust me."

"You never have to ask, Tom. And you never have to worry."

As if on cue, Jenny opened the door and stuck her head in the room. "Shower's free."

I remembered then, that last night, I'd dropped Elizabeth off at her house. Elizabeth must have read my mind because she said, "I felt like a walk." She kissed my cheek again. "Now, run along, get a shower. You need one."

I stuck my tongue out at her, and Elizabeth simply waved at the door. On the way down the hall to the bathroom, I was trying to remember the last time I'd been told I needed a shower; I'd been six, I thought. Fresh from a rare Arizona

cloudburst and playing in the mud.

I'd hardly got the water running, when the shower enclosure door slid open and JR was there, grinning at me. "I heard a rumor this morning that there was a naked horny boy in the bathroom."

I glanced at her as she got in and laughed when I saw her erect nipples. "Well, maybe the rumor was wrong. Maybe there was a naked horny girl on the way to the bathroom."

JR grinned. "Funny you should mention that, big brother. The problem about having five people in the household is that now and then, someone sleeps alone. You have no idea how horny I am."

I stared at JR's erect nipples, capping her small, lovely breasts. Here you go, Tom. Last night you made love to Jenny, this morning Elizabeth. Time to say no. You told Elizabeth you were going to say no...

JR wrapped her arms around my neck, kissed me really hard, rubbing her breasts against my chest and her pussy against my erection.

My arms went around her, and I kissed back. Our tongues came together, and her hand moved around and tugged me so that I could slide into her. Like Elizabeth not so very long before, I had no trouble entering her, and even less trouble moving inside her. Her pussy wrapped around me like a tight velvet glove, and I could feel every muscle movement she made.

The water started to turn cold, and she laughed. "Hurry up, big brother! You've got me more than ready!"

I put my hands on her bottom, pulled her tightly to me, and came. She squirmed, rubbing me hard enough to be a little painful, before she came too. We had gravitated to the dry end of the shower, however the cascade of cold water a few feet away was more than enough to send a chill into the shower stall.

I shriveled up pretty fast, down to a pale shadow of my usual self. JR, in turn, was looking at the shower and laughing.

"What?" I asked.



"Oh, I heard Mom and Dad's shower go on as I started over here." She nodded at the now freezing water coming out of the showerhead. "What do you want to bet we don't get talked to about running out of hot water this morning?"

We had done that, regularly the last few years. Finally Dad had started taking showers at night, and that had relieved the pressure on the hot water heater in the morning.

I sighed, stepped under the water and rinsed off, trying to ignore the chill. Trying to work out why I could be telling myself one second that no, I wasn't going to make love to a girl, then a second later, be doing it.

"You look, big brother, like that didn't quite hit the spot," JR said after a minute.

I shrugged, decided that if I couldn't tell JR the truth, who could I ever tell the truth to?

"I told Elizabeth I wasn't going to be sleeping with so many girls any more."

I wasn't prepared with the look of concern that came across JR's face.

"Me too?" she asked softly. She took a step closer to me, ignoring the cold water. "Does that include me?"

I looked her in the eye. Making love to your sister isn't right; how many times had I heard that in my life? I'd learned my mom had been with her brother since she was JR's age. The two things didn't add up.

Elizabeth said she and Mary would understand. Shannon said she never could. Here I was with JR, who's understanding was more like Elizabeth's and Mary's. What in the name of heaven was right?

My voice cracked. "I don't think you need to worry, JR," I told her.

I couldn't help it. I turned and leaned my head against the wall, my mind unwilling to deal with what was around me. Staring me in the face. It was talk, nothing but talk. I was a

bundle of hormones, going where they led me.

"Tom," JR's hand was on my shoulder. She cuddled up close; I could feel her breasts against my back. "Tom."

"JR, I don't know what to do." It wasn't very hard, but I lightly slammed my head against the wall. "So many..." My mind traveled along the time line, since Marsha. "I don't know, JR, I just don't know..."

JR, being JR, was more direct. "Fuck this!" I heard her crank the valve, turning off the water.

"Look at me, Tom," JR's voice was hard, demanding.

I pulled myself off the wall, away from my self-pity.

"What exactly do you mean?" JR asked, standing now, hands on her hips, glaring at me.

"I mean, JR, that the other day, coming home from Penny's you were thinking you were a slut because you'd made love to two boys in a day. And I told you I'd been with three girls in two days."

JR nodded, remembering.

"JR, in two days, I was in the double digits. More than ten. Three times a slut, maybe five times."

She reached out, put her finger on my chest and pushed me lightly. "Listen to me, Tom." She pushed me again.

"You were the one who told me to pay attention. You said that the number wasn't important; it was who they were that mattered. Tell me true, Tom. How many of the double-digit lovers you were with, how many would you kick out of bed? How many do you have second thoughts about being with?"

"None." I wanted cry, but tears had been in short supply, ever since I'd found myself upside down.

"How many of those girls have told you they regretted it?" JR went on.

"None," I said, but, reached out and touched her. "But JR,

half of them I've never seen again. Maybe more than half."

"I'm not you, Tom. I was with Penny, you, Roger, Kim, Mom, Dad, Uncle Craig, Jennifer, Sue Ellen and Shannon. Oh wait, double digits too!" JR waved at the shower enclosure door. "Tom, we're both all wet! I think if we both dry off, these things will pass."

"How can I love that many people?" I asked her.

"I have no idea," JR told me. "I do know that you will try your best to love us as much as you can and as much as we need. That, Tom, is the bottom line as far as I'm concerned."

JR paused, and then simply bent double, laughing wildly.

"What?"

"I forgot something," she told me, a new, enigmatic look on her face, one I'd never seen from my sister before.

She had gotten a grip on herself, now she looked at me. Now that is the true grin of a Cheshire cat, I thought. Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile, eyes dancing with laughter.

"What?" I repeated, mystified.

"Tom, let's just say that I'd forgotten for a second what sex with you is like. Believe me, brother, believe me. That alone is worth it."

She slid the shower door open, grabbed a towel. "Come and get dried off, Tom."

Later I had breakfast. It was an odd breakfast. Jenny hugged me, Mom hugged me, JR did and Elizabeth hugged and kissed me. I didn't know if they'd talked or not, but each and every one of them was saying that they loved me, loved being made love to by me, and please, please don't stop loving them.

I had barely finished loading the dishwasher when Tony called. "Say Tom, what are you doing this afternoon?"

"I didn't have any real plans." Thinking about things; there was one hell of a lot to think about.

"Sue Ellen says come over. Time she says, for you and me to work on our tan lines."

I blinked, stared into the distance. Connecting dots; the way to work on tan lines, would be to not let anything get in the way, as it were.

"A couple of people are coming over. Mindy and her friend, Michelle," he paused, "Fleur."

"Cool. I thought Sue Ellen said Fleur was leaving, though."

"This evening. I don't know what she did, but she twisted her old man around her finger."

I remembered Fleur's father from the police station, and then contemplated Fleur. That was pretty impressive, if she could do it!

"Should I bring a friend? Can I?" I corrected myself in mid-sentence.

Tony chuckled. "Tom, there's not enough room in the pool if you bring all your friends. Juniors only party."

Tony and Fleur. Mindy and her friend. Sue Ellen and me. Sue Ellen had said she wanted to make love again before she and Tony were going steady again. Today was supposed to be the day. How many predictions lately had I heard that went wrong?

Like so many of late, Tony was reading my mind. "Skinny-dipping, Tom. Sue Ellen's mom and mine are going to be chaperones."

I had to laugh myself. "A parent chaperoned skinny-dipping party?"

"Sue Ellen's mom is letting my mom come over to chill for a while. Mom told Dad he has until this evening to make up his mind whether he's going to move out, because I'm moving back." He chuckled again, "They're going to ask Dad over about eight or so; they're going to be watching a Sun's game on the big screen in the family room, the surround sound, the whole nine yards."

"Oh, dirty pool!" I told him, laughing myself.

"No, we have to leave the pool clean!" Tony kidded, and I smiled. Things really were coming back together. Again.

"What do you want to do about cars, tonight, Tom?" he said, changing the subject. "I'm not able to drive mine."

"Funny you should mention it," I replied. "You haven't seen my new wheels. Let's just say, I have room for you and Sue Ellen, JR and Shannon, Jenny and Katrina. Mary's going to bring Elizabeth."

"What are we going to see?" Tony asked.

I'd looked at the morning paper, so I some suggestions. "How about Clockstoppers?" I asked.

"That the one about the time traveler?"

"Ah, time stopper, anyway. We could see the Time Machine, it's showing."

There was a moment's pause, and then Tony laughed. "Saw it a couple of weeks ago with Sue Ellen. The girl in it has nice breasts. I was just remembering something Sue Ellen said then. At the time I thought she was yanking my chain. I said something about how much better Sue Ellen's were, and Sue Ellen said the girl wasn't too shabby; that she wouldn't kick her out of bed." In my mind's eye I could see Tony shaking his head. "I never imagined..."

I was fairly sure that at some point in time, Sue Ellen and Tony had had a discussion about Sue Ellen and girls. Well, we'd both had an education in the last couple of weeks.

I got to Sue Ellen's a little after lunch. Tony and Sue Ellen really were skinny-dipping in the pool, so were Fleur, Mindy and Michelle.

"When in Rome," Tony said with a laugh, "do as Sue Ellen says, or get beat up." He pointed to a chair. "Drop your pants."

I did, dove in the pool, swimming the length underwater. Well, maybe two-thirds of the length.

We splashed and had fun. Everyone was relaxed; no one seemed embarrassed by being nude. We listened to music; in a word, it was nice.

Oh yeah, I went the entire time without an erection.

Around three-thirty in the afternoon, Fleur had to get dressed, as her mother was due to pick her up, so we all got dressed as well. While we were in the living room, I pulled out the picture I'd gotten from Johnnie Dugan and passed it around.

"Merde!" Fleur exclaimed.

French isn't my thing, so I promptly mistranslated the word as something to do with death. "I wasn't hurt."

I think she saw in my eyes, what I was thinking.

"Merde is French for shit," Fleur told me, looking at the picture.

I was a little surprised by Mindy's reaction. She started crying, and then she turned and walked away. Michelle went to her; while I was left feeling like an idiot.

Right then Fleur's mother arrived, and we all exchanged pleasant greetings. Even me, who was tongue-tied. Fleur's mother was tall and elegant, like Fleur's father. She smiled at me when Fleur introduced us, then surprised me by leaning close, kissing me on each cheek.

The smell of her perfume, the warmth of her body close to mine, the fact that I could look down the top of her dress and see her unfettered breasts, all hit my like a blacksmith's hammer against an anvil. I had an erection; it was a total sensory experience quite unlike any I'd had before.

She pulled back, regarding me. "Fleur is a swan, you know." She nodded at her daughter, "She doesn't believe it, but I see it in your eyes. You know."

I could only nod. I wished I'd been paying more attention when Fleur had told us her name.

Before she left, she hugged Sue Ellen. "Thank you for being so kind to my daughter."

"No problem," Sue Ellen told her. "My pleasure."

Sue Ellen's mother made an appearance, the two women hugged as well. "It isn't to Jean's liking," Fleur's mother told Mrs. Wells, "but we will be back in the summer. He doesn't know it yet, but he is in line to be made Consul-General here."

Sue Ellen's mom smiled. "Ah, dear Jehanna! Together again, at last!"

The two laughed. It was like I was there again, watching my mother and Melinda, the TV reporter. Oh! No wonder Sue Ellen likes girls too! The two women exchanged smiles, and then Fleur and her mother were gone. Sue Ellen's mother vanished as well.

Mindy had pulled herself together when Fleur's mother had appeared, now she came to me. "I'm sorry, Tom."

"It's not a nice picture; I wouldn't show it to anyone again. It just..." Words failed me again.

She smiled at me, leaned close and kissed me on the cheek, a lot like Fleur's mother had... although just on one cheek, no perfume and no unfettered breasts. "A few years ago, we lived in a town called Mohave, in California. My father worked for an aerospace company that had a lab near there.

"One day there was an accident at the lab." Her eyes bored into mine. "He was killed, so were a lot of others. They took Mom and some of the others who'd lost family members to see it. Afterwards, Mom cried for days and days; more than when she first heard Dad was dead."

I decided that mentioning someone had died at the accident was never going to cross my lips, at least in Mindy's hearing. I hugged her, and she smiled at me. Pale and sad. I looked over her head, caught Michelle's eye.

"Please take care of her," I pleaded wordlessly.

Michelle came and hugged Mindy. Mindy wrapped her arms around Michelle and held on for dear life.

I mentally consigned the picture of the accident to a place

in the bottom of the bottom drawer in my room. I'd survived; others hadn't. Who needed reminding about friends and relatives who hadn't been as fortunate as me?

The picture was a reminder to me about how lucky I'd been. It was something I never intended to forget, but at the same time, it would mean something else to others. A lot of people are killed and injured in accidents; more people had family or loved ones killed or injured. Who needed that kind of reminder?

There was another knock on the door, and this time it was Michelle's uncle, a man of about thirty or so, looking even more Hispanic than Michelle. Mindy perked up when she saw him. "Please, Uncle Marty. Please! Ice cream! A ride in your car!"

He grinned at her, then at me. "You have to be Tom."

"Yes, sir."

"Please, it's Marty." He held out his hand, and I shook it, mystified.

"Mindy tells me you play a mean game of poker."

I almost fainted, remembering the poker game. I was pretty sure he knew what kind of a poker game it had been, too. Would I tell Uncle Craig about the poker game? I sniffed in mental derision. Not!

"One of these days, when we don't have something else to do on Friday night, like going to a movie, we should get up a poker game."

All I could do was nod, not having a clue. I'd been lucky, not clever, to win the poker game at the party. In fact, if there was a best player in the game, it had to be Anna, who had had the best strategy of anyone.

Then they were gone; it was getting to be like a parade. Sue Ellen's and Tony's moms appeared, announced they were off to get some beer and chips for 'our party'. Again, I was flabbergasted. I'm not sure why; it would have been flat impossible for it not to have gotten out to them what kind of a party Sue Ellen's and Janey's had been. Saying they were having 'a party' had to be irony, right? Or maybe teasing?



How about them sitting in the house talking in the kitchen while a half dozen nude teenagers splashed around the pool, working on their tan lines?

I'd lost track of Sue Ellen, but when I saw her again she was wearing a very short pleated white skirt and t-shirt without a bra, something that was very easy to tell on Sue Ellen, particularly when she had erect nipples.

Tony grinned at her, and Sue Ellen gave a little twirl, going around twice. Pale blue panties. Who was being teased now? Me? Tony? Both of us? I shook my head. You'd think with everything that had happened to me, I'd have learned to handle anything. Instead, my mind kept flashing back to Sue Ellen's blue panties and Fleur's mother's breasts.

Tony didn't seem to be troubled or confused at all. "I'm going to get a shower, I hate having the chlorine smell hanging around," he announced.

He turned and went towards the back of the house, leaving Sue Ellen and I alone. It had been, maybe fifteen minutes since Fleur's mother had kissed me on the cheeks.

I could see Sue Ellen's lips moving, her eyes intent; I hadn't a clue what was going on in her head.

"I should go," I said, trying to be casual about it.

Sue Ellen smiled slightly. "If I were you, I'd get undressed first."

I blushed; I'd forgotten I was undressed! Then her words and the fact I was dressed hit me together. I was confused.

"Did you know you can set your watch by a Tony Shower?" Sue Ellen said, looking at me with a big grin on her face. She reached out, grabbed my hand and tugged.

I was going to say no. There was no way I should be led around either by the hand or my erection. My brain and heart together had to be in control of my hormones. Had to be!

In a second we were in Sue Ellen's room, where the door to her bathroom was closed. On the other side of the door Tony was singing 'Three Jolly Coachmen' at the top of his lungs. I could

hear the water running in the shower.

"Tony's favorite song. Particularly the last verse about the young maid who stays to steal another kiss." She was unbuttoning my shirt, then my jeans as she spoke.

Her t-shirt flew through the air, and she pulled on me. I guess it's something cheerleaders do, maybe, or something she had been practicing all week with Tony. She started falling towards the bed, backwards, pulling me forwards. Next thing I knew, we'd twirled in air, and I hit the mattress first, with Sue Ellen across my thighs.

For a second I was concerned about what Sue Ellen was going to do with her panties and skirt; I'm sure I was taught another cheerleading secret right then, because my erection slid nicely through the edge of one of the leg holes of her panties.

Sue Ellen wasn't wet at all, but she started rubbing the head of my cock over her clit. She must have been really horny, because I don't think it took but a minute before she was really wet. Then I was inside her, and she was laying down, her tongue plunging into my mouth, her breasts cushioned against my chest.

My brain gave a last, mild word of reproof, before hormones were in total command of the situation. It was very much like the first time we'd been together; two people going at sex as hard and as fast as they could go. The bed didn't so much squeak as groan; the sounds of my pelvis hitting hers were like whip cracks that echoed around her room. Her tongue was driving into my mouth like my cock was going into her vagina.

I wrapped my arms around her butt, squeezing and massaging her cheeks. I forgot second thoughts; forget about anything except Sue Ellen, the moment and myself.

The sound of Tony turning off the faucet in the shower came through all of it. Sue Ellen closed her legs, brushed her teeth lightly against mine and we both pushed hard and as deep as we could. She gave of growl of complete feminine satisfaction; I was speechless, spending and spewing semen into her.

My ears were ringing, my chest was heaving, my vision a little dim. Sue Ellen moved, pulling off and sitting up next to me on her bed. I looked up at her, realizing that once again she'd made love to me, then left.

"You have," she said with a calm and level voice, her breathing effortless and measured, "about three more minutes. Right now Tony is drying off, then he's going to shave, brush his teeth and then slick on some English Leather deodorant. Then he's going to come out here to get dressed."

Or, I was sure, code that it would be a good idea if I was dressed myself and out of here and into another room in less than three minutes. I got up, bent down to pick up my clothes. Sue Ellen's fingers trailed down my back, then she gave me a light slap on the butt. "I'm not a tease."

I shook my head, not wanting to be heard in the bathroom, just a few feet away. "Making love like that can't be called teasing."

She smiled, but shook her head. "You know what I mean."

She leaned close, kissed me on one cheek, just like Mindy. "Don't think badly of me."

"Not ever going to do that!" I said firmly.

"Get going, my turn for the shower."

I got; a few minutes later Tony came out into the living room. "I thought you'd like to see my new wheels," I told him. His eyes lit up, and the two of us went outside.

He was duly impressed, even to the point of sitting in the passenger seat and inhaling deeply. "Ah, the smell of a new car! I figure it's going to be a million years until I get one of my own."

"I wonder if they cover that on the warranty?" The two of us traded laughs.

"See you around six thirty?" he asked and I nodded.

The only person at the house when I got home was Dad. He was sitting in the living room, reading, when I came in. "Everyone else is off getting their hair done." He ran his fingers through his short hair. "I'm not due for a trim for a couple of weeks."

We traded grins, and I excused myself to get my own shower, and to dab this and that smelly stuff under my armpits and on my cheeks; I did shave this time. I couldn't help laughing at myself. Fate didn't seem to be cooperating with my vow to Elizabeth to cut back on partners. Two this morning, one in the afternoon, who knew what on my fourth, ever, date? Then home tonight, where I knew that Mary, Elizabeth and Shannon were going to be staying over. Mary and I were going to spend the night together.

I sighed. Most guys would be wildly happy if they had a girlfriend who would have sex with them, even if it was just now and then. Four different women in the same day? And a date with a fifth? How could I look people in the eye and talk about love and all of that, when I just wanted to hop into bed with them?

How about this afternoon? Tony and I had swum all afternoon, horsing around with four girls. I hadn't gotten hard, he hadn't either. It could be done. I'd done it before. I just had to be firm with myself; and less rigid with the women in my life. It was a stupid joke, but at least I felt better. I'd not had any trouble yesterday staying away from Miriam the banker. Of course, there had been that other lady banker... one out of two? Still a prescription for failure!

I was sure that had to be a reason for all of this; I just couldn't figure it out.

Later Mom and Mary returned, the four girls in tow. They'd all had haircuts or trims, all preened for me, and I told them how nice they looked; it wasn't hard... they looked really good.

Elizabeth had two thin french braids done, one on either side of her face, perfectly framing it. I remembered the first time I saw her where I thought she looked cute, but serious. Now I just admired how beautiful she'd become in just a few short weeks.

Mary had done the least; but even so, she too was stunning. JR and Jenny had conspired together and now they were laughing that people would think they were sisters. Well, except for maybe their different heights, eye and hair colors. Other than that, well, at least their hairstyle was the same...

I found a lump in my throat, tears... well, maybe only a

few. How lucky could a person be, to have family and friends like these? My life had been good before JR had knocked on the door to my room and wanted to know about oral sex; I'd loved my mom whole-heartedly before she had hit on me.

Jenny, my dear sweet Jenny. Only she wasn't mine, she was her own person. A whole, entire, beautiful wonderful person, who day by day blossomed from a defiant, shrouded and scared, very angry young girl into a warm and radiantly beautiful woman.

Shannon eyed me, and then smiled broadly. "Thank you, Tom."

I shrugged, not really understanding.

She lofted her violin case. "From the bottom of my heart, thank you. You don't know how wonderful it was, how much it meant to me, to go to my violin lesson today. And Mrs. Hesse told me that maybe I should skip a lesson now and then, because I'm playing much better."

I had trouble imagining that; Shannon played better than anyone I'd ever heard in my life. But Shannon was smiling; there was another happy person in the universe.

Then it was a grand tour. Shannon and JR opted to go with Mary and Elizabeth, Jenny came along with me, and we went and fetched Katrina. Then I went and picked up Tony and Sue Ellen, and then last stopped for Gloria.

Gloria was different, she was my date. It was me who walked up to the front of the house, knocked on the door.

A man answered, he was perhaps in his early forties. He wasn't large, but he definitely had a presence about him that told me that he was the master of all he surveyed. His jet-black hair had a few stray white hairs, but other than that he seemed to be in his prime.

"I'm Tom Ferguson, here to pick up Gloria."

He reached out his hand, and we shook. Well, I shook anyway; he crushed. I'd never had a handshake like that, but pain is a swift teacher. My hand soon found a little niche of less pain, and crawled into it. His eyes bored into mine; when he saw that the handshake had stopped being effective, he let up

a little on the pressure. Not much.

"So, you're Gloria's new boyfriend?"

I shook my head. "Sir, we're just going on a date. A first date. I'd like to be friends with Gloria, but..."

"At least you're not some punk football player."

"No, sir." He wouldn't let go. I thought about trying to pull my hand away from his, but when I tried to move, he held on.

"So, you wanna stick it to my daughter?"

In a kung fu movie I'd do something really clever, have him on his knees, saying he was sorry. I didn't know jack about kung fu, judo -- any of that martial arts stuff. "Sir, I don't know Gloria well enough to know if I want to be more than friends with her. You don't know me well enough to jump to conclusions."

"You're a guy; that's all I need to know."

"So, since you're a guy, does that mean you're chasing after Gloria too? Is that what this is? You're jealous?" I couldn't believe I'd said such a stupid thing.

Well, that got my hand turned loose; he balled his fist, drew back and uncorked a punch.

With Roger Parker, I'd simply moved out of the way and he missed by a mile. Gloria's father was a whole lot quicker than Roger, and even though I hurried, his fist grazed my cheek.

"So, it's true," I stood still after I spoke, not moving. Please, let my calm tone and sweet reason work!

He seemed to get a grip on himself. "You come to my front door and insult me! I could smash you to a pulp!"

"Sir, I came to your front door and you insulted me. Plus, you have a rather firm grip when you shake hands. Sir, I'm just here to pick up Gloria and take her out to dinner and a movie with a bunch of my friends. This is not a big deal. If you feel like this, why don't you explain to her that she's not

allowed to date, and no one else will make the mistake of trying to be her friend again."

"The last boy, he couldn't look me in the eye. He'd honk, and Gloria would go to him!"

"Well, I'm not cockroach like Darryl," I told him. "Tell Gloria I was here, thanks and have a nice evening."

I turned my back and got two steps before a vise clamped on my shoulder.

"So, you are afraid!"

I turned back to him. "Sunday," I told him, "last Sunday, Sam Reese put a pistol to my head. Right here." I reached up and pressed my finger down in the middle of my forehead, remembering.

"Tuesday, sir, I spent two and a half hours in a wrecked car, smelling the gasoline leaking from the gas tank. That's how long it took them to cut me out. Almost two weeks ago a friend of mine, standing as close to me as you are, dropped dead of a heart attack.

"Afraid?" I took a step towards him, getting well inside his personal space. "You damn well better believe I was afraid! I gave my friend CPR, brought her back. Sam Reese is dead now, he didn't get past me. Now here I am, standing in front of you, I got out of the car wreck okay. Someone died in that wreck; others were injured. I got up and walked away."

"Tom!" Gloria was at the door, having heard a little of what had been going on.

Then someone else elbowed past Gloria, someone short. She looked to be maybe ninety years old, with skin wrinkles on skin wrinkles. But there was nothing old or infirm about the way she walked up to Gloria's father, reached up and grabbed his ear and twisted.

"Esteban! You get in the house! I told you now, just like I told you when you were Gloria's age, mistakes are hers to make. Yours to make. You turned out pretty good, hijo. Now, in the house!"

The little old grandmother person flashed me a smile, whispered something in Gloria's ear, and dragged the man who'd been so hostile away, as though he was a six year old about to get a time out in the corner.

"You see, about my father," Gloria said forlornly.

"Next time, I'm going to date your grandmother," I told her, trying to laugh it all off, "so I don't have to worry."

Gloria smiled, and the two of us went out to the van, and she got into the front seat.

We had dinner at the Black Angus; it was nice food, although they were busy and it was crowded and noisy. Still, everyone had a good time. Gloria and I talked a lot; about school and cheerleading, music, books. She was a lot like Anna, I thought. She was determined to go to college, no matter what she had to do. Gloria didn't have quite as much enthusiasm for some of the things she'd had to do along the way, I thought. In that way, I guess she was like Sue Ellen.

Her stories about her grandmother though, they were so funny that everyone at the table was laughing. I looked around, pleased. Twelve of us, sitting at two pushed together tables. I scanned around the restaurant, but everyone seemed to be intent on their own meals, their own affairs; not interested in Tony and I.

What did we look like to someone else? Earlier it had been Tony and I and four girls. It was still just Tony and I, but now there were eight women, ranging in age from junior high to Mary in her early thirties. The only woman at the table I'd not been in bed with was Mindy's friend Michelle. True, Katrina and I had made love to Jenny and not each other, but we'd been in the same bed, making love to the same person at the same time.

I had to hurry us along to get to the theater in time. It was cool to stand in the window and ask for twelve tickets, and hand over five twenties to pay for it. We were nearly late for the movie, but managed to get seats in two rows, right in the middle. There weren't a lot of people there to see it.

I reached over and took Gloria's hand before the lights went down. She smiled at me, and I smiled back. On my other side was Elizabeth, then Mary. Sue Ellen was next to Gloria,



then Tony. In front of us were Jenny and Katrina, JR and Shannon then Mindy and Michelle.

We watched trailers for a lot of movies that looking boring. I thought the one I liked the best was for Spiderman. I'd liked the Mummy movies, and Scorpion King looked like it might be interesting too.

The movie was, well, ah, well... it had mad scientists, dumb parents, bad guys and worse guys. Buddies and a pretty girl. The hero won, the dumb parents learned a thing or two, and the bad guys probably did too. The guy and the girl were happy.

As the lights came on afterwards, Elizabeth just sat there shaking her head. "The science was so bogus."

Jenny turned back and grinned, nodding.

Mary on the other hand, simply laughed. "When you go to a movie or a play, or just read a novel, the first thing you have to do is suspend disbelief."

Elizabeth squinched up her face and stuck out her tongue at her mom; there was more laughter. Then we were outside again, and there were hugs for those not going with me. I took Katrina home, then dropped off Tony and Sue Ellen, then a quick stop at the house to let out Jenny.

I walked her to her front door. The light was yellow to keep off bugs, which made her face very much darker. All the other house lights were out. "Thanks, Tom," Gloria said, as we stood, both a little unsure what to say. "I had a lot of fun."

"That was the idea," I told her.

She nodded, quite serious. "I'm sorry about my dad."

I shook my head. "Don't worry about it," I told her. "Your grandmother fixed up things just fine."

"The other day at your house. You were a true gentleman." She giggled, "Well, it wasn't day; it was night. You let me sleep in your bed. You didn't bother me."

I shrugged. Bother a girl like that? I might not be able

to say no when the girl was saying 'Yes!' but I had no trouble with the word when it was obvious I wasn't wanted. I met Gloria's eyes, and saw the same faint relief I'd seen the day at school when I'd told Janey Sussman thanks would do.

"Gloria," I paused, not sure if it was a question I should ask, "are you a virgin?"

She blushed but answered. "That part of me is, not my mouth."

I didn't follow all that closely the who-was-dating-who gossip at school, but I was pretty sure Gloria had had several boyfriends. I connected a few dots. What guy was going to admit he was dating a cheerleader and not having sex with her?

"You know, don't you?" her voice was soft, a little nervous. "That Darryl didn't exactly do like I said?"

"I guessed, just now."

"He gave me something; he said it would make me feel good. We had some beers, and then he gave me a shot of whiskey. By then, I wasn't thinking so good. When I didn't want to drink it, he pushed me down on the bed and forced me to drink it. A water glass. Then, it went like I said, only he just wanted to screw me."

"He wanted to rape you," I replied. I'd thought it was just a boyfriend pushing his girlfriend past where she wanted to go. But drugging someone, getting them drunk? I'd been wrong all along. Darryl was another Sam, Keith or Roger, going where he wasn't wanted; rape.

"I told Janey and Sue Ellen," Gloria added, "they said they'd take care of it. Sue Ellen said that there will be a football team meeting Monday after school."

She sighed. "People make life very complicated."

"That's for sure!" I told her. "I'd rather be kissing you."

She smiled, shook her head. "You know I don't want to. Not yet. Maybe the second or third date. Maybe." She leaned close, kissed my cheek, very much like Mindy had done earlier.

"I have places to go in my life, things to do. So do you, Tom. You and I both know, we're not going the same places."

"You don't know where I'm going," I told her, speaking seriously.

Gloria replied, "I'm going to college, then I coming back here. I'm going to learn everything I can, then come back and teach it to kids, young kids." She waved around them. "I see the kids here, in the neighborhood. They don't know what to do. Parents say one thing, teachers another, the news says something else different. Grandparents, the few that have them... they are clueless too. Kids need better tools to help them understand."

I contemplated that. "I wish you the best of luck."

She leaned close, kissed me on the cheek again. The other cheek this time. Fleur's mother in stop motion.

"Good night, Tom."

She went inside and I went back to the van and drove home.

Mom, Dad and Mary were sitting in the living room, talking. I waved, went to the bathroom, and then returned.

Only Mary was left.

"It was a very nice evening, Tom," she told me.

"It was."

"You could have spent longer with your friend."

I walked over to Mary, wrapped my arms around her. "Not this time. Gloria has a lot in common with another girl I know, more than I would have thought. She wants to go to college, then come home and help her neighbors. Doesn't want distractions like boys."

Mary hugged me, and I kissed her. Her tongue speared into my mouth, and I ran my hand down over her jeans, pulling her pussy against my erection.

"You are enormously and thoroughly addictive, Tom," she

said, grinding her pelvis against mine.

"And you a beautiful, wonderful woman, Mary."

Her mouth closed again on mine, and again I was massaging her bottom.

She pulled back, then, a faint smile on her face. "You're a bottom fetishist, aren't you?"

"What's a fetishist?" I asked.

"Someone devoted to a particular thing."

I smiled and undid the snap of her jeans, unzipped them, and ran both hands, palms against her skin, inside her panties, brushing her bush with the little fingers, going further, pushing her jeans down. On the trip back up her thighs, I let one hand trail the other, so both fingers could trail through the cleft of her sex.

"Oh, I devote myself to the target at hand," I said with a grin.

"Like I said, I'm an addict."

We kissed again, and I slid her jeans down as far as I could; Mary kicked them away.

She looked at them, then at me. "I think we'll finish this in your room."

"I wouldn't mind starting here."

"Oh, I'm well and truly started."

I reached down and scooped up her jeans and panties; then I followed her upstairs, watching her bottom as she climbed. Once again, I felt a strong desire to make love to Mary like I'd made love to others before her, my favorite way. Except she turned to face me in my room, working on my clothes.

It is really, really stupid, I thought, with Mary's head bobbing on my erection, to worry about a particular way of making love, when there are a million other ways, all of them quite enjoyable.

Mary liked zucchini; I had no use for the squishy green things at all. There was, I thought, more than enough room for all of us on the planet, and even more room for different tastes.

I came, giving Mary something to taste, and then she was tasting up my body, licking and kissing everything from my below my navel to, eventually, my tongue. I lay down, pulling her down to my second favorite position, thumbing her small breasts and large nipples. And she reached down and fed me into her, and I sank as deep as I could.

Long, slow strokes for a long, slow time. She rubbed my breasts as I rubbed hers. Mary ran her fingers across my groin, while I worked on her clit. She came with a soft sigh, then leaned down and kissed me hard. With most mothers, I'd found they weren't really tight enough to bring me to climax without additional friction; not so Mary.

I came a second time, with Mary sighing deeply. She laid her head against my chest, put her arms around me and slept.

I smiled into the night, running my hands lightly over her body, enjoying her touch and feel, the warmth and texture of her skin, the tiny play of muscles beneath as she breathed slowly.

I wasn't sure how it happened; I realized her heart was beating at the same rate as mine, the beats occurring, so far as I could tell, simultaneously. Two hearts beating as one.

I slowed my breathing, trying to match hers as well. It wasn't until I let go, relaxed and stopped thinking about it, that it worked. Worked just fine, I slept united with someone at a level I'd never known before.

Saturday, April 6, 2002

I awoke from sleep, looked over at the clock on the nightstand. It was a little after one. In spite of our earlier unity, Mary had moved off to one side of the bed. I rolled back to cuddle up to her, reveling in the warmth of her physical presence, the warmth of her soul in proximity to mine. I smiled to myself remembering that once Mary had worried about being a 'Thursday's.' No, I thought as I settled back into sleep, you are going to be a 'most every day' if I can find some way to

make it happen.

There was no discernable transition; I was sitting up in my bed, alone. Almost alone, a small rotund man was standing a few feet away; he bore a slight resemblance to Danny Devito, although this man looked more Semitic. That and he was wearing a yarmulke.

"Hello, Tom," the man said.

I looked around. "Where's Mary?" I remember being a little curious, but not as much as I should have been.

"Oh, she's still sleeping. No need to disturb her."

"What are you doing in my bedroom?" I asked.

He smiled, a wry, ironic smile. "I'm God, Tom. I pretty much go where I please."

I smiled to myself. So, I was dreaming! I was going to make a smart comment, but his level and serious expression changed my mind.

"We need to discuss a few things, Tom," he went on.

Okay, a dream. I mentally laughed. Oh well, sure! Why not!

"The other night you talked to Joanna; confirmed something you had begun to wonder about, concerning the first time the two of you made love."

"She wanted me to make love to her," I agreed. "She was curious about the questions she wanted to ask, but pretty sure what was going to happen once the topic came up."

"That's right, Tom. Now I want you to think about why you made love to Sue Ellen the first time; then think about why you made love to her again yesterday afternoon."

I mentally winced. "I did it with my best friend's girl because I wanted to and because she wanted to. We just wanted sex. I'm not proud of the first time or today." It was impossible to forget Sue Ellen and I earlier on Friday. If the first time had been a desire for sex, this last time had been pure animal lust.

We'd made love furiously the entire time Tony was in the shower, not twenty feet away; we'd both come the instant he turned off the water.

"I can't justify either time," I said sadly. "I betrayed my best friend twice, just so I could have sex with his girlfriend."

"Did you betray him with Sue Ellen at the party?" the man asked.

There was no way I was going to think of this guy as God. None.

"No. I knew they were apart; Tony had said I could if I wanted to."

"Why do you think Sue Ellen wanted to do it, that first time?"

It was tempting to say because we were both horny, but a few days later, at the orgy, I remember Sue Ellen telling me about Tony and her problems; Tony knew one and exactly one way to make love. The first time Sue Ellen and I had been together, I'd shown her different. And the second time. Yesterday? Well, I guessed you could call it different too.

The man stood silently, watching me. "So now you understand that Sue Ellen and Tony had a problem." His voice was firm and confident.

I'd thought it, there was no way he could have known what I was thinking. Then I remembered that this was a dream. The dream version of God would know anything I did.

"Do you think it was a good idea for Tony and Sue Ellen to break up, even if for such a short time?"

Sue Ellen had me, Tony had Fleur. Mindy had said something about long talks with Tony; I was pretty sure they did more than talk. Mindy had also spent a lot of time with Sue Ellen at the party.

"Tony and Sue Ellen love each other," the man told me. "Right now they are sleeping in each other's arms, blissfully happy, with very large grins on their faces. A long time from now, Tom, their children and grandchildren will gather at their graveside and marvel at how they could build such an enduring love."

I contemplated that; it was, I was sure, my conscience telling me the end justified the means.

"You have it backwards," I was told. "The means justifies the end. Each time you made love to Sue Ellen, she loved Tony more."

"Every time Sue Ellen and I have been together; we came, then she gets dressed and leaves as fast as she can." I heard the bitterness in my voice, and I was surprised. It was something I'd noticed each time; I hadn't realized I was upset by it and how much I was upset.

"One day in not so long, you'll figure out why." He gave a wry chuckle.

"We should move on to other things. Monday you told Eleanor Johannsen that you believed in God. You were quite positive about it. Wednesday, you told Joanna that you weren't sure if there was a God, and if there was, you didn't like him. What happened in the two and a half days between the two answers?"

It was my turn for a wry chuckle. "That would be the two and a half hours I hung upside down. I had time to think, really think for a change. Nothing concentrates your attention like the threat of imminent death.

"I thought about what happened to Jenny, Mary, Elizabeth, Shannon and their father. Jenny's parents, her brother. Roger Parker and Keith Driscoll. I didn't understand how a kind, loving God, who is, according to what I've heard, all powerful, but who allows these appalling things happen to people. And at that, it doesn't take long reading the newspaper before you realize how lucky we are." I was almost crying. "Lucky? Is that what we're supposed to accept? That it's luck or God's Will that things aren't a thousand times worse?

"Is it luck or God's Will that Sam Reese and his parents are dead? Bill Leary? My older brother or sister, whoever it was, cut from Mom's womb, instead of born like JR and me? God's great and wonderful plan?" You can't spit in a dream; probably a good thing, because it still looked like I was in my own bed.

The man shrugged. "I won't justify the nature and shape of the universe. Someday you'll mention this part of our conversation



to Elizabeth, the part where I tell you that in not so very long from now, she will put together all the clues from observations in astronomy and cosmology about the shape of the universe, then she'll have a good laugh at what your astronomers are seeing.

"Accept this, Tom: the universe was created. At one point in time, it didn't exist. Then it did. The universe grows and changes, Tom, each moment of its existence. Eventually, the universe will reach an end state. That end state is my goal, Tom.

"It's like taking your car down to the supermarket at the corner. You go out, turn right onto the street, stop at the main intersection, turn right again, go a mile, make another right into the parking lot, park and go inside.

"Those are the steps you have to go through, to go from A to B, Tom. Yes, you can change them. Go left instead of right at the street; you can eventually get to where you're going, but only after a whole bunch of left turns, instead of the much easier right turns and a much shorter route. Or, you can simply start taking random directions; maybe you'll get there, maybe not. There is a best way to go there; there are a large number of other ways to get there, and an infinite number of choices that won't do the job.

"The universe, Tom, is the sum of its parts. Every event has a cause, every cause an event that follows. Each event predicated on the those that went before."

I contemplated that; unsure why I should care. What did this have to do with JR coming into my room to get me in bed? Or making love to my best friend's girl, twice, when I shouldn't have?

"Tom, what is synergy?"

I knew the answer to that. It had come up in connection with Shannon's music. "A plus B should equal B plus A. But with synergy, you get a little something more."

"A sports team, an orchestra; they have synergy," he told me. I nodded. "People have synergies when they work together, isn't that so? In any endeavor."

"They can," I told him. "Although sometimes I think the synergy

can be negative." Sam Reese and Yolanda Melendez came to mind.

The man shrugged. "You've studied that, you should know the importance of the sign of a change."

I nodded, yeah, that made sense. Just another direction.

"So, Tom, tell me: Can a person by him or herself have synergy?"

I thought about it, "I guess."

"Michelangelo, Da Vinci. Every artist. A man building a house; be it a lean-to of sticks, a straw hut or the Taj Mahal," he explained.

I had to nod again.

"Tell me, Tom, where does the synergy come from?"

"Inspiration and perspiration," I guessed.

"That's some of it. What's inspiration called?"

Hey, you say you're God. I can connect those dots! "The soul."

He nodded. "And tell me Tom; Monday, you believed in me. Wednesday, you didn't. Why would God be happier with you today, than on Monday?"

"Not a clue," I shot back. "It doesn't make sense."

"Because a person who believes, for the most part accepts those things they believe in. A person who isn't sure, questions what they don't understand. A person who accepts things isn't as able to grow, to see new things or expand their understanding. They just accept. A doubter doesn't get complacent; you've learned lately how bad it can be, when the things you think you know turn out not to be so."

I nodded ruefully. Oh yeah!

"The universe is made up of the sum of everything that is and was. The present exists because of what's happened before. The future depends on today. To get to where the universe should end up, things have to happen. Objectively, some of those

things aren't pleasant. Some are horrible; too horrible to contemplate. Yet for the universe to wind up where it's going, they have to happen. It might not seem better at the time, but in the end, it will make it all turn out for the best."

"How can misery and suffering make anything turn out for the better?" I asked. "What good can come from the death of my older brother or sister? A person who never got a chance to live?"

"Gone but not forgotten," the man's voice was gentle. "You remember, and as a result, the things you do will forever be changed by that knowledge. Sure, in a million or billion years, no one will know or care that Tom Ferguson lived; nor that his older sister or brother didn't. But your actions, Tom, will have an impact on their lives; not huge, but it will be there. In cosmology, a little change now means a great huge change a long time later."

I shook my head. "This is just..." I was going to say bullshit, decided I didn't want to find out what the penalty from God would be for cussing to his face. Sure, it was a dream, right? "This is a dream," I repeated my own thought. "I don't believe."

"And as I said, I prefer it that way."

"Once upon a time, Tom, I used some pretty spectacular things to prove my existence. Humans are a particularly stubborn people. Give them any amount of time and they come up with an alternate possibility. Burning bushes and stone tablets written on the Mount. Floods and fire and destruction!" He laughed, shaking his head. "Even parting the Red Sea! That's my favorite! People say it was the tides. Of course it was tides! They think they understand, they believe they know. What they have forgotten to ask themselves, is why there and why then?"

I blinked, and then swallowed. Oh. I could connect those dots, too.

"So, why you?" I looked at him; that had crossed my mind. I was crazy; this was a dream.

"It's very simple, Tom. Unbelievable, but simple. Why not you?"

"I'll leave you with some additional things to think about."

They are things you can easily rationalize if you want. The first is something your subconscious knows, but your conscious forgot four years ago, today. Then two things that your subconscious couldn't possibly know. A small, trivial gift, then two more that add up to the greatest gift you will ever have, far transcending the one your uncle gave you Thursday.

"First, four years ago today, you were standing in the kitchen, having just gotten your allowance. Your mother was praising you, having given you the agreed upon bonus for good behavior, four quarters for video games, over and above the regular ten dollars."

I remembered those days; I'd gotten the bonus nearly every week.

"You were standing there, the money in your pocket, basking in the glow of good deeds and the anticipation of your just reward. You stood with one hand in your pocket, rubbing one of the quarters, imagining what pleasure it would bring. Your mother decided to show you how to thaw meat for dinner that night, and called you over to pay attention to what she was doing with the microwave.

"She wanted you to push the buttons, so you would better remember how to do it. You pulled your hand out of your pocket, after letting the quarter go, so you could do what your mother asked.

"You heard it at the time, but were intent on something else. You didn't understand until later; the tunk of a quarter landing on the floor, the whisper of sound as it rolled, then a slight ting as it hit the front of the grill at the base of the refrigerator. It didn't make any more sound, because it was swallowed up by accumulated dust."

I remembered, vaguely, Mom showing me how to thaw meat. I didn't remember any particular first time, but obviously there had to have been one. I didn't remember losing a quarter.

"The quarter is still there, under the refrigerator," he told me. "Oh, and the two important gifts? When you were just three, Joanna was due and your parents decided they needed a bigger house. They bought the other half of the duplex." Not exactly earth shaking news, I thought.

"They changed the kitchen. The refrigerator was moved from the

old kitchen to the new. The workmen found an accumulation of dust under it, just three years worth. They didn't say anything, just cleaned it up and went away.

"That was three years, this is thirteen years. No one has looked since, Tom. Except it's not just a little dust now, it's a lot. It acts, Tom, as an insulator. It makes the compressor that operates the cooling system have to work harder; so it gets hotter. The dust traps the heat as well.

"It's charred already, Tom. Your mother has mentioned on occasion she smells something burning in your kitchen; your father jokes about if it was last night's or tonight's dinner. Two days from now, almost exactly, it will start to smolder. A half hour or so later, it will burst into flame. A little later, the overheated compressor will crack, allowing the coolant to rapidly escape; that rapid escape will blow the dust all around the room, Tom.

"Your father, Tom, is a good man; your mother has wanted things that he thought weren't really a concern; one of those was fire drills. Your mother was concerned, so he went along. Except, he never thought about it. None of you ever did. The plan is that you all come down both sets of steps and go out the front door.

"No one ever gave any thought about how to get out of the upstairs if both sets of stairs were burning; the steps start not ten feet apart, Tom. Two days from now, you'll get Elizabeth and Mary to safety, then die trying to rescue Jennifer. Mary goes in after you, and she dies. The smoke will be worse in the other half of the house; only your mother wakes up. And she dies trying to get your father awake."

I looked at the man, wanting to punch him in the nose. To rend him limb from limb.

"Oh, and you might want to check the smoke detector in the living room," he continued, offhandedly adding another thought. "Your father put in a new battery on New Year's. Except the battery is defective. None of you have noticed the LED light has been out for two months.

"Sleep good, Tom."

I opened my eyes. I really was sitting upright in my bed; this

time I could feel Mary's presence. As always, it was comforting, and I could draw strength from her and gather my wits just from knowing she was there.

I carefully got out of bed, went out to the hall. The door to Jenny's room was closed; she and Elizabeth were asleep within. I went downstairs, peeked into the family room from the entrance hall. Looked up the other set of steps. Mom and Dad, JR and Shannon were asleep up there.

I walked the short distance to the kitchen, wiggled the grate at the bottom of the fridge. I lay down, prone, to get a better grip; finally found that if you lifted up and pulled, it unhooked. Tufts of dust and dirt pulled away; I could smell the faint odor of smoke.

I pulled handfuls of the mess crammed in there. Dust bunnies on serious steroids. I saw the charring; I lost it.

I'd done so many things for so many; I was the rock. The hard one; in all senses of the word. I'd been there for Jenny, for Mary, Elizabeth and Shannon. All the others. I'd sat calmly and quietly in the ruins of my car for more than two hours while men worked to free me, smelling the gasoline that would have incinerated me in a flash if someone goofed. I'd joked with those men.

And now, laying on my stomach on the kitchen floor of the house I'd grown up in, the tears came hard; buckets and gushers, more even than the night Jenny revealed her soul to me.

I didn't hear my dad behind me; I did flinch when the light went on. "Are you okay, Tom?" he asked quietly. He laughed lightly. "I was going to ask something about a reasonable reason my son should be laying on the floor, crying. I don't think I'll ever make that joke again."

I opened my eyes; saw the silver shape, nestled in the dust. I reached out, ignored the searing heat. Instead I flipped the quarter towards my dad.

He fielded it neatly, then cursed and dropped it. "Damn, that's hot!" I could see him sucking on his fingers.

I started pulling on the dirt, more of it. "Help me," I said simply.

He saw what I was doing and silently went and got a paper grocery bag from the cupboard and started stuffing the crud from under the fridge in it. "Some of this is pretty warm," Dad said, his voice thoughtful.

I handed him some of the charred material. He swallowed, looked at me. "Guess I messed up pretty bad," he said quietly.

"Oh, when was the last time you skipped the 'clean under the fridge' task on the list?" I asked, my voice bitter. "No, this one goes to ignorance and complacency. To drive home the lesson, it's what you think you know that isn't so, that is a bigger danger than the true unknown."

Mom appeared, looking at us. "An odd time to clean the kitchen. What's that I smell burning?"

Dad got up, went and hugged her hard, kissed her harder. "Promise me," Dad told Mom, "that the next time you smell smoke, you will kick my lazy butt into gear until I find out what's smoking."

JR came in, yawning. She stooped down, picking up the quarter. "Hey, someone dropped this. Can I keep it?"

"No," I said quietly, "we're going to frame it and hang it on the living room wall, by the smoke detector."

"Smoke detector?" JR replied, looking mystified.

"Come," I showed them the dead detector that had nearly resulted in a lot of dead family members. Long before a good battery was in it, there were a lot of questions that I answered by shaking my head.

I simply shook them off, smiled. "I'm going for a walk."

It was the middle of the night, but Phoenix nights in April are summer nights most other places; almost balmy, in the 60's. I walked.

I don't think I walked more than a hundred yards when I saw the bright flash in the distance, a bit later heard the crash and boom of thunder. I modified my planned route, harkening back to what my dad had told me the Sunday we'd gone over to Mary's.

When he walked, we ended up back at the house. I'd gotten us back there, but it had been a long walk indeed.

Now, I'd come another long ways. I started walking around the block, not aiming to go far.

I didn't walk long. I'd been enjoying the growing lightning display to the south; it was pretty clear it was headed my way. I changed to just walking up and down the block in front of the house.

A car pulled up next to me; I glanced at it. The police. I laughed at myself. A month ago, I'd have been nervous and flustered. Now, I was just curious to see if it was going to be Joe Moss or Detective Harris who got out, or Surly and Polite.

"Kind of late, guy," one of the two men in the car told me, leaning out the open window.

"I needed some time to think."

"You have ID?" the policeman asked.

"No." I waved at the house. "The lights are on, my parents are up. We had a small kitchen fire. Close. Real close!"

"And we can just go knock on the door, and they'll know who you are?" the cop asked.

I tapped my pants pocket. "I might have left my wallet in my room, but I brought my keys."

It was I thought, not going to be enough. Still, I found I had a question for them. I walked towards the police car, stopped a few feet away.

"Can I ask you a question?" I asked the cop. He'd opened the door and was getting out.

"About what?"

"What does it take, if I wanted to ride with you? To watch what you do?"

"How old are you?" He was now facing me, looking at me closely.



"Sixteen."

"Not a chance, sorry. They let some Eagle Scouts do it, but they have a special program for ride along. You an Eagle Scout?"

"No, sir. Just curious." I'd asked Johnnie Dugan about it, the police seemed to have the same answer.

"It can get a little hairy, sometimes," the policeman went on. "Couple of weeks ago, my partner and I got a call on a domestic dispute. A guy beating on his wife. We got there, found her beating on him." He waved at his partner. "Howie there, he caught her arm, just before she was going to brain her old man with a cast iron frying pan. The guy teed off on Howie. It took six of us to bring them in."

I saw his eyes were on me. "And you don't even want to think about rolling on a traffic accident."

"Wednesday it took Johnnie Dugan two and a half hours to cut me from my car."

The policeman looked at me closer. "Ferguson?"

I nodded. "Joe Moss asked us to keep an eye on your place. Looks like another of the rapist bastards is gonna make bail tomorrow."

"Which one?" I was curious.

"Asshole Parker."

I could faintly hear his partner say something, and the cop laughed. "Ah, that would be Mr. Parker, of course."

I smiled. "A stupid asshole; I know the guy."

The cop smiled, then his eyes went beyond me. I turned and saw Dad.

"A problem, Tom?"

"No, we're just talking."

"You Mr. Ferguson?" the policeman asked.

"Yes."

"Quite a boy you have here."

There was a spectacular lightning bolt in the south. It had branches and arms that seemed to fill the sky; the thunder was just a few seconds later.

"I'd agree," Dad said, "except that in a few seconds, he's going to be all wet."

The cop grinned. "And I'm getting back in the car and going back on patrol. Have a nice day."

They pulled away, and Dad laid his arm on my shoulder.

"You should come in."

I nodded, turned and walked with him towards the house. We'd just reached the porch, when there was a sudden rush of sound, and it was raining buckets.

"Not a drip!" Dad said with pleasure as we stood in the entrance.

"Thanks," I told him.

He waved at the kitchen. "I've watched you help people the last few weeks. Never dreamed it would be me, next. Like you said, the worst thing is when something you are sure is under control, only to find out it isn't."

Not so very much later, I was asleep again. Unlike any other time, I wrapped myself around Mary, hugged her really, really tight, finding solace in having people who loved me, in close physical contact.

When I woke up I found myself still holding onto Mary as tightly as I could; somehow she'd rolled over and was holding me pretty much the same way. Our eyes met, our lips met, and then our tongues.

Mary put one leg over mine, pulling me tightly against her and I squirmed to make the fit even better and Mary did the same. I put both of my arms around her, flat against her back, putting

all the pressure I could, to weld her body to mine. It was way too much; I came even before I was inside her, shooting streams of milky white sperm over her abdomen and belly.

"God, I'm sorry, Mary!" I was embarrassed and frustrated; I wasn't sure which dominated.

She just shook her head, keeping me tight against her. She didn't have an orgasm, but like me, she wanted to be held.

Both of us relaxed, I lifted my lips from hers and kissed her on the nose. "You are so beautiful!"

"Part of me tells me that I'm having a second childhood; wanting to experience the wonderful sex I never knew I'd missed. Part of me tells me that you're a wonderful man, that any woman would be lucky to have you love her; once, twice, ten or a million times."

She kissed me on the nose too. "That's all my heart and parts lower talking. The gray stuff between my ears reminds me that a few days ago I buried my husband of seventeen years. That I have two daughters, one your age; daughters I love and am responsible for." She smiled, and then bounced her hip against my mild erection. "That this isn't something I should be doing."

Her gray eyes laughed, like I remembered from the first time I saw her. "This wins." She turned, pressed her pussy against my ready again cock.

This time it was slower, more deliberate lovemaking. Much slower. I'd bring her close, fighting not to come early again; then I'd back off and slow down for a minute or so, before repeating. Finally Mary couldn't stand the waiting any more, and started moving hard against me. I tried once more to slow down, but my heart wasn't in it. My erection, though, that was right where I wanted it to be.

Mary smiled at me, closed her eyes and was asleep again.

I kissed her eyelids as gently as I could, then stole out of my room, a set of clean clothes in my hand so I wouldn't have to disturb her later.

When I went in the kitchen after my shower, Uncle Craig was

standing at the counter, a coffee cup in hand.

"Ellen told me everyone was sleeping in late," he told me. "I guess so."

I nodded to him, walked over and lay down on the floor in front of the refrigerator again. I reached inside and felt the place that had been the hottest before. It was warm, but not unpleasantly so.

When I stood up, Uncle Craig was looking at me with a wry expression on his face. "Let me guess, Ellen has something new on the 'to do' list."

I went over to the sink and washed my hands. Otherwise I'd have been tempted into a mistake.

I finished, dried them and turned to face my uncle.

"Craig, has anyone ever told you, you're an asshole?"

I could see anger in his eyes for a second, then they went blank, shuttered and closed.

"More times than you might think; never before from someone as young as you."

"You've made fun of Mom's to-do list as long as I've known you."

"Let's just say, I did my share of chores growing up, and now I'm in a position where I don't have to do them if I don't want. And I don't want to do chores, no more." Obviously, he was thinking he was being clever.

"To learn how to manage money, you have to study business, right?" I asked him.

"Sure, although Ellen did an end-around, studying economics, which isn't quite the same thing. More of a big picture type view of things, none of the little fiddling, day-to-day details."

"And it's not something you can pick up in a few hours, reading a book?"

"No, it's not, Tom. For one thing, business is a rather broad

topic. There's all sorts of aspects to it, ranging from accounting, law, management, analysis, marketing... and that's just a few areas of specialty. There are others."

I smiled to myself; once my uncle started to talk, it seemed like he had no other desire in the world but to hear his own voice. I'd thought about a lot of things, and he represented just one more problem.

"Uncle Craig, you have until Friday to change your mind about my having control of my trust money. If before Friday, at six in the evening, you tell me that it would be better if I was a little older first, then I'll sign it back to you.

"I don't know if I want to learn business and management or not. But I am sure about one thing: it's not going to happen while I'm in high school."

"And what happens after Friday?" he asked.

I smiled like I'd smiled at the banker, when he'd said a lot more than he intended.

"I will talk to my account executive, look her right in the eye and ask her if you've put limitations beyond the legal ones I face on my use of the trust money. If she says no, and if I find out later she's not telling me the truth, I'll run a newspaper ad saying she lied to me. Ditto the banker. I'll look him in the eye and ask him the same question; lying wouldn't be in his best interest either."

"Why don't you ask me?"

I stared at him and smiled. "I could put whatever I wanted to into a newspaper ad about you, and it wouldn't matter a bit, would it?"

"Ellen would be unhappy with me," he confessed. "Except for that, you wouldn't need to run anything in the paper."

His eyes widened slightly. "You don't want to ask because I have no good answers, do I?"

"As in, can I confidently expect the truth?" I shook my head. "Nope. And I'm not about to hurt my mom by finding out you didn't tell me the truth."

He chuckled, "Well, there are caveats on your use of the funds... but Tom, you need to think some more about this. I can have all the caveats I want, but on the day your emancipation is signed off on, they won't matter."

"So, to learn how to manage the money properly, I'd need to spend time learning business, accounting, law, management."

"Economics," he continued for me, "psychology, and real estate..."

"Can you learn all that on the job?" I asked him.

"Sure. Doctors and airline pilots could learn on the job, too. Not sure as I'd want one trained like that working on me, but..." He shrugged.

"I'm not going to spend years, at least not now, learning things I have a general interest in. I like learning, don't get me wrong, but those things aren't at the top of my 'to-do' list."

"Ah, back to that! Tell me, Tom, what's on your to-do list?"

I looked him right in the eye. "Mom wasn't as old as me, when she learned that she didn't really understand about the facts of life. I know she has tried to make sure JR and I didn't make the same mistakes... but I think in a different way, she's neglected our education in the facts of life."

"In what way?" Uncle Craig asked, his voice sarcastic.

"We live in our nice house, in a nice neighborhood, go to a nice school, have nice clothes... my car was wrecked the other day, hey, I have a new one today.

"In the last couple of weeks I've met people who haven't had nice lives. I've seen Sam Reese twice in my life, one of those times he tried to kill me; now he's dead. He hurt people I care about; he killed others. I never met William Leary, but right now he's dead and buried; that hurt some friends of mine. Terribly.

"Crazy bank robbers ran into my car. Uncle Craig, I saw it in the paper, they stole less than a thousand dollars. There were at least three of them; what kind of payday is that? They

killed someone, hurt others; caused thousands and thousand of times more damage than what they stole.

"I've met some really good people along the way, too. People I like, people I love."

"And this has what to do with a to-do list?"

I was my turn to be sarcastic. "I don't know why all the to do about a to-do list. Chores, scheduled tasks that have to be done. You have something to keep track of yours, too. An appointment book or something."

"A PDA in my briefcase," he agreed.

"So, what I want to do is get some other viewpoints on the facts of life."

"Life, Tom, can be the shits."

"Yes, I've noticed." I turned my back on him and went to the fridge, poured myself some orange juice, went out to the family room, kicked up my feet and picked up my latest book.

Quite some time later, JR brought me the phone. "Tom, a girl."

Once I'd have been curious; well, maybe a lot curious. Now, I simply reached out.

"Hi, Tom!"

It was Marsha!

"Hello Marsha! How's life in Seattle?"

"It rained yesterday, it hasn't rained today, but it probably will rain again tomorrow. Normal. How about Phoenix?"

"Warm today, tomorrow, next week, next month. Until maybe Thanksgiving. We did have a thunderstorm last night, though."

She laughed, "Oh God, I'd die for a forecast like that!"

"You doing any good? Your basketball team?" I asked.

"Oh, we're doing kick ass! We've won every game since I

got back."

Once upon a time, I'd never have noticed that she stopped there. I mean, why not? Her team was kicking ass! What more needed to be said?

"And you, Marsha?" I asked, trying to keep my voice light.

"I met someone yesterday. Someone nice."

"I like to meet people each and every day," I told her. And had, just about.

"I know we talked about things..."

"Marsha, we both had a good time when you visited. You had to go, and I had to stay. It would be good to see you again, but it's not going to happen anytime soon, is it?"

"My parents decided to buy a summer home on Long Beach."

"California?" I asked.

She laughed, "No, Washington. It's an island, down in the southern part of the state, off the coast. Dad bought a couple of condos, kind of like time share." Marsha laughed again. "You have to see it one of these days, Tom! In the middle of the summer, if you don't wear a rubber suit, you freeze to death in the water in a half hour. In December, you have three minutes. It's just a pretty beach that you can walk along; other than that, it bites. He's crazy."

Leaving out of course, the someone nice Marsha had met. Then it struck me; she was telling me that there was no longer the least chance we'd meet again.

"We have a beach in Tempe. It used to be called the largest flush toilet in the world; it's how they make the waves. Now it's been cloned and is not that big of a deal any more."

"Tom..." Marsha started to say, then sighed.

"Marsha, you and I both wanted something. We both found it. I have not a single regret, Marsha. None."

"In your letter you said..."



"I did," I told her. "And if we lived next door and you met someone nice, I'd be pretty upset. On the other hand, Phoenix is at least as big as Seattle; I've met a nice person or two myself."

"Girls?" Marsha asked.

"Girls, women. A lot of nice people, Marsha. Sometime, maybe, you'll be back, and I'll introduce you."

"More than one?" I could hear the surprise in her voice.

I contemplated life since Marsha. "Yes, more than one."

"You dog, you!" she laughed, "Tony was all wrong about you!"

"He wasn't wrong about you," I told her. "He told me you were really nice, really beautiful. I thought he was BSing me."

"Tony's nice. Dad said Tony's in deep shit."

"Marsha, Tony's dad is in deep shit, not Tony." I gave her a PG-13 explanation of the issues, leaving her laughing.

"You're not going to be... upset... are you, Tom?" Marsha asked finally.

"No, I'm not upset. But I'm not going to forget you, and what happened between us."

"I won't forget either, Tom," she paused, and then went on. "Thanks."

"It's not something you owe me for," I told her, "it's the other way around."

"I'm really glad you're not upset."

"I'm not upset."

Eventually, she had to leave and I went downstairs, returning the phone to its cradle, pretty content, happy with life.

A little while later, JR appeared with the phone and handed it to me. "Another girl." She was laughing and I stuck my tongue out at her.

"Tom, Eleanor Johansen."

"Good afternoon, Eleanor."

"Are you busy?"

"No, not at all."

"I'd like to talk to you again. Can I come over in an hour or so?"

"Sure."

"Thanks." And she hung up.

I went downstairs again, to return the phone, and JR laughed when she saw me. "You might as well keep it in your room."

"Thanks, girl."

Then Shannon decided it was time to practice.

I've never seen my mother act like that. "First, Shannon," she told Mary's daughter, "you will play something for all of us!"

So Shannon did, and it was beautiful. What had I told God? A plus B equals B plus A, with a lot left over! I smiled at the thought, but spent much more time, listening to Shannon.

Then she did practice, and again, none of us did anything else. Still, towards the end, the doorbell rang, and I got up, motioning everyone else to sit back down.

"Afternoon, Tom."

"Afternoon, Eleanor. Please, come in."

Shannon hit a really great series of notes then, and Eleanor stopped. "That's Bach. Wer Wachtet auf Uns." A little pause, then, "That was beautifully played."

"That's Shannon Leary," I told her.

We listened for another few minutes, until Eleanor shook her head. "I could listen to that for hours and hours. Please, can we talk for a few minutes?"

We went outside, and I waved at the sidewalk. "Would you like to walk?"

Eleanor nodded, and we started off; only the fact that she would need a long, involved explanation kept me from laughing as we started down the street.

"The other day, you asked me about heart's desires. About what I think about an organization to help kids on the street."

"Yes," I answered her, slowing a bit.

"So I got down on my knees and prayed, Tom." She stopped, and touched my arm. "Do you understand what I mean? Do you have any idea?"

"Yesterday, I'd have told you no, I didn't," I told her. "A while ago, I was full length on the floor, crying, thanking God. A God I no longer believe in, a God I have the most profound doubts about. And that, according to God, is just fine with him."

"Don't make fun of me, Tom."

"Eleanor, I never have, I never will. Not ever." Maybe she could understand?

"I had a dream last night, Eleanor. God came to me, spoke to me. A very bizarre dream. Yet, when I went to look, it wasn't the bush that was burning. It was the crud underneath the refrigerator." It was my turn. I reached out and touched her arm. "I swear, Eleanor, it was charred. God said, two weeks until it would have burned down the house and killed nearly everyone."

We stood wrapped in our silences; I'm not stupid, I can connect the dots. My silence had a far different cause than hers.

"Eleanor, this has been an educational week for me." Her eyes held mine, as we stood on the sidewalk. "Everyone tells me no, it's too dangerous. I wanted to ride with the fire department; too dangerous. Leave out the fact that it took them two and a half hours to rescue me the other day. They worked on Elizabeth for a half hour, with me standing a few feet away. The police say it's too dangerous to go out with them, too. I need to be a Boy Scout or something. I think you just need to be eighteen, and they are BSing me."

"So, Eleanor. People go out to help kids on the street. I'd like to go along."

"Do you have any idea what you'd see?"

"People hurting," I told her. "Six days ago, Eleanor, a little earlier than this, Sam Reese had a gun to my head. Three days ago, I was trapped in my car, smelling spilled gasoline, waiting to be burned up. Two days ago, my uncle gave me a hundred and fifty million dollars." I laughed. "I bet when you checked my parents out, you didn't look at JR or me!"

"No." She was staring at me.

"Odd how I feel around you, Tom. I can feel your desire, like a naked flame. Although it's pretty quiet today." She smiled at me, and I shook my head. "I've met hundreds of boys your age; none ever set my heart fluttering before. Made me doubt my vows. Then you told me to check your parents again, and I did. I swear, no one, no one at all, had any idea you should do more than verify the accuracy of information. Now I know better."

"Now you say you've been given a substantial sum; I should laugh and shake my head in disbelief. Except... when have you lied to me?"

"I never have," I told her.

"About Jennifer, you'd cheerfully lie and lie and lie."

"Jennifer isn't part of this discussion," I said, a touch angry. "And I've never lied to you about her."

"Yes she is part of this discussion, Tom. You helped her. I'm not blind, Tom. I told you before; I'm not interested in

how. Just that you did. That was a fine thing, Tom."

"You have to have someone who's the first contact for those who need help," I told her, trying to ignore her comments about Jenny. "I'd like to ride along. I want to look over their shoulder and see what they do."

"Would you really like to do that?"

"I really have asked twice now. If it wasn't important, if it wasn't something I wanted to do, I wouldn't have asked once."

"Well, sure. I'll set up an orientation, then... next Friday would be the best time to go out."

"That's fine."

"Tom... once, you might be lucky, and be able to make a difference in an intervention. Two or three times out there, you might be lucky. Tom, the streets are hell incarnate. You take your victories when and if you find them. Sometimes it's just one.

"And Tom, mostly you lose."

"My parents want to protect me, the whole education system seems designed not to let people know about the underside of life." I was more than a little upset. "Yet, when it counted, I was there. I don't want to see a pile of shit, I don't. But every day, each and every one of us, contributes our pile. It exists, Eleanor. I take no joy in it, but I want to look at it, from the bottom side."

"And then what?" she asked.

"And then I'll know what upside down shit looks like," I told her. "I've seen it right side up often enough. Time for something else."

"And my ideas to help kids?"

"Talk to me about them."

So, we walked and talked, finally ending up in front of the house.

"I'll call you," she told me, "about this. Probably tomorrow or Tuesday. Put you together with one of the outreach groups."

"I have school during the day, but I'm good any other time."

"Ok." She leaned close, to kiss me on the cheek. I ducked and weaved, avoiding it.

"I'm being stupid," Eleanor muttered. "I'm old enough to be your mother."

"And we're both old enough to take your oath seriously," I told her.

She blushed, and then nodded. "Later, Tom."

I walked in the house, and Dad grinned at me. "Making time with the nun?"

"No." I was upset; I wished he'd not make jokes about something like this. I wished my dad made a whole lot fewer jokes about a lot of things.

He turned to Mom. "De-stressing hasn't been 100 per cent, has it?"

Mom shook her head.

"Tomorrow is a zoo day!" Dad announced, "You will all go look into the faces of your aunts, uncles, cousins and distant relations... anyone who takes anything seriously is grounded until the end of school!"

Mom and Mary vanished off to go shopping a little later; then they were back. "All hands on deck!" Mom said, her usual laughter.

It was, I found, another full meal deal. She'd found a goose and duck at Trader Joe's, and instead of debating which to buy, they'd bought both. Mom and Mary had done nothing, I found listening to them, but debate the best way to cook the birds since they'd found the birds.

Dad appeared, listened, and then turned to me. "Son, your

education has been neglected! Let's take over from these turkeys! Man the barricades! We're declaring the kitchen revolution! Down with women cooks! Up with men!"

I'm not sure how it happened, but a few seconds later a dollop of lime green jello flew my way, and I found a bowl of grape jello in the fridge and massively retaliated.

Later, Dad was sternly lecturing Mom. "Massive retaliation aside, you have responsibilities!" Dad pointed at the ceiling, festooned with dollops of green jello. "That was wanton, reckless disregard for the rules of civilized warfare! Tom and I will cook the birds! You ladies will clean! Particularly the ceiling!"

The goose was partly frozen; in spite of gallons of warm water, my fingers were frozen to the bone, long before it was ready to my dad's satisfaction. We'd rubbed a mixture of salt and garlic, inside and out. For my goose, I'd diced a half dozen red delicious apples and stuffed them inside. Dad stuffed his duck with pineapple chunks from Costco.

Then they were in the stove, cooking, and Dad was introducing me to the importance of glazes and basting. I had a small sauce pan filled full of goose grease (there'd been a lot of it!), some butter, and a lot of herbs, bay leaves, rosemary, oregano, basil, sage. Dad used some of the same, but used cinnamon and ginger instead of basil and sage.

Then he had me add a dollop of lemon juice, then some tomato sauce. In his, he sliced in half a small can of frozen orange juice, and added one of the halves to the sauce pan.

Only in the last half hour did we relinquish the kitchen to the women of the family.

Later, we went in to check on the birds. Dad smiled at me. "Smell that?"

I sniffed. I could smell corn bread, sundry vegetables and other things. "Yummy!"

"Yep! Nothing like motivating the women folk to aspire! A lot of men, Tom, limit themselves to slicing the birds up. Like, what kind of job is that? Nine of ten of them use an electric knife. Ick! Nope! This is heaven, Tom! People

striving together to do better than the next guy. Or gal!"

It was a delicious dinner; I could not remember better. And I had great kudos from everyone about the goose, and Dad got not nearly as many about the duck.

"What holiday is the sixth of April?" Mary asked.

Dad had laughed, "Not a damn one!"

Elizabeth spoke up, "Anyplace else, and tomorrow would be spring forward!"

Dad guffawed. "This is Arizona! We're adults! We don't fiddle with the clocks!"

"I fiddle," Shannon said, "and do it well!"

There were more laughs and jokes; jokes and laughs that carried us well into the final clean up phases of the meal.

Some time later I was sitting on the couch in the family room, between Jenny and JR, Elizabeth was sitting at my feet, Mary and Shannon on either side of her. I'd have been upset, except Mom and Dad were obviously happy and content on the floor, off to one side.

We watched the movie Shanghai Noon, something that had even Elizabeth laughing before the end. Actually, it had her laughing from the first mention of 'John Wayne.'

Myself, I faded away when shortly after the bath scene; curious about what I'd dream about.

Sunday April 7, 2002

I woke up, momentarily disoriented. I wasn't sure where I was, and for a horrid second I thought I was upside down again, since I was sitting up. I felt something warm pressing against my side. Things snapped back into focus as I realized it was Jenny, and I was on the couch in the family room. The lights were out, and so far as I could tell, Jenny and I were by ourselves.

I shifted slightly, and Jenny spoke up. "I'm awake."



"Hi, everyone else go to bed?" I asked.

"Mary, Elizabeth and Shannon went home. The others went upstairs a while ago."

I turned towards her, saw her smiling at me. "You and me, together again," Jenny said.

I think she meant it to be funny; instead, her voice cracked. I leaned close and kissed her lightly on the tip of her nose, just for a second.

"You okay, Jenny?"

"Do you think I'm terrible?" she asked.

I shook my head, a little mystified. "No, of course not."

"The other day, they asked me what I wanted to do about funeral arrangements for my parents," Jenny paused. "I told them they'd kicked me out, they should get in touch with the others in the family and let them decide. My dad has an older brother; my mom two younger brothers and a sister."

"Jenny, if there was ever someone who had a right to just let them go, it's you.

"I'm not sure any more about some things, but I do believe in right and wrong. What they did, what they let your brother do, was wrong. You did a good thing, getting out of there when you did."

She hugged me, hugged me tight.

"Tom, could we do like we did the first night? Just curl up in bed?"

I smiled, resisted the urge to lean close and kiss her on the forehead and say of course. "Yes, Jenny. With me, it will always be what you want, not what I want. I'm fine with just knowing you're next to me, and safe. In fact, I'm better than fine with it."

The hug was repeated, only much, much harder. I stood up, gave her a hand up off the sofa, and didn't try to hold onto her. We went up the stairs and into my room. I stripped down

to my underwear, Jenny put on a nightie.

"Thank you, Tom," she whispered. "Thank you."

I glanced at my clock, it was after one in the morning. "You should sleep. Dad wants to go to the zoo later. It's going to be a warm day; odds are we'll come home exhausted."

She spooned in behind me, putting her arm around my waist. "Good night, Tom."

"Good night, Jenny."

I slept soundly, and while I could remember dreaming, my dreams were ephemeral, dreams that I couldn't remember at all when JR came to wake us. My sister had an idea she wanted to try, and wasn't interested in hearing our opinions. "I want us all to take a shower together. Just washing and touching... not getting carried away."

I didn't want to tell JR that I didn't think it was going to work, because she was so bubbly happy and enthused about the idea.

It didn't really work, either. A regular shower enclosure just doesn't have enough people for three people at a time. One person was at the end, chilled. Another person was getting drowned and the one in the middle, splashed.

I was really proud of JR, though, because when we were drying off, she said, "Well, that was an idea whose time hasn't come."

"The shower's too small," Jenny said, looking serious.

JR snorted in derision. "The shower's way too small!" We all chuckled at that.

It was an idea that had been perking in my head for a couple of days. "JR, what would you say if we moved to a new house? One with bigger tubs?"

She slapped me playfully on the butt. "I don't think I want to move just to get a bigger tub. And I sure don't want to change schools."

I contemplated if Uncle Craig or Mom had mentioned home schooling to JR. So, since I was curious, I just out and asked.

JR snorted. "Mom might like Uncle Craig, but he's such a jerk! No, I don't want to give up my friends at school! No, I don't want to study how to live the life of the rich and famous! Not for Joanna Ferguson! Not going to happen! I told them where they could put the idea!"

"But what about a larger house, close to here? There are a whole slew of them."

"You mean the country club houses?" JR asked, and I nodded, because that was what I'd been thinking. Some of them were like small castles; dozens and dozens of rooms.

I turned to Jenny. "What do you think, Jenny?"

"It's not for me to decide," she said, sounding like Mary the night I'd been in the accident.

I was going to speak, but JR beat me to it. "Jennifer! Aren't you forgetting you're an orphan? Mom and Dad are going to adopt you? You became a member of this family right after you moved in. Please, Jennifer, please. You're not just our friend, you're our sister, too!"

Jenny started to cry softly, and we both hugged her. That didn't last long, because Dad bellowed up from the bottom of the steps that he wanted to go see animals. So, we went to our rooms to dress.

I've never understood what my dad sees in going to the zoo. He's an engineer! You'd think he'd find looking at displays of desert tortoises, mountain lions, deer, elk, antelope and the myriad other critters that live in the desert boring. Instead, it seems to fascinate him.

Once, back in sixth grade, I'd made the mistake of voicing my opinion to him. He'd grinned, and the next thing I found I had to do was make a list of all the animals at the zoo that lived in Arizona.

It might sound like a simple thing to do, but the first night he'd checked it, and told me I had less than half. He told me I'd have to write a one-page paper on each animal that I

missed. We'd went back the next day, and I learned a lot about the zoo that I'd not known before. I'd not seen the rodent collection before, for instance. I didn't like the bird tent, either. You tended to come out daubed with bird poop.

How did I do? My father is really smart, really, really smart. He added a hundred and fifty names to the list I'd already made, that had more than two hundred names already on it. I'd not gone into the insect or spider buildings either.

So, we spent the day, wandering the zoo. It was clear that Jenny had never been before, so JR and I took turns taking her to places we really liked. About one, we met at the restaurant, sat at an outside table and had lunch, then back again looking at everything, even the birds. Jenny really liked the bird tent; she was utterly fascinated by the riot of color, the sounds of their songs and chattering.

Around four, we were all suffering the usual zoo day afflictions: sore feet, aching legs, and entirely too much sun. The only member of the family who was at all chipper was Dad, which was something that always amazed me.

Mary had invited us over for dinner at her house, and we went straight from the zoo there. We got to listen to Shannon play her violin for us, while Mom and Mary worked on the last preparations for dinner.

Pot roast. People make jokes about pot roast, but that's because they aren't all that smart. Mary had put the roast in a baking pan; the roast perched on a rack. She'd put an inch or so of water in the base of the roasting pan, plus carrots, potatoes, garlic, onions and celery.

Not only did we have some killer roast beef, but the soup she made from the veggies was just as good.

I know all this stuff because Dad made some stupid comment about how Mary really knew how to roast beef. Some people, Dad averred, actually boiled the meat; obviously he thought boiled beef was terrible. Mary explained what she'd done to cook it. The water kind of half steamed the beef, while the oven was baking it. It was cool, seeing Dad looking silly.

Mom called Kim after we ate, while the five of us kids took care of the cleanup chores. Kim and Penny were back; Aunt

Shirley had followed them in her car as well. Tomorrow evening Mom told everyone we would have a big dinner at our house, with everyone coming.

Again, the sheer logistics was daunting. Our family was five. Mary's was three. Kim and Penny, my aunt and uncle. Twelve for dinner? It was I thought, going to be interesting for sure, because we only had eleven dinner plates; one of the double set having given it's all months before when JR had dropped it.

Elizabeth had been talking to Jenny; all of a sudden they were talking up Elizabeth's idea of eight person Scrabble. You can't play Scrabble with eight people, or so the rules said; the game was designed for four people.

I was sent home to fetch our game set, while everyone else was sitting around, enjoying after dinner conversation.

Karma, fate... call it what you will, but it works in strange ways.

I got out to the first big street, and there was a funeral procession going by, going the way I wanted to go. Since a left was impossible, I made a right, planning on circling around. My thought was that rather than just sit and wait, it would feel better driving.

I'd gotten well along, when my cell phone went off. I mean, when the phone rings, it's kind of ingrained. You answer it, right? Except I was driving Mom's car and it was a pain to drive one handed.

"Tom, this is Miriam."

"Hello, Miriam," I told her, realizing as I did, that I needed to pull over. "Miriam, could you give me a second to pull over? I don't want to talk and drive at the same time."

"Sure."

So, instead of turning north on Central at McDowell, I went straight. It took a couple of blocks before I found a parking lot I could pull into. "You still there, Miriam?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to disturb you on a Sunday evening, Tom,

but I was wondering if you could come by my office tomorrow after school. I'd like to talk to you about what you'd like to do about investing your trust funds."

I nearly blurted out that I thought Uncle Craig had been clear enough. Start changing things so as to run up transaction fees, and it wouldn't be good. Then I remembered two important things. I wanted to ask her what Uncle Craig had said to either her or her boss. That, and it wasn't fair if I made a rash judgment, based on no evidence.

"Sure, Miriam. How about four tomorrow afternoon?"

"I'll see you then," she told me, hanging up.

I put the cell phone back on my belt, and sat thinking for a second.

Like I said, these things might be what Elizabeth deals with every day. For me, it wasn't like that.

Yes, I sat there in the parking lot I'd pulled into, thinking.

The sign on the building finally penetrated my thoughts. Garish, red letters three feet tall. "Lease Expiring! Close Out! Huge Inventory Clearance!" Then beneath that, in letters equally red and tall, "Hartfield and McComb, Agents." With a telephone number to call for inquiries.

I'd seen this building since I was a kid. A huge red brick edifice, one that I'd been told had started existence as a Jewish Temple, but the congregation had declined until they could no longer support the building. For the last couple of years, the downstairs was a very large pawnshop, with general office space upstairs.

It was about two miles from the high school, a bit more than that to JR's middle school. In any case, it was April; I was tolerably sure that dealing with a lease or buying a building takes some time, but if it was a done deal, the sign would have come down.

I wrote down the phone number, then scooted home, got the game and headed back.

You think playing Scrabble with one set of letters is exciting? Try it with two!

There were some killer words on the board, plus some killer scores. My problem was, I'd much rather have a cool word than a good score. I mean, 'MEANIE' is cool, but worth practically nothing. Get that X in AXIS on the right triple letter square, and you can take the points to the bank.

Fate, karma, it happened again. I had a lot of vowels, I made use of them, filling in simple words here and there. For whatever reason, I finished using all of the available letters first.

There is something terrible about watching people continue to play the game, where you know the best you can do is fourth, and that was if everyone ate their letters. Which they weren't doing.

My cell phone went off again, and I lifted it up. "Tom," I spoke.

"Tom, this is Eleanor. Do you have a minute?"

"I have several minutes. I'd tell you that I'm losing my shirt playing Scrabble, but you might misinterpret it."

She laughed, "Shirt, eh?"

"Shirt," I confirmed.

"I talked to Marcus Stewart hyphen Jones this evening. He runs a teen outreach program in south Phoenix. He will give you an orientation on Tuesday, if you're still interested in seeing what they do."

"I'm interested. What time and where?"

The address I got was in South Phoenix, on Baseline just off Central; a small store front in a mini mall with a big grocery store at five pm. I told her I would be there, and thanked her.

Dad was out by then, grumping, since he was not going to be one of the people who finished ahead of me.

"I have an appointment back at the bank tomorrow after school," I announced. "I can chauffeur, but then I have to split. Tuesday, I'm doing something personal. I'm going to drop everyone off after school, then go downtown."

The last wasn't the whole truth and nothing like the truth, but if I told Mom or Dad where I was going, they'd worry. Downtown was a fib, but better than the worry.

Jenny got one point less than Elizabeth, JR was tied with Mary a few points back. Mom had beaten me; at least Dad got to finish ahead of Shannon.

It was a work/school night, so we left a little after nine. I gave Mary a solid kiss and she returned it. Then Elizabeth and I simply held each other, looking each other in the eye. There was something cosmic about us; I'd already figured that out.

At home, we were ordered to bed, forthwith. I for one, was suffering from extensive zoo time, plus a long, long three weeks.

There were the usual hugs and kisses before we were to climb between the sheets. Mom and Dad went off, hand in hand, grinning like I imagined I had, contemplating JR's pussy for the first time.

I was, in spite of it all the myriad surprises in the last few weeks, unprepared for what happened next.

JR and Jenny vanished in tandem to the bathroom; something that didn't excite much curiosity on my part. A few minutes later, they returned. Instead of more hugs and kisses, they stood together, but not touching.

"Tom," JR started, "you're the coolest guy I know. The most understanding."

Jenny nodded.

"JR, if you just want to go off to bed by yourself, that's fine. If you want to snuggle together, and nothing else; that's fine too. Whatever you want."

"Tom," JR said firmly, "shut up!"



I blinked, and then nodded. JR didn't usually get upset at nothing.

"Jennifer and me... it's that time of the month. Both of us at once. Actually, Mom too."

My first thought was stark terror. My second thought was schizophrenic delusion. I had to be dreaming, this wasn't really happening.

"You said the other day you haven't had a period before." I tried to keep my voice from rising.

JR made a face. "There's a first time for everything. I wasn't in a hurry, and now I know why. This isn't much fun."

"But..." I gargled, unable to go on.

"Tom, I know," JR said, hugging me. "We talked about it, didn't we? The bad news is that you were right to be concerned. The good news is, we were lucky. I was lucky. Mom is going to make an appointment for me at the doctor and then we will see what we see."

"I don't know what to say," my voice was forlorn, I felt worse. Once again, my own words had come back to haunt me.

"Tell me that you love me."

"That's no problem," I told her. "I love you. I love you both. But gosh..."

"Yeah," JR replied. "Yeah. The other day, your car got mashed, but you were okay. Today, it's my turn to walk away from what was nearly a major accident. I tell you true, Tom. If I have a daughter, she's going to get the same lectures Mom gave me, plus some of mine. Girls are fine to play with; boys, you just have to wait, take your time. Otherwise you're taking big chances."

Jenny had been sitting quietly, watching us. "Tom, don't beat yourself up over it." It was Jenny's turn to grimace. "I'm going to the doctor too, just for a check up. It's something women have to live with."

"It's something I should have been more careful about," I said emphatically. "When I think about what would happen if JR got pregnant... It scares me. It really scares me."

I'd been careful with Marsha, JR and Penny, asking. By the time I went to the orgy, I'd stopped asking. It had been Sally who told me that she had gone to the nurse for birth control; I hadn't asked. From now on, I was going to ask.

"Well, I'm going to deal with it, and I do want to be with you again, so I will take precautions," JR told me. "I think we should just snuggle up now and get some sleep. Tomorrow is a school day."

We traded hugs, then Jenny wrapped around me from behind, while I did the same thing with JR.

"You really need a bigger bed, Tom," JR murmured, once we were comfortable.

"I think you said that before. But, I'd need a bigger room. I'm thinking about that."

"Mmmm," she said sleepily. "Night Jenny, Tom."

A round of good nights followed, and I lay awake for a few minutes after I was sure they were both asleep.

There were simply too many things to think about; it was hard to keep track of them. But, like I'd told JR the other day, I didn't know what I could do. I liked each and every person I'd slept with. I was beginning to understand that while my hormones could drive my interest, if the interest wasn't there, the hormones didn't get far.

Someday I suppose, I'll be old and toothless, no hormones. I wasn't in a hurry to get there. The world wasn't perfect, I wasn't perfect, but the world was pretty nice and I tried to do the best I could. I let sleep come then, content.

Monday, April 8, 2002

I'm not sure why it is, but it is. You can go to school for weeks and weeks, and getting up in the morning is no big deal. Take a week off, and the first day, getting up is a big deal.

The alarm had been going off for a maybe a half minute before Jenny grumpily pushed it off. JR muttered something about she was "Going to sleep another few minutes while Jenny and you shower."

Jenny got up and told me that she was going to shower by herself, so I decided to be clever. Mom and Dad had their own bathroom, JR used the one downstairs. I hustled myself down there with my things, and then shook JR when I got back to the room.

She was curled up into a ball, obviously in a lot of pain. I went back downstairs and found Mom in the kitchen, getting things out for breakfast and told her. She went up to see to JR, while I took over the breakfast chores.

Shortly Mom was back, saying that JR wasn't going to school today. That wasn't a problem for me. A bit later I took Jenny over to Mary's, picking up Elizabeth and Shannon, getting a smile and a thanks from Mary for a reward. That worked!

I don't know how it is at other high schools, I just know what it's like at mine. You are supposed to be there at 8:15 in the morning; that's what's called first bell. That means you have five minutes to make it to Home Room. I guess the purpose is to give you a little warning; seems kind of dumb to me.

Then there's Home Room. My Home Room teacher is Mr. Miller, who teaches shop. That is both wood and auto shop; I have no idea what qualifies you to get that job, but as near as I can tell he's the most cynical person I've ever met. Second Bell is at 8:20. In Mr. Miller's Home Room you are in your seat then, because he takes attendance by putting an 'X' on the seating chart where there is an empty seat. It doesn't matter if you're actually there, but standing and talking to someone else; it doesn't matter if you come through the door just as the bell rings. Nope, what counts is being in your seat when he's marking attendance.

As a result, unlike some Home Rooms I've had in my two prior years in high school, Mr. Miller's room is settled and ready at Second Bell. Even after Spring Break, we were all in our seats, in various degrees of wishing we were elsewhere.

Mr. Miller is the one and only Home Room teacher I've seen

who can actually get attendance done in the minute before the intercom pops and we listen to the daily announcements from Camilla Bowles, the Student Body President. Mr. Miller expects you to sit still through the announcements, then as far as he's concerned, he's done with us. At 8:30 is Third Bell, which is the start of the five minute passing period before the start of First Period, the first academic class of the day. Most of us get up as soon as the announcements are done and head to our first class. Why not?

So it was, just like usual. Bells, sitting down like good little robots, then announcements, then everyone started to get up, me included.

"Mr. Ferguson, may I see you for a moment?" Mr. Miller said as the room started to stand up.

I had no idea, none, what I'd done to earn his attention, so, being more curious than concerned, I walked up to his desk.

He handed me a folded note. "Doctor Stone would like to see you in his office at 11 AM this morning."

I opened the note; that's what it said. Just a simple, "Please report to the Principal's Office at 11:00 AM Monday, April 8th."

I'd never been in trouble in my life, so I simply shrugged and put the note in my pocket. I was unprepared when Mr. Miller spoke again.

"Tom, I've never had you in a class, but you're in my Home Room." That was self evident, so I shrugged. "You will probably want to call your parents and have one or both of them present when you report to the office. Dr. Stone intends to have your head."

I blinked, completely clueless.

"Why?"

"I'm a student of the Far East, Tom. I don't know a single culture over there that doesn't have the aphorism 'The nail that sticks up is hammered down.' You, Tom, have stuck out for the last couple of weeks. He can't do much of anything, and he's looking for a scapegoat."

It was Mr. Miller's turn to shrug. "I don't approve, but then, I'm not the principal."

"I haven't done anything!" It was simple, I thought. I hadn't done anything wrong, at least nothing that the school would be taking note of.

"Tom, call your parents."

I went out in the hall, now pretty much deserted and considered for a moment. Dad was a new vice president at his company. Mom had said earlier this morning the bank was upset because she'd missed so much time in the last two weeks. She had said they could just live with it, but she'd made a point of saying she was going to having a busy week, and planned on going every single day.

Mary was in worse shape than either of them, new at her job and Elizabeth had caused her to miss days, so had her husband. Uncle Craig was busy getting a move organized, Aunt Shirley was helping with that. In any case, I'd rather have a ten principals on my case than have to ask Uncle Craig for help.

So, I could go by myself, I could call the lawyers or do something else. Mr. Miller was sarcastic and cynical. He also had organized Home Room better than any other teacher I'd seen. He wasn't a fool, then. So, if he said I needed my parents there, he was serious.

I picked up my phone and pushed a quick dial number. "Eleanor, this is Tom Ferguson."

"Hello, Tom," she replied. "I hope nothing's come up, I told Marcus you'd be there tomorrow."

"That's still on, Eleanor, but I find I'm in need of your services."

There was a perceptible pause on the other end of the line. "Pardon?" she asked, confused.

"I'm supposed to go see the principal at eleven this morning. My Home Room teacher suggested I have my parents come along, that I was in major trouble. Eleanor, I don't know what your schedule is today, but I could sure use a helping hand."

"And your parents?"

"Have missed a lot of work the last couple of weeks, what with one thing and another."

"Tom, I know your father practically owns his company. I suspect your family could buy the bank your mother works for."

"Eleanor, they feel they owe their employers, no matter what, their best. They feel like they've taken too much time off lately, so while I could ask, and they would come, it wouldn't be good. I have no idea what this is about, and I can't help but think it's bogus, but it would be nice to have a friendly face in my corner. This is as a friend, not as Eleanor Johannsen, Children Services. Sister Mary Catherine, the Carmelite nun, instead."

"I can be there at eleven. North High, right?"

"That's right."

"I have court this afternoon, I can't be much later getting downtown than one."

"I can't imagine what this is about, so I don't figure it will amount to much." Ah, the voice of youth and inexperience!

The morning seemed to pass with glacial slowness. Finally I stood up in class, showed the note to the teacher, who reacted badly to the interruption, and I walked down the empty hallways towards the office.

I smiled at Eleanor, who was already in the office. I walked up to the school secretary's desk and told them who I was and that Principal Stone had asked to see me.

The secretary picked up a phone, and a moment later, Mr. Jones came out. I'd never met him, or Principal Stone; I'd seen them both at assemblies though. Mr. Jones was the Vice Principal, the person who normally was in charge of discipline.

"Mr. Ferguson?" he asked.

I nodded, and he waved to the office and I started forward, and Eleanor followed behind me. He blinked when she moved

forward with me. "Ms. Johannsen?" he said, as confused as I was.

"Brad, Tom asked me to come along. I'm here as a friend."

He looked at her for a second, then we resumed the parade into the principal's office.

Doctor Stone, an occasional voice on the intercom, someone I'd seen at assemblies a couple of times. He was in his sixties, thin and balding, formerly blonde, I thought. What little hair he had left was colorless, not white. He waved me to a chair, and I decided then and there that if I was in a chair, he'd be in his element.

"I'll stand," I said mildly. "Sir, what can I do for you?"

"Mr. Ferguson, you are suspended for the rest of the week. Mr. Jones will give you the paperwork."

I'd been told, but I'd not believed.

"Sir, I think I should be told what rule or rules I've broken. I haven't done anything that I can think of, offhand."

"You were in an altercation a couple of weeks ago with Roger Parker. Blows were exchanged."

"No, sir," I said straight off, "that's not true. No blows were struck by either side. The teachers there did send Roger to the office; they didn't send me. No blows were struck, and Roger was back in class at the end of lunch."

"You were involved in a further altercation with Roger Parker a few days later at a basketball game. Friends of yours then kidnapped Parker and took him out into the desert."

That time, I really did blink. My friends? The football team? "I think, sir, that if you were to ask the members of the football team if I was their friend, you'd get a vast chorus of 'Who's he?'"

He ignored me. "You were involved with three young men who beat and raped a girl, one of whom subsequently committed murder."

I was unprepared again, when he stopped there. "Involved? You mean when Sam Reese put a pistol against my forehead, and I took it away from him, and pounded his face on the ground? Yeah, I did that. He'd just shot Janey Sussman, the Captain of our Cheerleading squad, I might add. Killed both of his parents, a few hours before."

He ignored me. "In short, Mr. Ferguson, you are an obvious trouble maker. This is a warning shot, putting you on notice that such behavior is not and will not be tolerated in this student body," he finished speaking, and I stood there for a second, my mouth agape, wondering what planet he was from.

"Funny thing about that. I was told by the police department detectives on the case, I'd been instrumental in saving a North High student from being killed, after she'd been assaulted and raped. They were profuse in their praise. I've not had much to do with Roger Parker, but I understand he's out on bail, having been charged with kidnap, rape, assault and conspiracy to commit murder. Keith Driscoll is still in jail, but hey, you know him a lot better than I do, because he's been in trouble as far back as I can remember."

"Parker is here today. One of the purposes of this meeting is to make sure the two of you don't have an opportunity to get into it again."

My jaw hit the floor, I mean for a second all I could see was red. I'd had a little experience being angry, but never like this. Nothing like this.

"I have never 'gotten into it' with Roger Parker. Once, I asked him to stop trying to feel up a girl at lunch, here at school. None of you were around. He tried to hit me, but like everything else he does, it wasn't very good. There were attempted blows on his part, but none of them landed. This is the same Roger Parker your football team did indeed take into the desert; not because of anything I'd asked them to do, but because Parker was being obnoxious to cheerleaders and some of their girlfriends. And now, you're telling me I'm being expelled, so the two of us don't meet? How about not letting him back, since he's an imminent threat to any girl at school?"

"See Mr. Jones for the paperwork, Mr. Ferguson. Return to this office next Monday morning, and if you've behaved, I'll consider letting you back. One option I have, is to extend the



suspension indefinitely; which is something I will do, if you don't show an improvement in your attitude."

"Brad," Eleanor spoke quietly. The Vice Principal looked at her, then looked away.

"You know me, have known me since we were in first grade together at St. Gregory's."

"I know you, Eleanor."

"I came here as Tom's friend, not wearing my official hat. In fact, I made a point of signing out when I left the office."

"Eleanor..."

Eleanor turned to Dr. Stone. "Tom's said it all; you've just ignored him. I'm a CSD case worker, Doctor Stone. I've been involved with this whole sorry affair. Sir, if you persist in this, there is nothing at all I can do. File a report, that's about it."

She turned to the Vice Principal. "You've told me you like your job."

"I do. I'm making a difference. Not every day, in every way, but I make a difference."

"Expel Tom Ferguson, and a week from now, you will be suspended. A few weeks later, the union rep will tell you to quietly take retirement or lose everything. Is that what you want?"

"Tom Ferguson is a trouble maker. He's been the center of any number of incidents."

"Brad, when we were in third grade, the two of us raced to see who could finish The Wizard of Oz first. Do you remember that?"

He nodded, and Eleanor went on. "Dorothy was the center of a Kansas cyclone, Brad. It wasn't her fault. Nor was it her fault that when she landed, she turned the wicked witch into powder; for all that Dorothy had been in the 'center' of things. Nor was it an entirely bad thing."

"Eleanor, we have a responsibility to the district to deal with troublemakers."

"Then deal with them. How many times has Tom Ferguson been in this office?"

"Never before. But we both know that with high school students, behavior can change overnight."

I spoke up for the first time in a while. "How much will you take for the whole thing? The school? The buildings, grounds, teachers, staff. How much is it worth?"

"Tom!" Eleanor barked at me, and I subsided. It really had been a dumb idea.

"I think, Dr. Stone, you should take another look at this. I think you should do a little checking up on Tom Ferguson, and Tom Ferguson's family. I think you should talk to the police, to the fire department. I'm obviously, prejudiced, but it wouldn't hurt for you to hear me out."

The Vice Principal waved at the door. "Why don't the two of you go outside and let us talk this over?"

We walked outside, into the waiting room of the school office. I was torn, there was no other way to say it. Part of me was the dutiful student, appalled that I'd done something that I could get expelled for. That was a real, real, small part of me. The rest of me was simply coldly furious about what morons they were.

Eleanor saw my black fury, and laughed. "Chill, Tom."

"They are stupid."

"They are. But you need to think, Tom. Don Quixote tilted at windmills. You want to do a little better than that. There's nothing wrong with dreams and aspirations. But you do yourself and everyone else a disservice if you let the Lilliputians keep you down."

I nodded. I contemplated everything, then picked my phone off my belt, and dialed the lawyers.

Bill Carstairs appeared to have returned from wherever it

was he'd been; he took my call. "Mr. Carstairs, Tom Ferguson."

"Hello Tom. The secretary said you have a problem?"

"My high school principal just had me into his office; they want to expel me."

"What for?" he asked.

"Preventing rape and murder. What I'd like you to do is get in contact with Phoenix Union High School District and North High and explain to them the facts of life. Not the least of which is that I've done good, not bad."

"I'm on it. I'll take care of it, I promise."

Shortly, the Vice Principal came out, and told me that 'pending appeal' I was free to continue to come to school. I thanked Eleanor, then I left, still seething.

It was nearly lunch, and I went straight to the usual table and sat down, even though I was the first; in and of itself a first.

A while later, the usual gang was there, including Elizabeth now, as well as Shannon.

Tony showed up a little late, and promptly waved to me. "Gotta talk to you, Tom."

I figured he'd heard about the BS at the school office, so I went off a ways with him.

"After school, the team wants to talk with you."

"The team? The football team?" I asked.

"Yeah. This is about Darryl. And Gloria, but mainly about Darryl."

I couldn't help chuckling, and Tony looked at me, curious. "What's funny?"

"Dr. Stone wanted to expel me a while ago. Gloria, at least, didn't make his list of my transgressions." Gloria would have been, I thought, really unhappy about it, too, if she had.

Tony frowned. "I don't think I understand."

"I think the Gloria wants to put Darryl behind her, Tony."

"Sue Ellen told me he tried to rape her. He gave her a date rape drug, got her drunk and tried to stick it to her!" Tony was outraged, I realized.

"That's what he did," I agreed. "But I think if you were to ask Gloria, she'd tell you to let it go. If it gets back to her family, she's in big trouble. Big trouble, Tony. I met her father Friday evening, remember? The guy's a little whacko, Tony."

"Three o'clock, Tom. The PE locker room."

"Tony, then as a favor to me. I just came from Dr. Stone's office, Tony. They were going to suspend me for the week."

He stared at me in surprise. "What for?"

"Helping people. Roger Parker is back today, he doesn't want us 'to get into it.' His words, not mine." I felt my anger returning. "It's crazy, it's stupid, but I do not need the boat rocked right now, Tony. Please, please. If you guys do something to Darryl, they'll dump on you guys. Taking Roger out to the desert was one of the things Stone blamed me for."

"Blamed you for?" Obviously, Tony was having a hard time with it too.

He looked away for a second, then shook his head. "Three o'clock, the PE locker room, Tom. It won't be what you think."

Tony and I were too good of friends to butt heads; he said it wasn't what I thought, I'd accept that. I hoped he wasn't trying to snow me.

"Just one last thing, Tony. I'm the designated driver. I have to take Elizabeth and Shannon home, Jenny and probably Penny. I have to be downtown at four. It can't take very long."

"It won't."

Lunch period finished, the rest of the day dragged by. I managed to get in touch with everyone I was supposed to pick up to tell them I'd be a few minutes late, and to wait for me at the van. I handed Shannon the key after the last bell of the day, then headed off to the locker room.

It is always impressive to see so much flesh at once. Not that the football team was undressed, mind you. In fact, they were all duded up in their letter jackets. But two dozen clean shaven young men, who's average weight was close to two hundred pounds is a lot of flesh.

Tony stepped out, pointing to Darryl. "Darryl, you go stand next to Tom."

"What's this about?" Darryl was a little surly.

"Just what you were told, a team meeting," Tony replied.

"I thought you were off the team," Darryl sneered.

"Don't go there Darryl," the guy I knew was the current team captain said. "Shut up and move."

Darryl stood next to me, obviously curious.

Tony turned to face the team. "You all voted me Captain for next year. I told you then, and I'm telling you now, thanks. I can't think of anything that beats the honor.

"Coach has always allowed the team to vote on varsity letters. I talked to him earlier this afternoon, and he said that as far as he was concerned, that varsity letters were based on service and team spirit. You can't have one without the other.

"I move we take back Darryl's letter. All in favor, say Aye!"

There was a loud chorus of "Ayes!"

"Opposed?" It was very quick.

"What the hell is this," Darryl said, angry.

"Anyone opposed?" Tony waited a second, but Darryl was

still sputtering. "Ayes have it then. Darryl, take off your jacket. If any of us see you wearing it again... you won't like it."

Darryl stood there, facing down two dozen team mates. He might have been pond scum, but he certainly knew it. "I was transferring to Central next year anyway. The coach there says I have real promise. I'll be a good fit for their running game."

"Promises, promises!" I didn't see which team member said it, but there was a chorus of laughter.

"That's all then, Darryl. Thanks for your time," Tony told him.

Darryl took off his jacket, sneered and walked out of the room.

"All in favor of asking Tom Ferguson to carry water next year?"

Another chorus of ayes. Tony smiled at me.

Deadpan, I smiled back. "I've been able to carry my water now, since I was three and a half."

There was laughter in the room; it was a stupid joke, but they seemed to like it.

"So, Tom. Next year, you will show up at practices, just like a regular team member. Coach will tell you what to do, but basically you're the refreshment manager. Make sure there is water, juice, Gatorade and the like at practices and the games. Lots and lots of ice."

I shrugged, and Tony smiled even more. "After the first game, the team votes on varsity letters. Typically, the water boy doesn't get one. However, some water boys are better than others. You too could have a jacket."

I shook my head. Tony was really weird, sometimes.

I did my chauffeur duties, saying hello to Penny, after a long week of absence. She looked tan and fit, quite cheerful too. I dropped Elizabeth and Shannon at their house, Penny went

home with Jenny. I told them I'd be back; we were supposed to be going out to dinner again. Uncle Craig and Aunt Shirley. Kim and Penny, the five of us.

Not for the first time I realized that the van had been a nice idea, but still wasn't sufficient for the family needs. There would be nine for dinner, still more than the van could hold. I contemplated what else I could have bought, but nothing came to mind. Maybe a school bus. Ick!

I managed to get to the bank just a little late, about five minutes, which Miriam seemed to accept as the price of doing business downtown.

"I want to go over your portfolio with you," she told me. "Your uncle said you were thinking of some changes. Charity, for instance. Single family homes."

I nodded. My Uncle hadn't been a total write-off after all. "First, Miriam, I don't want to get off on the wrong foot, I'd like to think I can trust you."

She looked at me without speaking, obviously waiting for me to go ahead. I was tolerably sure then that there might well be trust issues.

"Did my uncle give you or your boss private instructions about what I'm allowed to do or not do?"

"Yes," she said the word without explanation, so I went looking for it.

"Can you tell me what the rules are?"

She nodded her head. "I was told that my job was on the line if I allowed you to do anything really stupid with the trust funds. That comes under the heading of a pointless threat. The bank carries considerable insurance now on those of us in the financial management office, to fend off investor lawsuits. We are here to offer advice, but in your case, because of your age, there other duties as well.

"Those duties will, mostly, expire when your emancipation becomes official. If you were to tell me to buy a thousand shares of a stock and I were to tell you the current street recommendation was sell, that wouldn't be a problem. I'd

execute the transaction. Bet everything on a what the industry says is a bad choice, I have a choice. Tell you to find another manager, or go along, knowing that if the investment goes bad, as likely as not we'd be sued. So, yes. There are rules, and I will not break them. Some are your Uncle's, some are the laws of the land, some are common sense."

"I just ask that you tell me before you act against my wishes. I'm not going to shoot the messenger," I told her.

"That said, I have a house I want to buy."

"Your uncle explained the situation with that. I don't have a problem with that."

"Did he tell you I decided to do everything at market price?" I asked, and she nodded in agreement.

"Well, I'll give you the address. The matter is urgent; her husband stole every penny they had. He was being hustled; the woman he was running off with killed him and took the money. The police are involved, but they don't think there is likely to be any recovery of what was taken.

"The family has just a few dollars left. They are going to need bridge financing and all of that. I have the name of the lawyer she has talked to. I think she has also talked to the mortgage holder as well. I want to make this as swift and as painless to them as can be done. She and her family have suffered enough."

"No problem," Miriam said, looking at me. "About the rest of the portfolio..."

"I looked at the papers the other day; I understand about one and a half percent is in cash. Use that. Otherwise, leave things alone."

"And charity?"

"I'm looking into it," I told her. "How about t-shirts?"

She smiled slightly. "I met with Mr. Dugan earlier today. He found the wife of another fireman who does logo art for an agency, she's coming up with something. Probably should have something by the end of the week."



"Cool," I told her. I sat contemplating things for a second, then decided, why not?

I slipped the phone number of the commercial real estate company that had been on the side of the building I'd looked at yesterday.

"This is a commercial property at Third Avenue and McDowell. There is a sign on the building side saying that they've lost their lease. I'd like to find out more about it. Could you arrange for us to see it later this week? Wednesday or Thursday?"

"A commercial property?" I could see her brow furrow.

"I understand it was once a Jewish temple."

"Oh," her reply was very understated. "I know which one you mean. My grandparents met there."

She looked at me. "Why are you interested in it?"

I couldn't very well tell her it was a hunch. "I was reading a book the other day; I understand that in Europe it is quite common to have a commercial property on the ground floor, then apartments on the upper floors. Is that sort of thing possible here? I can't remember seeing anything like that."

She looked at me. "That's an odd idea. No, it's not commonly done here. I'm not even sure if there's a zoning code for it."

Miriam saw my expression and laughed. "Not to worry, anything is possible, particularly if you don't mind paying a bit extra. After my grandfather died, my grandmother moved in with my parents. That didn't work out very well; grandmother was observant and my parents weren't. At the very least, grandmother wanted her own kitchen, so she could keep kosher.

"It wasn't as simple thing to add a kitchen. My parents had to get a zoning variance, because the city code said that if a house had two kitchens, it wasn't a single family residence any more. I remember my father saying that he overpaid on the donations to the city council members, but he just donated a thousand dollars to a two members. That did the trick."

I was uncomfortable with that, and she shook her head. "You could say it's corruption, and you'd probably not be far wrong. It was to their campaign funds, which have legal limits on how the money can be used. A fig-leaf, but it does make it legal.

"It wasn't even a quid pro quo. He donated the money, then asked for the zoning variance. A few weeks later they had the zoning hearing, and he got it. But the request is a little unusual."

"The city has talked about increasing density," I told her. "This might be an idea that would kill two birds with one stone. Dual use and all of that. There might be some money in developing other properties in a similar way," I added the last sentence as if it was an afterthought.

"It's an idea," she agreed. "It would take some research."

"And you do research, do you not?" I asked, smiling.

"I think I told you that I do a lot of it. I have to admit, this would be in an area I don't know much about."

"Learning is good," I said with a straight face, and she laughed.

"There's that. Anything else, Tom?"

"I think that will do it for now."

We shook hands, and I went back and got into the van. I sat for a few minutes contemplating life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I put the van into gear and drove home, unsure what my parents were going to say when I told them about my day. The bad, the good and the proposal I wanted to make.

It was actually worse than I imagined.

When I got home, everyone was there, and by everyone, I mean everyone. Mom had decided that Mary, Elizabeth and Shannon should come along. I knew Mary was profoundly unhappy about people buying her and her daughter's dinner. On the other hand, it was a couple of days until she got more than the few hundred dollars Dad had loaned her. Not that she would be able to

afford, even then, to take a dozen people to dinner at a nice restaurant.

I'd spent time thinking about that, but I had no ideas. Mary was a proud woman, who wanted to make it on her own. Her karma was to have met a family where money wasn't an issue.

But, before we went to dinner, another matter came up.

Shannon had heard about my proposed expulsion, and told Mary, who told Mom, who told Dad... should I go on?

I suppose the Inquisition is worse; they use the rack and pincers, after all. They don't use hurt looks, angry looks and tears.

"Tell me about school today, Tom," Dad said as I came in.

"Well, I'm up for water boy on the football team next year." It wasn't funny; it was obscure. It was a perfect example of, 'you had to have been there to understand.'

"About your being kicked out of school."

I contemplated how my dad would joke about it, then I smiled. "They've suspended my suspension."

Mom laughed, Dad turned red, caught himself and clapped his hand over his mouth.

I was stunned! It had worked! I'd made a joke and the bomb was defused! For the first time I realized that's what Dad was doing all those times he made stupid jokes. He would look at something awful and try to joke about it. Except, he didn't have very good instincts.

I tried to remember that I was my father's son.

"I was called in, I asked Eleanor if she'd come along. Turns out she knows the Vice Principal."

I explained it all to them. Mom started off concerned for me, Dad started pissed at me. Mom decided that I'd done okay, Dad got pissed at the school. Of course, Uncle Craig just sat there and smirked; he didn't need to say a thing, knowing I was making his case.

"I'm hungry," I concluded.

That served to get the dinner procession in motion; the logistics and the fact you can't move that many people in one vehicle unless you had a school bus, killed the conversation for a while.

We went to a Red Lobster; a little downscale from our usual place, but they were having a lobster fest. I'd never had lobster and let Mom talk me into it. It was pretty yummy, and an evening of convivial company and conversation is pretty nice.

We didn't get done until after nine; I'm not sure why having more people makes everything take longer, but it does.

I hugged and kissed Mary and Elizabeth, hugged Shannon. I was thinking we were headed for home and bed, when I found that another family meeting had been called.

There we were, like we'd been the day Jenny first came to us, sitting in our dining room, with JR, Jenny and me on one side of the table, Kim at one end. Penny was standing behind her mom, while Mom and Dad were joined this time by not only Craig, but Aunt Shirley.

It was Kim who spoke first.

"I grew up clueless about just about everything. The only thing I did well, was study. Then I went to college. I'd never had friends before, I'd never had sex before. Imagine my surprise when I found my first lover was a black woman.

"I never regretted that, never even thought I should. I didn't regret finding my other roommates attractive lovers. I love Ellen and Shirley, as much as I love Keisha. I came to love Craig. David. Others.

"Then I was a mom, and Penny was so beautiful! I had such great dreams for her!" Kim smiled at her daughter, "She is a dream!"

"Then I met Jennifer Reese." She looked around the table. "I liked her. I liked her in ways I didn't understand."

I spoke up, something I realized almost at once, the adults

didn't want. Tough.

"Jenny is like that."

I got a glare from Dad; Mom simply shook her head. "Let Kim talk, Tom."

Kim went on. "I never thought about it. I liked her; she liked me. We clicked on all sorts of levels, not just sex, but that too.

"I found out since, what Jennifer's life has been like. I don't know what to say, except to apologize to you, Jennifer. I was wrong. I should have asked more questions."

Jenny shook her head. "Please, don't do this."

Kim started to say something, and right then, I realized something. Jenny had been desperate. She'd said she'd been thinking of running... or killing her brother. I'd thought at the time the reason she didn't look me in the eye when she spoke was because she was ashamed.

"Kim, stop," I said quickly, getting ahead of her.

"Go any further in this direction and you're going to hurt Jenny. Please, Kim. Don't."

She stared at me, then at Jenny, who was looking down again.

"Why would that be, Tom?" Shirley asked.

She was tall, brown haired; like Mom and Kim, in pretty good shape.

"You all think I saved Jenny, right?" I asked. There were a lot of nods on my side of the table. The adults just looked at us.

"I 'saved' Jenny," I made air quotes around the verb, "because I realized she had issues. You didn't. You know what issue I saw she had? She was scared and afraid. I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew what she felt. So I was too happy to be a macho guy; I'd protect her. Piece of cake. Hormones."

I nodded to Jenny. "In truth, I was getting off protecting her. I was her big brother. Then I looked her in the eye... and then I knew about her brother. I didn't feel very good about it, but I wasn't about to stop protecting her.

"You, Kim, you're beating yourself up because you didn't notice. Kim, Jenny was using you. She wanted to be safe; as an adult she was sure that you could stop her brother. In fact, you did, even if you didn't know about it. Sam was wary of adults; he left his sister alone for the first time in her life."

"I have a responsibility," Kim said. "To myself, my lovers and my daughter. I had no right not to look deeper."

"You trusted Jenny, Kim. It would have hurt you to find out Jenny was using you."

Kim stared at Jenny, who met her eyes. Jenny bobbed her head the least bit.

Kim paled.

"Mom too. She was here, Jenny and she went off together. Later, Mom was upset when she learned about Jenny. Yet she never connected the dots. And was upset, just like Kim, when she learned the truth. Jenny was looking for someone to protect her, and wasn't much concerned about what she had to do to get the protection.

"I have no idea what JR said to Jenny to get her to come to my bed. But you all need to think long and hard, longer and harder than you've done until now, about what you are doing. JR knew something, I'm sure. I don't know about Penny; I have a little trouble imagining Penny and JR not sharing everything, so I think she knew too.

"The other day, you were going off to have a meeting about 'intra-generational relationships.'" I sniffed. "We weren't invited.

"Dad, Craig... did Mom tell you why JR stayed home today?"

Dad said no, Craig shook his head.

"Well, that's because she has her period."

Dad turned pale as a sheet; Craig looked down at his hands, then back at JR. I told myself if he blamed JR, I was going to punch him in the nose.

"Sorry, Joanna," Craig said softly, his voice muted. "Once, I pulped the bastard's face who got your mom pregnant. I..." He stopped talking, then said softly, "I should have been more careful."

"I knew better," JR told him, then she looked at Dad. "Stop this, all of you. We are people. We make choices. Some good, some bad. It was a mistake to be so careless, and the lesson has been learned, believe me!"

Kim spoke up again. "I don't need anyone's help. I'm sorry, Jennifer. I didn't know about your brother. I wish I had, because I'd have been as willing to help with your brother as anything else. Actually, more willing."

"Ditto," Mom said.

"Now I'm going to say, 'stop this,'" I told them. "You are ignoring us. Face it, my friends. You all are friends and more. We're family, but you are reluctant to look at what's happened and face the facts. It happened. To Jenny, to JR. In my own way, to me.

"Uncle Craig has said I'm supposed to take over handling my trust funds. Okay, fine. Tell me, Craig, what possible reason could you give me that I should take responsibility for that money, yet cut me out of a say in my sex life?

"You left the bank instructions on how to deal with demands I make of them, at least right now. Craig, training wheels are training wheels. Don't mistake that for freedom of the road; I surely won't.

"So," I concluded, "here we are. Jenny had an agenda when she came to us. It wasn't to hurt any of us, it was to protect herself from a monster."

I slapped my hand down on the table, making a loud Crack! sound.

"This is now. What are we talking about?"

"Adopting Jenny," Mom said, confirming what I'd thought in the beginning. Mom looked at Jenny and smiled.

"I vote aye," I told her. "Any objections?"

I think Mom was the only one who realized what I was doing. Thank you again, Tony!

"No objection, the ayes have it," I told them.

"Now, I'm for bed." I started to get up, then sat back down.

"Excuse, I forgot a few things." Everyone looked at me, confused.

"I should have told you about school," I spoke to Mom, but included Dad, sitting next to her, "I should have called this morning. But there was always something to do. I'm sorry, and it won't happen again."

"I hope you noticed," Dad said, his eyes flashing anger, "that I did not make a wisecrack this time."

"I know, and I am sorry. Eleanor convinced them to give the matter more thought. As near as I can tell, they were blaming be for everything that's happened, because they can't afford to punish Roger or Keith any more."

Craig nodded. "I suspect Arizona's got the same sort of rules California does. If you suspend a student for enough days, you have to provide a tutor. Quite frequently, that's a one tutor, one student situation. Very expensive."

"So, tomorrow I'll find out."

"Carstairs will be there," Dad said darkly, obviously upset. "Me too."

"I didn't want anyone to miss any more time at work," I tried to explain.

Dad just waved his hand. "I have almost six months of vacation saved up, I'm maxed out on sick leave days too. A few days or weeks don't matter. Not to worry, Tom."



"I need to be at the bank," Mom told us. "I have a proposal I'm working on, I'm supposed to present it Friday. I'd like to make sure my ducks are in a row."

Dad nodded. "Anything else?" he asked me.

I smiled. "I talked to my account executive about getting a start on buying Mary's house. I was thinking, we are just about to exceed this house's ability to hold us. I was looking at a place that might work out better. Much better."

I met Craig's eye. "It's a little pricey, I expect, but on the other hand, there would be enough room for everyone. And I mean everyone, including the LA contingent of the family, Mary, Elizabeth and Shannon. Kim and Penny. Everyone."

"You found a house big enough for that many people?" Kim asked, obviously curious. "Where? We live where we do so my commute isn't a killer."

"Third Avenue and McDowell. The old temple. The lease has expired, and it's available. I was thinking we could make the ground floor commercial space, and have living quarters upstairs. Miriam seems to think that if campaign contributions were made to the right people, zoning problems could be resolved.

"I asked her to set something up Wednesday or Thursday after school. I don't think we should all go this time, but I promise that I will not do anything without the advice and consent of everyone."

"Pretty ambitious," Aunt Shirley said. "Craig has mentioned maybe a million times that running back and forth between houses at all hours has not been good. If nothing else, Tom has a good idea that needs to be looked at, and considered."

She smiled at me, and I smiled slightly back. What had I been told? Aunt Shirley was inordinately fond of people my age? That was fine, she was like the rest of us, she kept herself in shape, and in fact, her figure was better than Mom or Kim's, which I suspected came from the lack of kids.

"I think you should check out the place yourself, Tom," Uncle Craig told me, "then write the family a proper memo about

the idea, the site, the options you think are possible. David, Ellen or myself could help with that, if you aren't sure what you need."

"No problem," I told him. It wasn't either.

"Now, I am ready for bed!" I told them.

We broke up, Kim, Penny, Craig and Shirley going to Kim's, the rest of us did our goodnight kiss. For a change, JR and Jenny wanted to sleep by themselves, for that matter, so did I.

I spent a while at my desk, catching up, doing the little homework I'd been assigned. I didn't finish; I fell asleep at my desk.

Tuesday, April 9, 2002

I woke up at my desk, around two thirty in the morning. The house was dark and quiet and I went downstairs and checked the kitchen for flaming dust bunnies, of which none were in evidence. Being there I got a drink of water from the fridge, sipped it for a minute while I contemplated the quiet and the dark.

I went back to my room, climbed into bed and pretended to sleep. I wanted a dream, any kind of a dream. What I got was very short periods of sleep; I kept waking up. In fact, after a bit, it was like a metronome with a tick every twenty minutes.

About a quarter of five I gave it up. Sure, I could plead sickness and probably get a day off from school. But for one of the really rare times in my life, I wasn't about to miss the day. First, I had responsibilities. I was a chauffeur. Then I was supposed to go meet Marcus Stewart-Jones and be oriented to what was on the street.

I shied away from what I was afraid was the real reason I felt so off: that the thought of getting expelled, bogus reasons or not was stressing me out more than all of Jenny's, Mary's or my own problems before this had. Sam and his gun had been extremely stressful, but it was over quickly. The accident with the car had been stressful too, and while it wasn't over as quickly, I'd gotten up afterwards and carried on.

What would they say if I didn't show up? Honestly, I was

fairly sure the principal and the vice principal wouldn't say anything. Instead, they would nod their heads sagely and think of my absence as vindication of their take on my actions.

I went ahead and got my shower before anyone else's alarm clock went off, I was dressed and in the kitchen long before any one else.

I rummaged around in the pantry, found what I was looking for. Two boxes of chocolate cupcake mix. Mom liked to make things from scratch, but cakes and cupcakes were too much of a pain. Lately, in fact, such things had all but vanished from our diet; the 'use by' date on the box was April 1st, 2002.

I made the double batch, putting in the first tray just as Mom came in. She sniffed the air after a few minutes and came and gave me a hug. "Lately I've sworn off chocolate. It's not my ribs every calorie seems to be sticking to these days. Probably unfair to the rest of you. Thanks, Tom."

I kissed her, and in a minute we were holding and hugging each other. It was nice to feel the press of her breasts against my chest, and I responded by pressing my erection between her legs. After a few seconds she sighed and pulled away. "At your age you can just drop your plans and go spend the day in bed."

I shook my head. "I have to go to school today. I don't want them to think I'm afraid."

She hugged me tightly, but this time it was motherly and not sexual. "God, Tom. You're almost grown up!"

"Almost," I agreed. I copped a feel through her blouse. "I still have hormones, though."

"You do, you definitely do. And you're going over to Mary's tonight?"

"Yes," I told her. "Which reminds me, I need to get my things together before school. I'll pick them up when I drop off JR and Jenny, but I'm going to have to hustle to get downtown by five."

Actually, Central and Baseline was well south of downtown and I was going to have emulate a rocket ship to get there on

time. Of course, I was ten thousand times more wary and cautious than I'd been this time last week.

"And what exactly is this errand of yours?"

I met her eyes. I'd not wanted to have to explain it, because I wasn't entirely sure I could. "I asked the police if I could ride along; watch them do their job," I explained to her. "They said no. I asked the fire department. They said no. Eleanor gave me the name of someone who goes out at night on the street, to help kids in trouble. I'm going to meet with him. I'm hoping to be able to spend Friday evening doing that."

She was silent, looking at me steadily. I popped the first batch of cupcakes out, then slid in the second tray, and worked on getting the first tray refilled.

"Just be careful, Tom," she finally told me.

"Every day, in every way that I can," I assured her. "It's just that... well, I want to do something for people. I don't know what, I don't know how. Probably it won't work out, but I want to have at least looked first."

She nodded. "Well, French toast this morning." She fetched eggs and stuff. Mom's French toast is really nice; and there's absolutely nothing wrong with maple syrup, either.

JR was feeling better, and I got a kiss from her and another from Jenny for the cupcakes for lunch. I went to school feeling particularly good.

Mr. Miller seemed to be surprised to see me, but didn't say anything. There were no notes from on high, nothing was said. I spent the morning in my usual classes, doing the same thing I usually did in school. There were times in the last few weeks, even before I met Marsha Richardson that I seriously questioned the utility of school.

Uncle Craig had gotten my back up by wanting to take over home schooling. What would have happened if the proposal had come from Mom, with notice that Uncle Craig would add some insight into business and finance? I grinned to myself. Yep, Uncle Craig had blundered there.

Lunch was more interesting than what lunch usually was,

although I had to admit that the last few weeks had provided some interesting lunches. I was sitting, holding hands with Elizabeth, when Sue Ellen came up with a girl I didn't recognize.

Actually, I didn't recognize her face, but how many girls at school had a bandaged nose, her arm in a sling, and fading bruises on her face?

"Tom," Sue Ellen said as she got to the table. I stood up and held out my hand to the girl. "Dawn Driscoll. Dawn, Tom Ferguson."

It was her left arm that had been wracked up; so we did a proper handshake.

"Thanks, Tom," she told me.

I shook my head. "It wasn't the least bit difficult, didn't require any thought at all."

What had Janey said, quoting Dawn? That she was upset that the cheerleaders had offered themselves, when, if anyone should do that, it should be her.

She had let my hand go, and now stood regarding me. I regarded her back.

"That's really is all you want, isn't it?" Dawn's voice was soft.

"That's all," I told her. "Nothing else. I'd have done it for anyone."

"Janey told me about what you told her, what you did when the other cheerleaders made their offer."

I shrugged.

"I don't have a very good opinion of guys, you understand?"

"I can understand," I told her. "A lot of that going around these days. Not all of us are bastards, though. Maybe not all that many of us, but a few rotten apples sure leave a bad taste, afterwards."

She nodded gravely. "I did what I hear another girl did. I left home, moved in with a friend and her father. My parents were told by Children Services that if they continued to work on getting Keith out on bail, they'd revoke their parental rights. Tomorrow he comes out." She shook her head. "They mortgaged our house to do it. I left last week; what was the point?"

"I'm sorry," I told her.

"You know what my friend's father told me?"

I shook my head.

"He wanted to know why someone from the family, someone from school, someone, anyone at all, hadn't stepped on Keith like a bug, a long time ago."

I sniffed. "The thought occurred to me, too."

"It's like I told him, Tom. It gets to be a habit. You lie to yourself, you lie to others; all to pretend it's not the problem it is. Cover it up, hoping not to make it worse. Hoping not to set him off. And now... I'm pretty much an orphan. Not as much of an orphan as Jennifer Reese, but way too close for comfort. I will never, ever, shy away from telling it like it is, again."

"Good," I told her. "Keith, Sam, Roger Parker. All are history. What's left for us is the future." I gave Elizabeth a grin when I said that, and she showed just the tip of her tongue between her lips. "We have to make it better."

"Yeah. Well, I know I've said it before, others have said it. Thanks, Tom."

"And you're welcome." I paused, remembering that Janey had said she and Dawn were close. "How's Janey?"

"Grumpy." Dawn said. "She gets out of the hospital Thursday or Friday. Janey hates sleeping on her stomach; she snores she says." She grinned at me, "I could tell her she snores laying on her side, on her back..."

And that, I thought, made it quite clear where Dawn was coming from, and going to. I smiled at her, she smiled at me, and she turned and walked away.

"Cat's goodbye," Sue Ellen said softly.

"Pardon?" I asked, not understanding.

"Not a long drawn out scene. Just, bye and go. Cats usually don't bother with the goodbye, either."

Oh. That was an interesting concept. I contemplated how I said goodbye to people. Was I cat? It didn't seem like I made a big deal out of saying goodbye. I contemplated being upside down. I contemplated what would have happened if I'd not been lucky. Did I really want to check out, without telling the people I love, goodbye?

Then it struck me. I had gone over to Tony's. I've been going to Tony's since grade school. Even after he moved, it wasn't that far away; I rode my bike over there a million times. I left for school every day; my parents went places. Every day, we would go do our individual things, all of us. Make a big production out of saying goodbye every day? Wouldn't that cheapen and devalue the sentiment? It would sure get old fast. For me and for everyone around me.

I met Sue Ellen's eyes. She looked like she was going to giggle. "I didn't expect you to go off into never-never land," she told me.

"It's something I never thought about," I told her. "Now I'm wondering if it's something you could over do."

She smiled. "You can overdo anything, Tom. Like you and me."

We were a little ways away from everyone else, she had pitched her voice low.

"Sue Ellen, it was good. But..."

"Yeah," she said with emphasis.

"Friends, though, right?" I told her.

She reached out, and grabbed my arm with both hands, and twisted hard. "You better be!"

"Uncle!" I called, "I promise!"

I went back to Elizabeth, who had put her nose in a book almost the instant I'd gotten up. Tony saw her mark her place and smile at me when I sat down.

"Gosh Tom, isn't it nice to know you come ahead of a book?"

I put my hand on Elizabeth's and squeezed gently. "Tony, some of us are just glad to be there at the end of the day."

He grinned at me, and then checked out Elizabeth.

I sat back down, pulled out my lunch and handed Elizabeth one of the cupcakes. Since I made them, I'd seen fit to include a couple of extras with my lunch.

She took it, and then spoke to me, deadpan. "Tom has found the secret of women, ladies. We should kill him; chocolate unlocks crossed legs and libidos."

Sue Ellen reached over and grabbed my lunch bag, pulling out the other two cupcakes I had stuffed away. She took one, handed the other to Shannon, helped herself to the other. "Naw, let's just lock him away in the kitchen and promise him some quality time, anytime he makes more chocolate whatever."

"Chocolate, eh?" Tony said. "I'll have to remember that."

"Mom says that chocolate doesn't stick just to your ribs," I proffered. "Thighs, hips, tummy..."

"Breasts?" Elizabeth said, hopefully. It was even better than the deadpan line a second before.

"Gosh," Sue Ellen said, glancing down. "I hope not!"

It was like I was lying in the sun, basking in the warmth. Only this was the warmth from friends and lovers. It warmed the heart; something that sun warmed skin was just a pale imitation of.

When bell rang at the end of lunch, I half expected to get called to the office. Nothing had happened, so I started towards my next class. Enroute, my cell phone starting buzzing to itself on my belt. I stopped and picked up.



"Bill Carstairs, Tom."

"Sir," I said politely. "I thought you would get back to me sooner."

He didn't seem to mind the criticism. "On your behalf, I told the school district not to undertake a personnel action against one of the school secretaries."

"I don't understand," I told him.

"It's a bureaucratic thing; called covering your ass. The principal decided to drop the whole suspension thing; then issued this letter of reprimand to the secretary who he'd given the job of researching what you're supposed to have done. It took some major league pressure, but they finally coughed up the secretary's original memo. It's just a simple recitation of the facts, mostly accurate. The interpretation was all this Dr. Stone's.

"I told the secretary to refer the matter to her union representative. Now, like I said, that's not going to happen. The bottom line is that you are no longer under threat of suspension. Maybe someone in the district management will have a quiet talk with him, but..."

"I just wanted it straightened out," I told the lawyer. "I wasn't looking to jam any one up." I was kind of proud of myself for that line; stole it from a NYPD episode I'd seen once. I don't watch much TV, but now and then I did.

"That should be it, Tom. Glad we could help."

I put the phone away, and then had to hustle for my first class of the afternoon.

I'd not been that sleepy last night or in the morning, but after the phone call I was sleepy. It was a fight to stay awake all afternoon. I dropped JR, Jenny and Penny off first at our house, picked up my things for overnight. Then I went to Mary's house for a bit, and Elizabeth and I sat on a couch and kissed for a while. I didn't want to get too romantic, and Elizabeth just enjoyed being hugged and kissed. I enjoyed it when I could sense her getting excited and horny. Knowing that you can arouse someone; I don't know how to describe it. It's nice; a

compliment to you as a person, as a lover. Is there a better compliment? I don't think so!

After about a half hour I told her that I'd be back around seven and set off into the afternoon traffic for South Phoenix.

I took the Squaw Peak Freeway, and the traffic going into town wasn't as bad as the surface streets had been yesterday; of course, I then had another four or five miles to go further south, but I took 16th Street, which wasn't too bad.

I was expecting I'd be late; as it was, I was about twenty minutes early. I didn't want to sit in the van for that long, so I decided that if nothing else, I could wait inside.

The office was set in a row of small stores. There was a beauty salon, a small restaurant, a dentist's office, and the one that I wanted. South Phoenix Youth Outreach had Venetian blinds in the windows, blinds that were closed. I opened the door and walked in.

There was an area about twenty or so feet on a side, with a desk and some file cabinets in a corner. There were two doors in the back wall. One was labeled, 'Rest Room' and the other was open, showing an office beyond. The office was warmer than most offices and homes, low 80's I thought. The air was moist, too. It had been a while, I realized, since I'd been anywhere that relied on evaporative cooling.

Dad had told me once that growing up in Phoenix everyone's favorite place to go in the summer was the Palms Theater, which at the time was one of the few air conditioned public places in the city. Everyone else relied on water trickled through pads, with a fan sucking in outside air that was cooled as the water in the pads evaporated. That had been more or less the standard up through the 70's and early 80's, when it started to change. A lot of people used heat pumps, which is what we had.

How much would it cost, I wondered, to cool a huge place like the building I was thinking about. I made a note to myself in my mind. Look at utility costs, water, electric, gas, trash collection and be sure to put that in the memo Craig wanted. I was pretty sure he was going to be even worse than Dad had been about zoo animals left out of my survey, if I left anything out of what he wanted me to do.

There was a very tall black man, talking to two much shorter, very plump black women. He was also very thin, and moved with quick, nervous energy. He was in his thirties, I thought, but he could have just been one of my hyperactive classmates from the way he moved.

He'd glanced at me as I came in. I just stood still, knowing that when it was my turn, I'd be seen.

One of the black women nodded and sat down at the desk, pulling a laptop out of a case I'd not seen before, because it had been behind the desk. She plugged it in and booted it up. The other woman talked for a few minutes more, then she walked past me, ignoring me.

The man, Marcus Stewart-Jones, I presumed, turned and went into the office in the back. He was gone for four or five minutes, and when he came back, he had a Pepsi can in his hand.

"Marcus Stewart-Jones," he said, offering me his hand, still wet and cold from the soda pop can.

"Tom Ferguson."

He looked me up and down, seemed to sniff in derision. "So white boy, you want to ride along and look at what's happening on the street, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's Marcus," he growled.

"That's what I want to do, Marcus."

"Tell me young mister rich white kid, why would you want to do that? Is it a school assignment? Going to get some extra credit doing some volunteer work for your preppie school? Or you just want to see how the other half lives, so you can go back home and tell yourself how good you've got it?"

I felt my anger start to rise, but I quelled it. I took an extra second, and then looked him in the eye. "In the last couple of weeks, I've had a chance to help a couple of people. I liked doing it. But I realized I don't have a clue what the world's really like. I've just seen a tiny, tiny bit of it."

He cast his eyes upward. "Oh Lord! A do-good lookie-lou! A voyeur!" He pointed at the door. "I don't need you, rich white boy. Just take yourself back outside."

"Funny," I spoke, trying hard to keep my temper, "the other day I was talking to a nice black girl who told me that the only discrimination she's had in her life was from other blacks who think because she gets good grades that makes her white."

"The other day, my girlfriend had a heart attack on the street. Her heart stopped. I gave her mouth-to-mouth until the fire department arrived. I didn't hardly think it was remarkable or that it mattered at all that some of the firemen and paramedics were white, some black, and some brown. Last week I was in a car accident, the fire department and police came and rescued me. It took a couple of hours. All the colors of the rainbow on that crew, Marcus. It wasn't worth paying attention to; they were people doing their job. That's what they told me. Just doing the job. Both times, they did their job well."

"I wanted to ride along with the police; I can't. I'm too young and it's too dangerous. I wanted to ride along with the firemen or paramedics. Ditto, actually, they were more emphatic about it."

"All I want to do, Marcus, is ride along and see what it's like on the street."

"You're right, I'm rich. My parents are wealthy. I can no more help who I was born to than you could. So what? They did a good job of keeping the sort of thing I want to see away from me, when I was growing up. Well, I wouldn't say I'm grown up yet, but I'm old enough to see more of what the underside of life is like."

He stared at me for a few minutes. "First thing, you come along, you gotta keep your mouth shut. Can you keep your mouth shut?"

I nodded.

It took him a second to realize that was all I was going to do. He looked like he'd swallowed a lemon.

"Another thing, the most important thing. You will not be

judgmental."

"If I'm not talking, I should think I would be keeping my opinions to myself."

"Body language, that and there are times you'll just feel like you just have to talk. That's a lot of what I do, out there. I talk. Weather, this and that. Nothing serious. I never ever, nor will you, hint, make a sound, face, grimace, whatever, that in any way disparages them or their lifestyle."

It wasn't that I hadn't thought about what it was like to live on the streets, but I realized instantly I'd been looking at it from my own point of view. I'd be worried about staying warm, staying cool, staying dry. Where to pee. I would worry about being robbed, all of that.

Why were kids out on the street? Really? Marcus had said it. Lifestyle. A lifestyle that they'd chosen. A shitty, horrible, icky lifestyle. Why choose it? What had Jenny said? Kill him or run away. Why choose it? Because the alternative was worse. Marcus was right, though. Jenny had had reason to run away; what about some kid who just thought he or she was being 'smothered' by their parents? Whose parents didn't like their friends, clothes, music... whatever. Would I be judgmental about someone like that?

"I will keep my opinions to myself," I told him.

"Well, Friday at six, here. Do not wear those white boy preppie clothes. Old jeans, holes are good. Cutoffs, raggedy ass cutoffs, that's okay too. A t-shirt, white boy; an old one. Old sneakers, ones that have been in the bottom of the closet for years."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, get out of here, before I forget I promised Eleanor I'd do this. You are making a mistake, white boy. What you will see will range from kids hanging, to kids so deep in shit they can't see straight. Drunk, stoned, high."

"I understand," I told him.

"No you don't. Now, leave."

I left.

I got in the van and drove and drove.

I'd kept my temper; it had gotten easier to do as my conversation had gone on with Marcus. We rubbed each other the wrong way, no doubt about it. I could do anything if I had to, just for the one evening. Also, I wasn't entirely sure that the interview had been entirely what I thought. He had been contemptuous at first, and then at the end, seemed to agree to my coming along with hardly any discussion. Either I'd said something he liked, or maybe it was just a test, to see how I'd react if he dumped on me.

Would Eleanor have sent me to see someone as prejudiced as Marcus seemed to be, without a word of caution to me? How much had she told Marcus about me? I decided that it wouldn't hurt to ask Eleanor. But not today, today I wanted to visit my friends and have a good time. I had not had a good time since I'd left Mary's house.

Traffic was worse on the way back, and even though I'd left a little after five, it took an hour to get to Mary's. Shannon let me in, and I gave her a hug.

"How are things?" I asked her. I could hear sounds coming from the kitchen, and could smell something yummy, even if I wasn't at all sure what it was.

Shannon looked at me and shook her head. "There are times I look back over the last few weeks and just shake my head. I can't believe what's happened. Good, bad, good, bad... now good again. I never thought I'd like to sleep with a girl, but Joanna is..." Shannon sighed. "Gosh!"

I smiled. "Yep, I've lived with JR her entire life and she still gets me like that." I'd told Shannon why JR hadn't been at school on Monday, she'd asked and I'd told her. Maybe, for a few minutes, I was a little nervous about that, because I could only remember once before when someone had said a particular girl was having her period, and that had been JR telling me about Penny. Shannon had just nodded as if it made all the sense in the world, and had called JR as soon as she got home from school, Monday night.

I was chasing after things that could wait, I thought. I

made a mental note to talk to JR about what the rules were about talking to other people about things like a woman's period. I was sure women had a raft of things like that, that maybe they'd just as soon not have public knowledge.

Mary and Elizabeth came out of the kitchen, and Mary came right up to me and kissed me. She was wearing the same sort of outfit as when I'd first seen her, jeans and a blouse, tied across her stomach. She was just as stunning, as beautiful as that first time, and I kissed her with as much passion as I could.

Then it was Elizabeth's turn. In a way, she was completely different than what I first remembered her. She dressed much more conservatively than Mary, but she now had a smile on her face, at least when I was around. And she too was radiantly beautiful. And when I kissed Elizabeth, she was aggressive, sticking her tongue into my mouth, running her hands over my back and bottom, pulling me against her.

"Dinner will be soon," Shannon reminded her sister. We all laughed at that and Elizabeth and I pulled apart.

"Since you came into our lives," Mary said, putting a lilting emphasis on the word 'came', an emphasis that resulted in more laughter. "All sorts of things have changed. I won't say I was an indifferent cook before, but I'd gotten stuck in a rut of doing the same things, because they were relatively easy, and why not?

"Since I met you, and particularly Ellen, my horizons have been broadened in all sorts of ways. So, I got out my cookbook, and Elizabeth and I have been experimenting. We hope you and Shannon, as guinea pigs, will find the experiment worth while."

"Oh, ick!" Shannon said, "Test animals!"

"What are you going to test on us?" I asked, curious.

"I made gazpacho soup," Elizabeth said proudly. "If you can call something soup that doesn't get heated, and is served cold from the refrigerator."

"And I made pork chops, sautéed in butter, mushrooms and garlic. I don't know about anything else, but dinner smells heavenly."

I thought it did too, and told them.

"You forgot flowers," Shannon announced.

Déjà vu all over again, as Yogi Berra would say. Last night it had been JR's period pointing out to me that I'd gotten too casual about a very important thing. Today, I hadn't brought flowers.

I looked at the clock, it was six thirty. "Since I didn't promise to be here until seven, I'm going to rewind the clock. Back in a second."

I dashed out to the store and indeed got a nice basket of flowers, while adding to my mental list in huge letters, PAY ATTENTION TO LITTLE THINGS... they're not, not really.

When I came back, the greetings were recapitulated, which was it's own reward. That reward was followed by a nice dinner; everything that the first dinner that I'd had with the three of them hadn't been. The conversation was light-hearted, puns and short, funny anecdotes.

Elizabeth was a careful observer of people. All her life people had thought she was a loner, quiet and shy, wrapped up in her own pursuits. It seemed to me that Elizabeth was all of that, but more. Her main interest in life was mathematics; her next big interest was why people did things. I'd thought about that a time or two myself, although usually I'd scratch my head, shrug and mutter something about different strokes for different folks.

But, in the last few weeks I'd extended my baseline of people I'd met by a considerable amount. And my relationships with the people I'd met had frequently been accompanied by very heart felt conversations about a lot of important things in their lives and mine.

Still, because the conversation was light, there were quite a few places we didn't go. Then dinner was over and we all helped clean up. I realized from overheard comments that in the past clean up after dinner had been something that Shannon and Elizabeth had been doing, one at a time, for a week at a time. They had seen how Mom had organized things at our house and had realized something Mom had made a point of for as long as I



could remember: chores suck. However, if you have to do something that sucks, it sure helps to know that there is someone standing next to you, doing the same chore, or one very much like it.

Maybe Mom or Dad might not be helping with the dishes, but in a day or two, they would be. Once Dad had commented that the only things that Mom couldn't make a spreadsheet do was the chores themselves, and walk the dog. The next day, the computer started barking, whenever you looked at the to-do list. Mom is cool, no doubt about it.

But the truth was important: no one was exempt, and if someone was doing a chore, most likely everyone else was doing a chore too. Neither Mary or her husband had done dishes for years; Shannon and Elizabeth had also had more than their fair share of other cleanup chores to do too. Bill Leary had mowed the grass, taken on the garbage and a few other things; but that had been it. Mary had done a little more, but Shannon and Elizabeth had born the brunt of the work.

They agreed with Mom: chores suck, but if someone else is with you, helping, it goes down a lot easier. And if no one is exempt, well, that's another thing you can't complain about it. It was another way to say what I'd been thinking earlier; little things are important.

After dinner and dishes, Elizabeth looked me right in the eye. "I know what I'd most like to do."

"I'd like to do that myself," I said, a trifle smug.

Elizabeth was getting much better at zingers, I learned. "You like math too?"

"Ah, no."

"Well, I'm going to study for a while. Shannon's going to practice."

"I'm going to read a book on accounting," Mary interjected.

I nodded, not minding at all. "I haven't left the house without a book to read or homework to do since I was too little to remember anything."

I did have a little homework to do, and I did it. Then I read ahead in my American history book.

Around nine thirty Elizabeth put down the book she was working out of, which was, I was sure, a college calculus text book, smiled, and vanished into the bathroom.

I let my eyes rest on Mary. I hoped I would never get to the point in my life that Bill Leary had reached, where he couldn't see the wonderful, beautiful people around me. She met my eyes, her eyes gray and laughing, as I loved to see them.

"I'd asked Ellen to come tonight too, but she's indisposed."

I nodded; JR had explained it, sort of. "Saturday night, she tells me, she won't be indisposed." Mary's smile was enough to light up any room. "So my thought was that tonight you and I would be together, and you and Elizabeth could have the weekend."

That sounded like a plan, and I nodded. "Except, Elizabeth says that like as not, she'll be indisposed this weekend. So... I'm going to sleep by myself tonight, and have a surfeit this weekend."

She came close and we kissed, and after a little of that, I cupped both her breasts with my hands. She sighed, and kissed harder. When we pulled apart both of us were breathing hard, I was as hard a rock and Mary's eyes were glowing.

Once again, I was in a quandary. In every rational world, I'd now take Mary by the hand and we'd start making serious love in her bed. Instead, in a few moments Elizabeth would be back and I'd be going to her bed and making mad, passionate love to her. Then I realized that in most people's definition of a rational world, I wouldn't be lusting after a woman almost the same age as my mother. I would be content with one.

Elizabeth was a young woman any rational person could be content with. Seeing the future? What of it? She was a beautiful person, with a wonderful mind. What could anyone reasonably want beyond that?

Mary leaned close and kissed me on the forehead. "I'm detecting signs of thinking in there."

"Yeah," I replied, wishing I could be more sure of myself.

"Tom, Elizabeth and I talked. Oh, how we've talked! You've taught us both something important here in the last few weeks. There's more than one reason to have sex. Oh, the Catholic Church I was raised in says not, but I have a lot of other problems with church doctrine besides that. Sex is for making babies. Sex is for having a good time, letting your hormones romp. And if the two people making love want that joy, if they aren't out to hurt each other or anyone else, then I'm all for it! Sex is for healing, Tom. I expect it's also a good aerobic workout.

"All sorts of things. Too many people have spent too much time trying to tell other people what it means to them, and not interested in how anyone else sees it. You're comfortable with sex, Tom. And now, so am I. Once an hour, once a day, once a week; I love it all. I am looking forward to the weekend, Tom. There was a time that I was content to reach the end of the day and happy to go to bed by myself. This is better, trust me."

"You'd think," I said a little nervous, "that with something I started to do, then went and did to a fare thee well, that I would be more comfortable with it."

"You love us, Tom. You want to keep us all happy, all of the time. You can't, Tom. You have a life; we have our lives. We couldn't, shouldn't, live our lives together twenty-four seven."

I nodded at that.

Then Elizabeth was there, wearing nothing but a smile, and tugging on my hand. I blew a kiss at Mary, and went where I was more than happy to go, even if I wasn't sure how right it was.

Elizabeth undid my shirt, while I undid my jeans and kicked them all away. She pushed me down on her bed, and straddled me, her knees up around my head. I smiled, blew on her thin pussy hair, and kissed her pussy lips, running my tongue through them, finding her clit at the end of the stroke.

Elizabeth sighed, "Like that! Like that, Tom!"

So, I did some more like that. And a lot more. I blew

lightly on her, I used my tongue, I stroked with my fingers. I even used my nose to trace little lines on her inner thighs. Then I slid a finger inside her, moving it around in her vagina. She was moist, and grew more so as I rubbed inside her.

"Use two fingers," she breathed, and I did. It was all I could do, though, not to laugh. Where had Elizabeth heard those words? In a dream? Or from Jenny?

"You're awfully small and tight," I murmured, "I don't want to hurt you."

That reminded me of something I had to do, and I shifted, sliding her a little down my chest. "Elizabeth, about birth control?"

She looked at me, and shook her head. "Tom, it's something I took care of before I ever went to bed with you. It's one thing to think you know what's going to happen, but I'm pretty sure you can change some of it by doing things different. There will be plenty of time for kids, I promise. And I will have yours."

"JR took me by surprise," I admitted.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

I was used to Elizabeth knowing everything.

"She's having her first ever period this week," I told her.

I could see Elizabeth's eyes furrow. She didn't understand; I thought that remarkable, but I added, "JR saw what I was doing, and while she didn't cast her nets as far and wide, she did sow some wild oats. And since she hadn't had a period yet, it was unprotected sex. All of it." I paused, then shrugged, "except with her girlfriends."

"Oh!" Elizabeth sighed, and moved to lie down next to me. "I can see why that's caused a stir. I wasn't sure what it was."

"I thought you knew everything?" I was half-joking, not sure exactly what I meant.

"Tom, be real! I'm fourteen years old! There hasn't been

time for me to see all of my own life, not to mention the lives of everyone else. Little bits and pieces; some things I suspect are important, some that probably aren't. Sometimes I can see why they are important, but other times it's like coming in during the middle of a movie, watching for a few minutes, then getting up and leaving. Even if you'd heard someone describe the movie generally, you really haven't seen enough of it to be sure about very much.

"Combine that with not being sure of anything... well, trust me, Tom, I don't know everything and I don't want to. It's as much a curse as a blessing, that's for sure. You just don't know; I don't know."

I reached out, and laid my hand on one of her small breasts. "We didn't have dessert tonight, so, I'll have to nibble a little something, if you don't mind. Because I'm really, really hungry."

I leaned close and licked her nipple, then circled round it, leaving saliva tracks all over her breast. Then I did it to her other breast. I set down to some serious kissing on her breasts, while my hand moved down over her stomach.

Every woman I'd made love to, everyone, it seemed to me, I'd gotten off just touching them. Feeling the warmth of their skin, the muscles just underneath, the fine downy hair of stomachs and chests. Sensing a woman becoming aroused was just plain a good thing. I loved it.

When Elizabeth wrapped her hand around my penis, it grew in her hand. I hoped it was as sexy for her as it felt for me, because it felt really, really good. I wasn't surprised that I'd gone limp; thinking about the close call with JR did that very effectively. But I was glad I hadn't gotten hard again until Elizabeth had her hand on me.

"Tom," Elizabeth spoke, her voice tight.

"Elizabeth, my love, I hope this is as nice for you as it is for me."

She laughed, although she sounded a little hoarse. "Tom, if it was much better, I'd be a jelly spot on the bed. Tom, make love to me! Please! Now!"

Since I had been making love to her, and since she was lightly tugging on my erection I decided that she wanted me in her. And I was right.

I rolled on top; she spread her legs, helping me push inside her. She'd been moist before, now she was really wet. She heaved with her hips, clawing at my ass as she lifted against me. She shuddered, and came.

"Again!" she cried, "Don't stop! Fast!"

I started stroking into her, and this time Elizabeth was the fire. She seemed beyond horny, beyond reason; just wanting to be made love to. She came another time a minute later, as I was pushing deep into her and then again a short time later. Each orgasm seemed to make her uninhibited, more eager.

I'd not made love to Elizabeth very much, and this time was as different from the times before as it could be. But there was no doubt in my mind what Elizabeth wanted, and I wanted it to. I moved faster and faster, my hips slapping against her. She was very wet, and there were loud sucking and squishing sounds as I moved in and out. It would have been gross if I'd been thinking about it; it would have made me laugh at other times. Now I was as wrapped up in making Elizabeth come, as she was it having me in her.

It was too intense for either of us to last very long. She clamped down hard, closing her legs, squeezing me with her vagina. I came, an explosion that rocked me, leaving my ears ringing.

I didn't fall asleep, but it was close. I felt Elizabeth push, and I pulled away and lay down next to her. She wrapped her arm around me, put her head on my chest and started nibbling on my cheek.

"Thanks, Tom," she whispered.

"Oh, Elizabeth," I laughed, "thank you!" I told her with all the emphasis I could muster.

She giggled and I put my arm around her shoulder and hugged. "That was nice,"

"That was me hornier than I can ever remember being

before," she told me. "I don't know what came over me. I felt this ache inside of me, and I knew you could fix it. And I didn't care what you did to fix it." She grinned at me. "In fact, I think you just gave me a taste of something I didn't understand before."

"What?" I asked her.

"Unrequited hormones. Common wisdom says you guys have this all the time. In which case I understand why guys can lose it."

I figured she was talking about the Sam-Roger-Keith axis. "Well, I don't understand losing it completely. Not with someone I wasn't sure wanted to be with me."

She kissed me again. "I know; I guess I'm being unfair, because I know you're like that."

Elizabeth smiled at me. "When we've made love before, it's been so beautiful. It was something I'd imagined in my head, everything great and wonderful and beautiful and good." She paused and giggled. "I'm running on. It wasn't all cerebral, but I spent a lot of time in my own head. This time, I just wanted you, needed you."

"I won't get too far away, not any more. You know what I'm doing tomorrow?"

"Looking for a place for all of us to live. Oh, Tom, it's going to be so beautiful, it..." She suddenly stopped talking, clapping her hand over her mouth. "I shouldn't talk about it. It will be wonderful."

"I hope so," I told her. "We should get some sleep, tomorrow will be here before we know it."

"An hour and ten minutes, according to the alarm clock," Elizabeth agreed.

I chuckled. "What, it was so boring, you're watching the clock?"

She gave me a mock punch on my arm. "No, silly. If we get some sleep, we can wake up early and do this again."

Now that sounded like a plan to me!

Wednesday, April 10, 2002

She came up next to me and slid her arm around me. "Love you, Tom," she murmured, leaning close and kissing me on my cheek.

I waved at the view in front of me. "This, dearest, is as beautiful as it gets."

A short distance in front of my eyes was a lightly tinted pane of glass; a very large pane, a window that gave a completely unobstructed view of the open space before us. Across a gap of a hundred feet or more another tinted pane of glass looked back at me. There was a matching one off to my left, another to the right. Light shone into the space in front of us, streaming in from skylights in the ceiling.

It was thirty feet or more to the ground. There were trees and green growing things in planters dotted around the open space on the ground level, mixed with small fountains and tumbling freshets of water that ran over rocks. It was breathtakingly pretty.

"My first project," she said, slightly apologetic. "I was still learning."

I looked closer at her. She was my age, maybe a little older. A mop of blonde curls for hair; flyaway hair, I thought. Esmay Souza had hair like that in Elizabeth Moon's stories. Eyes that were pale gray, not nearly the depth of color that Mary or Elizabeth had. Paler than Shannon's eyes, too.

I was dreaming, I realized. And that realization helped me recognize her; we'd stood together on the top of a huge hotel, watching a spaceship rise in the distance. Elizabeth had been on the roof with us; I'd dreamed it. Except this girl was younger than the one I'd seen before. I was sure it was the same person, though.

"You have that look again," she said, half laughing and shaking her head.

"Sorry," I apologized.



"And we all tell you not to apologize and you do it anyway. The weird thing is you wonder why we love you. None of us have doubts, Tom."

"Doubts are good, God told me that himself," I told her.

"It was a dream, Tom. Just like this one." She started laughing, a little hysterical. "Sorry, I promise I won't lose it. Haven't, since the first night."

"That night was the night you did the smartest you could."

"I've moved on, Tom. I'm not a girl, lost and alone sitting in a doorway and an ounce away from eternity. Let's move the conversation on again, Tom."

"Sorry,"

"I'm not," she replied firmly. "It's just that I want to move on."

I sat up in bed. Actually, I shot upright like someone had hit me with a jolt of electricity.

Elizabeth opened an eye, smiled. "A dream, Tom. You have a lot of them. Come lay back down."

"Who is she?" I asked, "Short, curly blonde hair. Her eyes are paler than Shannon's. She's my height."

"Someone you've seen in a dream," Elizabeth explained.

"That's not exactly what I meant."

"But it's enough. Tom, I talk too much; please."

I felt like I'd had a six-pack of coke in the last hour. My nerves were jumpy, my mind was bouncing around like a mountain goat pronging off mountain peaks in a cartoon. Was seeing the future a disease you could catch?

Tony was a big fan of Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel. He'd explained the plots to me; I'd watched a few episodes of both. Buffy was okay. I liked the dialog; it was clever and witty. Angel was darker, much too dark for my taste. But there weren't enough hours in the week for all the things I did; TV

was something I watched maybe an hour or two a week, most weeks. Sometimes in the summer I watched more, but not often. Sometimes during the school year I'd go days and days without watching it.

But Angel reminded me of Cordelia, who had caught the ability to see visions from an Irish demon. Those visions didn't look like much fun, and from everything Tony said about how the story was going, I was glad I didn't watch. My mind is weird, sometimes. This wasn't a TV show; I'd just had a vivid dream, that was all.

Elizabeth pulled my arm around her, leading it to a bare breast.

"Do you wear anything at night when you sleep?" I asked, curious. At least it was a completely different topic.

"No, I never have. I thought I was terribly wicked; then your mom wanted us all to do it, walking around and awake." She squeezed my fingers down against her breast. "I like it, Mom likes it; Shannon is grossed out."

"Her choice," I whispered, settling down. Elizabeth's nipples weren't taut, just normal. I contemplated trying to change that, but even as I did, Elizabeth's hand fell away. Now and then I could fall asleep like that, but not often. Lately, more than usual, though. I grinned at my memories of the reasons why I'd had little trouble sleeping lately.

As jazzed as I was, it didn't take long to return to the land of Nod, but I don't remember any dreams.

I felt Elizabeth move. She was positioning herself to go down on me, I thought. I opened my eyes, and saw it was starting to get light outside. Four thirty or so, I thought. Elizabeth did just like I thought she was going to do.

She didn't have to do much to get me hard; I lay back, enjoying the pleasure she was giving me. Her tongue was running over the head of my cock, her mouth was wrapped around me, and she was lightly sucking.

"Mmmm," I whispered. "I'm awake," I told her.

She didn't say anything, just kept working my erection,

using her hand now as well as her mouth and tongue. I jerked and came, spilling my seed into her waiting and willing mouth.

She did a fair job of cleaning me up, then did a Sue Ellen: she hopped quickly out of bed. "Come along, Tom," Elizabeth requested. She beckoned to me, turned and walked out of the room.

Okay, I was a little disappointed.

It didn't last long, because a second later Mary came in the door. "My daughter informs me that we need a shower," she said. The beautiful grin, the laughing eyes.

"Okay..." I laughed.

We'd been in the shower about two seconds before we were making love, standing up. I remembered as Mary came the first time what I'd said to Fleur at the orgy. Sex after sex beat the heck out of cigarettes. Or a shower. But a shower and sex after sex, is a delicious variation on a theme.

Again, I can't describe the feeling that ran through my mind and body as I made love to Mary. A warm, living breathing person, whose interest and hormones quickened under my touch. I ran my hands over her bottom, pulling me to her, kissing her like I'd done the last few times we'd done nothing but kiss. Telling her I remembered and had been saving up.

Finally we were both replete, content. We dried each other off, smiling like giddy school kids having the time of their lives at Disneyland.

Mary finally spoke, as we were about leave. "I'm going to my room. I know Ellen is a fan of minimal makeup, but I'm going to have to do something so it doesn't look so obvious that someone made my day this morning."

That thought led me to think about Mary going to work, then why Mary had to go to work. She leaned close, kissed me lightly. "No, I don't feel guilty; I just don't want to advertise that I'm not a devastated new widow whose husband was brutally murdered a few days ago."

I reached out and took her hand, squeezing it lightly. "And I've never felt guilty making love to you; not the first

time, not the times in-between and not now."

She smiled back. "You go get ready for school, I will go get ready for work," she paused and laughed. "Oh, did I mention that we all usually skip breakfast?"

My stomach took that moment to growl; both of us laughed. "I didn't do that on purpose," I told her.

"I have no idea how one could do that on purpose. I trust you in the kitchen, Tom. Fix yourself something."

I got dressed, asking Elizabeth if she wanted breakfast. She actually made a face. "Your family is crazy, Tom. If I ate breakfasts and lunches and dinners like you guys, I'd look like a blimp."

I looked at her blandly, "Well, I hope you watch your weight, because I plan on doing my part to help you work off those excess calories."

She smiled at me, and I went and found Shannon still snoozing. "I hate getting up," she told me. "Usually around six, Mom drags me out of bed."

"Breakfast?" I asked, and she shook her head.

"I hate eating by myself," I said with a sigh.

"I have a glass of juice before I go to school," Shannon told me. She looked at the door to her room, and I realized that she wanted to snooze some more.

I laughed and went into the kitchen. How simple it is, to assume that everyone does everything the same way as you do... even the simplest things. And it just wasn't the case.

Around seven my cell phone went off, and I picked up. Everyone was out and about by then. Although Elizabeth's nose was in a book, and Mary was talking to Shannon about a shopping list.

"Tom," I said.

"Miriam," she said on the other end. "I haven't forgotten you. I just got distracted."

"That's okay," I told her, "you're not my personal servant."

"Four o'clock at the site, is that okay?"

"That's fine. I've been working on a list of questions," I told her. "I hope you can help shed a little light, too."

"As I said, property isn't my specialty. I could get someone to come along who is, if you'd like."

"No. Later, probably, if it looks good. I really appreciate this Miriam."

"Your uncle said you were going to write a proposal memo from this visit."

I would have flipped my uncle off, if he'd been present. A couple of times I'd flapped my own mouth; I was learning to put a stop to that. I wished I could tell an adult to put a sock in it, too.

"There will be quite a bit of research first before there is a memo. If there is a memo."

"You're paying the bank for my advice; they pay me to make it. I'd like to make a suggestion."

"That's what you're here for," I agreed.

"Write a memo, even if five seconds after you get there you get disgusted and call it off. Explain why you decided the way you did. Explain it to yourself, to anyone else."

I almost mentioned my diary, what else is my diary for, but for explaining me to myself? Sure, there are lots of times I just sit down and write, but there are other times where I spend a little while organizing my thoughts first.

"Thanks, Miriam, I'll do that. You're right."

"I'm going to call Mrs. Leary's real estate agent later this morning with an offer. I talked to her Monday afternoon and we've worked out a plan for the escrow and all of that. Please, don't mention to anyone that I talked directly to her;

that's a big no-no in real estate.

"Not against the law, but against good practice," she concluded.

Which explained, at least in part, why Mary was in such a chipper good mood. What would Miriam think of Mary and I if she found out that not only had we showered together this morning, but got very, very friendly as well? There wasn't the least spark of interest on my part towards Miriam; I was sure there was even less interest on Miriam's part towards me. Well, it wasn't exactly lying, not telling her about it. Sensible, though.

It was an odd chauffeur route; first Penny, then JR and Jenny, with Elizabeth and Shannon already in the van. Dad was due a few minutes after I left to pick up Mary, as they were now occasionally car-pooling.

Mr. Miller called me up at the end of homeroom; I was concerned this time.

He handed me a folded piece of paper; this time it was a sheet of regular paper, though.

I read it. Then reread it, shaking my head in disbelief. It was titled 'Confidential memo to all teachers' and explained my financial status, and that of my parents and mentioned Uncle Craig, but without the numbers, just a 'safely can be assumed to be in 9 figures,' notification. Teachers were alerted to possible kidnapping attempts, and perhaps even terrorist threats against my family and me.

I folded the letter back up, creased it with a great deal of firmness. "I wonder," I said under my breath, "what part of 'leave me alone' they didn't understand?"

"You can keep it, if you want," he told me. "That was in everyone's box this morning."

It's funny; I'd already noticed it this week, where it hadn't been something I'd ever paid attention to before. Mr. Miller was no fool; he knew exactly what the memo meant to me and my family, how quickly it would be a matter of common knowledge at school, and then who knew all where?

"Thanks," I told him. Instead of leaving, I went back to my assigned seat and sat down.

This time I called my dad first, and explained. He had just gotten to work, and was settling into his desk. Two seconds later, he was well on his way to low earth orbit.

"Let me call Craig, your mom, Bill Carstairs. Stay handy."

"I have a copy of the memo," I told him.

"Take care of it," Dad told me. "One day you'll be able to gold plate it and stick it on the wall."

"Right next the quarter from under the fridge," I told him.

He grunted, "I'll get back to you in a few minutes."

I hung up and then sat thinking for a few minutes; people started coming in for the first period class; the First Bell went off, the start of the passing period.

I got up and went up to the front, to Mr. Miller. I stuck out my hand, "Thanks, sir."

He took my hand and shook it.

I held up the piece of paper. "I'd have learned about this eventually, but I really appreciate the head's up. I really appreciate how you run home room."

He chuckled, "First time anyone ever said that, usually I'm an ogre."

"You are an ogre," I told him. "But you get the job done, and everyone knows it. Lately I've noticed that when people don't do their job well, life isn't as good as it could be. Even if it's a little thing like taking home room attendance."

"Rudi Guiliani and his police commissioner did that in New York a few years ago. They policed even the little things; the crime rate plummeted across the board. I'm from Brooklyn, but I moved my family away a long time ago; I didn't think anyone could fix things back there. But, I saw how they did it. So I copied their methods."

"Good job," I told him, and then went out into the hall.

My phone rang; this time it was Uncle Craig. "Go to the office, tell them you are leaving school for a family emergency," he told me. "Then be in front of the school in fifteen minutes, we'll meet you."

"Yes, sir."

So I headed for the office, went to the secretary's desk and told one of them that I was leaving. She wanted a note, and I told her I'd come back with one. She took my name, and when she heard it, she looked at me curiously.

I found my fingernails were biting into my palm; I forced myself to relax. "I may be back, but I don't know when," I told her.

"Just a minute, let me tell Mr. Jones."

She left, but so did I.

Uncle Craig was quicker than he'd anticipated; he was already there when I walked out front. Aunt Shirley was driving, and I nodded to both of them as I got into the back seat of the Lexus.

I handed Uncle Craig the memo, and he read it. Then he handed it to Aunt Shirley, who read it as well.

He handed the memo back. "Downtown, Shirley. I'll give you the directions," he told her.

He turned to me. "What do you think we should do?"

If I was a betting person, I'd have bet Uncle Craig was beyond furious right then. There was a muscle that kept jumping at the corner of his mouth; I could see the tendons in his neck. What he said didn't sound like he was that angry.

I'd been that angry, too. And I hadn't given any thought about what to do, except to call Dad, who I knew would call Craig. Well, I'd demanded more say in things.

"I haven't thought about it," I told him. "Right now I'm too angry to think straight."



He nodded, but it was Aunt Shirley who spoke. "That's a good idea, Craig. Give it a few minutes."

He nodded. "I don't know who said it, but you're right. Revenge is sweeter, cold."

"Just be sure to start with the finger pointing in the right direction when you begin assigning blame," she told her husband.

"There's that, too."

"I should have been a little less arrogant," I told them.

"Tom, you'll always lag behind Craig in that department," my aunt laughed as she said that.

"Tom," Craig interjected, "I spent more than a decade working on ways to keep anyone from noticing how many eggs we have in our basket. I went to elaborate lengths to keep the numbers secure."

"Fifteen years ago, more or less, the space shuttle Challenger blew up. They'd skimmed a few bucks on rubber o-rings; they couldn't handle a frosty morning. They were thinking space pickup truck; forgetting that what it actually is, is an engineering nightmare with a half million moving parts, all supplied by the lowest bidders."

"There are all kinds of arrogance, Tom. All kinds. Mine, sure that I could deal with letting you have control of your share. I simply forgot the most important part of the equation: anyone who could do what I expected you to do, wasn't about to let someone else control them, not at all. And I was sure that I could deal with some moron dumping the numbers out to the public, because I'd simply lie about the decimal place, and then get the bank to lie as well, and start over."

"However, with it all here in the memo, pretty much, lying isn't the option it once was."

"Is there really a danger?" I asked, but I knew the answer. I wasn't ignorant, after all.

"The Unabomber, among others," Craig replied, "a lot more."

Luddites, anarchists, Mafia, Tongs, Yakusa, drug kingpins; yeah that's something we now get to live with. Unless we can somehow keep this quiet, and stuff the genie back in the bottle."

"When I told the school secretary I was leaving, she ran off to get the Vice Principal." I sighed. "You can't keep it quiet. Last year, my friend Tony was a lab assistant for biology, first period. Miss Parks had him pick up the stuff in her box almost every day. She's not the only one that has a student do it. The teachers know, some of the kids know today, tomorrow... most of them."

If nothing else, the day was an exercise in the use of financial clout. We reached the law offices shortly after nine. Mom and Dad were already there, plus two lawyers and Bill Carstairs got there a little later.

Dad read the memo, Mom read it, and the lawyers read it.

"An example of the Peter Principle at work," Dad said with a laugh.

I don't think any of the lawyers got it; Mom punched Dad on the arm, and Craig glowered, while Shirley laughed.

By ten in the morning, we'd added Miriam's banker boss and another lawyer from another firm, specializing in something I wasn't very clear about.

About eleven, I got up and went outside when I'd seen Bill Carstairs go out; I think he was headed for the rest room, but I got to him first. "Is there a computer I could use here to connect with the Internet?" I asked.

A minute later I was sitting at a table in what they called the law library, and logged on. I called up Google and put in my name. It took a couple of tries before I could focus on myself, but there it was.

When Uncle Craig had moved the money into my name, the bank had reported to the transaction to the government; that in turn had alerted the Drug Enforcement Agency, who had looked at Uncle Craig's holdings and mine. They had agreements with all sorts of offshore financial institutions, and they'd unraveled all of his financial machinations, and my trivial purchase of a van.

Then, since his holdings looked similar to what someone doing money laundering for the drug cartels or organized crime, they'd dug further into the holding companies, tracing transactions. Early yesterday, some agent at the DEA filed a report saying that while the first examination showed everything looked okay, there were still a few strings left to be pulled. Should he go ahead and pull them?

I had no idea what the agent's boss had replied; but someone had hacked the DEA's computer Monday afternoon and the report was handed to a website that specialized in exotic stuff, stolen from the government. Now the DEA report was on about ten different websites.

I'd made notes, so I logged off and went back to the meeting. Sure enough, they were eating deli sandwiches; Mom had ordered me a roast beef. I like roast beef sandwiches. I can't stand sprouts. Not only were the roast beef sandwiches stuffed with sprouts, but so was everything else, including the egg salad sandwiches. Ick!

So, I settled for munching some chips and a cookie, drinking a soda pop, my stomach protesting it's second missed meal of the day.

I laid out my research.

Talk about bombshells!

About an hour later two representatives from the DEA were there, and very quickly sweating profusely, as they simply had no good explanation for how the report had been leaked to the Internet.

At two, Dr. Stone arrived, along with two lawyers and someone else from the high school district administration.

I was starting to get nervous; as far as I could tell, aside from suing everyone on the far side of the table I couldn't see any real solution. Since there wasn't anything worthwhile being proposed, my thoughts had gone to Miriam and the tour of the property. I didn't want to mess that up; worse, the van was still parked at school. Who was going to do the chauffeuring?

I asked Mom and she told me that she'd picked up Dad, that

he'd left his car and Mary was going to do the after school driving. Mentally, I winced. Mary did not need to miss more work, but what could we do?

That worry more or less resolved, that still left Miriam. I wrote a quick note to the banker, having pulled his name from my memory. Gavin Henderson it was. I need to learn how to remember names better.

Anyway, I simply wrote that I had an appointment with Miriam at four in the afternoon, and could he ask her to meet me at the law offices and give me a ride?

He nodded, got up and went outside, cell phone in hand.

"Your project?" Uncle Craig asked, and I nodded.

By then it was nearly three, and Uncle Craig seemed to wake up from his nap; or something. He'd been pretty much silent, while the lawyers and everyone else discussed things.

"Let me sum things up right now from my perspective; we can go into torts and all of that at a later time.

"The bank made a legally required notification to the government about a certain private financial transaction of a corporation that I am the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Financial Officer. The DEA investigated not only the particular transaction, but in just a few days, did a rather thorough dissection of our family's financial affairs over the last twelve years, and found nothing amiss. A DEA employee wrote a report to that effect and emailed it to his boss; somewhere in that process, the report was hacked by person or persons unknown.

"These persons released the report to at least one site on the Internet; more sites have since posted the report now as well.

"Monday afternoon, the administrators at North High school started examining Tom's personal information; something they had not done adequately prior to that. They found the DEA report, and that administration then made a number of determinations of risk and thought it incumbent upon themselves to warn the faculty and staff at Tom's school as to perceived threats.

"Does anyone here wish to dispute this outline?"

The DEA people said they would launch an internal investigation into how the report was hacked, plus how much other material had been released as well.

The school district was a horse of a different color. "We neither confirm nor deny the facts as stated. We will conduct our own internal investigation," their lawyer said. "Until that is complete, we can not speak to the matter."

Uncle Craig waved the 'confidential memo'. "Is that your final offer?"

The lawyer shrugged. "We need to do due diligence here, Mr. Summers. I'm sure you understand."

"Let me phrase this another way, then," Uncle Craig. "I haven't polled my corporate Board, but there is quorum present in the room in case you doubt my authority."

He turned to Bill Carstairs. "I want you to draw up a general release of liability for the bank, insofar as the events as I stated. I will sign it, my wife Shirley Summers will sign, as well as David and Ellen Ferguson. I'm sure Mr. Henderson will want to get a legal opinion from his own legal staff before signing, but considering what else is going to come out of this meeting, I think they will agree."

He turned to the DEA people. "I am not a litigious person, nor are any of the others in my family. You have, through carelessness and negligence, placed my family at some risk, not to mention rather thoroughly violated our privacy by making public our most intimate financial details.

"You may make an offer of settlement at any time, but in this matter we have no choice but to litigate without a substantial settlement. Seven figures, at the least."

"We can't begin to speak to that," the DEA lead agent told us.

"I know; I just wanted you to know what to expect. Your agent did his job, but somewhere along the line, someone screwed up. You can settle or we'll litigate."

The DEA people nodded, stood up and left.

"The high school district administration has failed to adequately supervise the administrative staff at North Phoenix High School. First, they wanted to suspend Tom Ferguson for reasons that are beyond ludicrous."

"That decision has been rescinded," the school district lawyer said. "It was never made public."

"Which is why at lunch that day, half the people I eat lunch with knew about it," I interjected.

I learned about what 'looking daggers' at someone really means. If that lawyer had had knives in his eyes, I'd have been a pincushion.

"I am willing to settle with the district, here and now," Uncle Craig went on.

"That man," he pointed at Dr. Stone, "is put on immediate suspension and put in charge of the paper shredder or something. He has no business running anything more complicated than that. You will issue another memo, by 8 AM tomorrow morning, saying that the original memo was in error, the decimal places were missing when amounts were reported in dollars and your people misread them. You will deliver to my attorneys here, by close of business tomorrow, the fee for their services, plus the sum of one dollar, payable to David and Ellen Ferguson for damages.

"Do that, and we'll sign a release of all claims against the district."

Ah! Uncle Craig's plan was clear. Offer a carrot, threaten a huge stick and hope that the correction would be accepted. Probably not, I thought. On the other hand, there was nothing else I could see that offered anything like a chance.

"We'll need to consult," the lawyer for the district said. "We need a few days."

"You can make a few phone calls, and insure that the memo was actually put in all of the staff mail boxes this morning. You will probably also be able to determine that the contents are now generally known.

"Frankly, if you were to take a couple of days, a week, to make up your minds, a 'correction' would be viewed as bogus. No, to your request for more time. Tomorrow morning the corrected memo is in the mailboxes; Dr. Stone is to be put to some more appropriate task in view of his obvious incapacity. By close of business tomorrow the attorney fees have been paid.

"That, or we will file a suit first thing Friday morning. Since our family's obscurity will not be possible any further, we would seek maximum publicity on what has been done and not done by the district. I do believe everyone on the school board will be standing for reelection in the fall. I'm new to the area, but David or Ellen would stand for the board, plus others. Trust me, the dollar figure on the legal action will be millions of times greater what it will cost you to settle tomorrow. Maybe a billion times."

They left, and Craig kicked everyone out except the five of us. "I know I didn't ask, and if anyone has a better idea, I'd be glad to hear it."

"No, Craig, that was okay," Mom told her brother.

"Ditto," Dad added, "not that I think you have a chance in hell of bringing it off."

"Ditto that," I said.

Aunt Shirley nodded, "I go with the consensus, dear. It's a fig-leaf, but it's our only fig-leaf."

I thought for a second, glanced at my watch. Odds were, Miriam was someplace outside, waiting for me. "Craig, there is a teacher at my school. I do not make this recommendation lightly, but he'd make a good principal, I think. Mike Miller, he's the shop teacher."

"I think that would be pushing our luck," Uncle Craig said.

I waved at the door. "Don't push our luck. Have Bill Carstairs or Gavin Henderson or someone else make the recommendation. Now, I have another engagement."

I turned to my parents. "I'm really sorry about this."

"Not your fault, Tom," Dad said. Mom hugged me.

I zipped out the door, and sure enough, Miriam was there. "You don't mind chauffeuring me around again?" I asked.

She waved, "Gavin told me a little about what was going on. We have a staff meeting first thing in the morning." She shook her head. "I can hardly wait."

We walked down to where she had her car parked and got in. As we drove, I sat thinking; Miriam, it seemed, had things to think about as well, as she didn't speak either.

The leasing agent's name was Howard Greeley; I had a notepad I'd pilfered at the lawyer's office and I wrote it down. We stood outside the place, and he gave us the basic statistics.

"The building is three hundred feet long, one hundred and fifty wide; there are three floors. Because of the design, you enter by walking up a broad set of steps to what would be the second floor. There is another floor above that, and one below.

"The current lease holder occupies the first floor, while a variety of tenants have subleases for space on the second and third floors. The building typically runs about 66 per cent occupancy."

"Why such a occupancy rate?" I asked.

The agent looked at me, then at Miriam. "The original congregation still owns the property. They have attached a number of codicils to the trust deed for the property concerning what can and cannot be done within the confines of the building. That is not negotiable; those codicils will remain as part of the deed until the end of time. No buyer has been willing to agree to them, not all tenants qualify. Further, the owners feel that the property, because of location, demands a premium."

He looked me right in the eye. "So, the market speaks. There are not as many tenants as there would be, if the lease costs were lower."

He waved at the building again. "Each floor has about 40,000 square feet of leaseable space, 45,000 each, total. The current sublease rate is a dollar twenty a square foot. The main lease is a dollar ten."



Miriam spoke up. "The going rate for commercial space like this in this area is less than a dollar a square foot."

"A premium is a premium," he told us.

"And if someone was willing to agree to all of codicils, how much would they want for the property?" I asked, more formal than I'd ever spoken in my life. I was entirely sure the price was going to be in the millions of dollars.

"Six and a half million," he replied.

I did my math. "Something like four years at a 100% occupancy of all three floors."

He shook his head. "I can't let you use that number, young man. Two thirds is the most common occupancy percentage. Eighty thousand times two thirds times a dollar twenty."

He was going to speak the number, so I gave it to him. "Sixty four thousand against a lease of one hundred and forty-eight thousand per month. Surprise, they are out of business," I said.

"The latest in a string of failures that go back thirty years," Miriam added.

"I think," Miriam rejoined, "that the rate of return the owners expect is out of line with market conditions, Mr. Greeley."

I started on my own list of questions. "How is the building heated and cooled?"

"HVAC," he told me. I had no idea what that was, so I just noted it down.

"And what does it cost per month?"

"The electric bill averages about six thousand a month; the water bill is a thousand one hundred, gas is about three hundred a month, trash and sewer runs about the same as gas."

Eight thousand a month for utilities; my plan was nuts; simply nuts.

"Property taxes?" Miriam asked.

He grinned, "The congregation got a 99-year exemption on them when they built the original building. That exemption has nearly forty years left to run. It was granted right after the Second World War; the City Council didn't make it a revocable exemption. Who ever owns the building, gets the exemption on property taxes."

"And if there were no exemption?" I asked.

"About a hundred thousand a year," he told us.

For another hour I asked questions, Miriam asked questions, and Howard replied; he volunteered a lot of numbers too, when it looked like we were headed that way. While we asked questions, we walked through the building.

Finally I realized it was getting on towards seven pm. I was late for dinner, I suspected Miriam and Howard were as well.

I thanked him for his help; ignoring his pained look. Somewhere along the line, he'd figured out it was me that was interested in the property, not Miriam.

Miriam drove me the couple of miles home. "Thanks, Miriam."

She looked me square in the eye and rendered her verdict. "I don't think I could recommend that property as in investment, even in the way you wanted to use it." She grimaced. "You can get a decent apartment in most of Phoenix at 75 cents a square foot, you can get the same apartment in Scottsdale for 90 cents, and you could lease the Taj Mahal for two dollars."

"I need to think about it," I told her; no matter how much I agreed with her I didn't want to close out options. Nothing to hurry about, I thought. I would wager there was no herd of likely tenants rushing to their door.

Dinner turned out to be at Kim and Penny's house, with them, my aunt and uncle and my family. I made a mental note; I wanted to talk to Mom, Kim and Shirley as soon as possible about Mary, Elizabeth and Shannon.

Kim bluntly told us that there would be no talking about finances at the dinner table.

What Kim fixed for dinner was an interesting change of pace. She grilled a dozen steaks, she and the girls had worked on potato salad, there was corn on the cob and three chocolate pies that we put whipped cream on, in lieu of meringue. It wasn't bad at all; I set an all time personal best, demolishing more than a pound of steak, four pieces of corn and two pieces of pie.

Afterwards, of course, I suffered from a bloated stomach, but hey, I'd missed two meals! A boy's got to eat!

After dinner we did have the discussion. Kim and Penny hadn't been mentioned; Penny clearly didn't understand the fuss. They were probably okay.

"At least for now," Craig told everyone, "we'll just say that the numbers were wrong. Just that; I'll talk decimal points and all of that. The rest of you just shake your heads and say the numbers are wrong. In truth, they aren't exactly right, so it's not a complete lie. We will go with that for the time being."

That finished, I asked the women if I could speak with them. It certainly got their curiosity up; more so when I made a point of excluding my dad and Craig.

"I want you to think about something," I asked them. "We are a family, so I've been told. It's been less than a month since I learned Penny and I are cousins, that I have not only cousins I didn't know about in LA, but half sisters as well."

"Dad's parents had some money, but the bulk of everything we have came from Mom and Craig's father. Craig and Dad have done what I consider to be a good thing: they've taken care of the kids. This is kind of like the Heinlein novel, 'The Moon is a Harsh Mistress.' A big marriage, sort of. Except it's not formalized as such."

Aunt Shirley shook her head, "It is formalized to a large part by the contracts Craig wrote, spelling out just what everyone's share is, and putting Keisha on the Board of the corporation as well. Just no formal wedding vows, except those society wouldn't have kittens about."

"I want to include Mary and her daughters in the family," I said boldly. "At some point in time, that would include financial provision for them."

They were silent for a second, and then Mom touched my hand. "And why aren't Dave and Craig here, Tom?"

I met her eye. "Because you three are in the same boat as Mary. Mom didn't inherit anything from her father, he cut her out of the will; everything she has, Craig and Dad gave her. The same with you and Aunt Shirley, Kim."

"That's true," Aunt Shirley said. "But I don't understand what you want from us."

"Understanding, that's first," I told her. "Also, if you agree, then Craig and Dad are more likely to agree as well. I'd also like to ask all of my generation what their thoughts are; because I might be the first to ask this, but I seriously doubt I'll be the last."

Aunt Shirley stared at me for a second, then smiled. "Had I been asked a few weeks ago about my opinion of you, Tom, I'd have said you were an amiable, polite young man. A child of your times, though, singularly without ambition or direction. I'm not sure about the ambition, but you do seem to have found a direction."

"And he's really, really, good in bed," Kim piped up.

"I'll take your word on that," Aunt Shirley said, "at least for the time being." She smiled at me.

I remembered the comments about Aunt Shirley being very fond of young people. I flushed a little, but quickly recovered.

"It's just something to think about for now," I told them. "That's all."

"And if Craig or Dave ask what we talked about?" My aunt asked.

"I wanted your opinions, that's all. I want you to think about them for a while. At some point, obviously, I'll need to

explain myself to Craig and Dad. In the meantime, it wouldn't hurt anyone to be thinking about it. I certainly am going to be."

A bit later, I was dropped off at the high school to pick up my van, and I told Dad, who was driving, that I was going to try and stop and visit Tony on the way home.

I sat in the van and called Tony at Sue Ellen's; it was close to nine, but he didn't have a problem if I stopped over for a bit.

He and Sue Ellen had been watching a DVD; they sat on the couch in the home theater room, arms wrapped around each other.

"Have you heard any good rumors lately?" I asked them.

Tony chuckled. "Oh yeah!"

Sue Ellen shook her head. "Stupid is what they are. I've been to your house. You're not the Waltons or Bill Gates."

"Waltons?" I asked, surprised. Hadn't that been a TV show a long time ago?

"Wal-Mart Waltons," Sue Ellen told me.

"Oh, no, we're not like that. There is money in the family, but it's not that big of a deal. The school panicked. I don't know for sure what's going to happen; my parents and my Aunt and Uncle were really pissed, they are probably going to sue. Of course, if we win the law suit, we will be billionaires," I joked.

"That would be cool," Tony said. "You can get Sue Ellen's mom to come over and help design your home theater. This is so cool... my dad never knew what hit him. He's back; I'm back and all of that. Now he's planning on getting an even bigger screen than what Sue Ellen's parents have." He waved at the TV; that was going to take some doing, because Sue Ellen's TV was mammoth.

"Well, I'd like to ask a favor," I told them. "When people tell you about all that money, could you just laugh and tell them you've been to my house?"

"Sure," they chorused.

I thanked them, and drove the rest of the way home.

I was tired; Jenny seemed to be more tired, and had crashed on my bed before I even got there. I would have gone down to the family room, but she told me to stay.

So, I sat down at my desk, and looked at the numbers from the building.

A hundred and fifty thousand dollars was a lot to spend a month on rent. Offsetting that with sub-lease income that was less than half of that made it no less brain dead stupid.

I decided that I'd write it all out, and I started typing away on my computer, trying to put my thoughts in order.

I fell asleep again, sitting in my chair.

It was a very scary dream. It was like when the accident happened. I opened my eyes, and I was upside down. Except this time I wasn't in the old Camry, this time I was balancing, standing on my head, trying to read a right-side up copy of my own memo.

It was hard, it was confusing, and I surely hoped that nothing like this was really ahead for me in the future, because my head hurt and I couldn't read what I'd written.

I woke up then, and my head did hurt. I'd leaned over and laid my head down on the desk; I was staring at the monitor from an angle, and instead of upside down, it was just on it's side.

I still don't understand dreams, there's something more going on in dreams than just sleep and random synapses firing. You can have your nose rubbed into the obvious for just so long, before you realize what the real message is.

Spend the six and a half million; maybe we could get them to come down on the price, but I didn't think so. I had a sneaking suspicion that the price had once been much higher.

Lower the lease rate to \$1.10 a square foot; that should bring in more business. That would be an income of about \$60,000 a month, with an 66% occupancy. That was about 11% a

year, return on investment. I hadn't been completely asleep when Uncle Craig had been talking to the bankers; I'd paid attention to Miriam when we'd been talking about investments. Eleven percent was nothing to sneeze at these days. Get the lease rate up to 80% and the return would be 13%.

I redid the numbers in my memo, they looked much better. Around midnight I went to bed, feeling much better.

Jenny made me feel much better too, when she wrapped her arm around me and whispered sleepily, "Tomorrow night, Tom. Back in commission!"

Ah yes, life was good! I slept.

Thursday, April 11, 2002

Jenny woke me up before my alarm clock did when she got out of bed and headed for the shower. I got up myself and went and reviewed my memo for Uncle Craig and the family to make sure I hadn't been dreaming everything. It sure didn't look like it; I was pleased at how well the idea was looking now. I didn't really have any idea how many families would want to live there, nor could I be sure that the number of leaseholders would stay as high as I thought.

Still, the bottom line was that even if half the tenants left, which seemed unlikely, how many people lived in a house that put close to half a million bucks a year into their pockets? A lot of people would be happy to earn more \$40,000 a year; having that as a monthly income, even if split four, five or six ways, wasn't something to sneeze at.

Then I had a real brainstorm; probably one of the most important insights of my life. Who were the smartest people I knew? Elizabeth, Jenny and JR. Who had told me to do the memo all by myself? The answer to the last question was no one. I promptly logged onto my email program and fired off a copy to each of them.

I patted my computer on top of the monitor. Elizabeth practically slept with her computer; if she didn't have her nose in a book, she was sitting at her keyboard doing all sorts of things. Sure, I do school work on the computer, I type my diary on it. But it's like a hammer or screwdriver to me; a tool I use to do a job. Still, now and then, even a hammer or computer

needs a little praise for doing the job particularly well.

Jenny was out of the shower by then, so I did my morning things, then zipped downstairs to the kitchen. No way was I going to miss breakfast two days in a row! Dad had a little gizmo thing that did doughnuts and pancakes; I mixed up pancake batter and got the griddle hot. I filled a little soup pan half full of water, set the heat on low and put the maple syrup in it to warm up.

By the time people were ready to eat, I managed a steady stream of pancakes, then finished up the last of them all by my lonesome.

Just before seven, the house phone rang, and Dad went off to get it. He was back a minute later, shaking his head.

"That was Craig; the school district decided to punt. They've suspended your principal for a week, while they 'look into the matter.'"

"And what did Craig say to that?" Mom asked.

Dad grinned wolfishly. "Craig says the suit is filed tomorrow unless they meet our terms. We aren't in a mood for compromise or half measures, he told them."

Dad turned to me. "This is called brinkmanship when you're in politics. You have to be careful you don't paint yourself into a corner."

Mom changed the subject, "We didn't ask how Tom's visit turned out yesterday afternoon."

It was my turn to grin wolfishly. "Let's just say that I was surprised at the numbers. Currently they lease out two floors and the income is about \$64,000 a month, on a lease payment nearly three times that. As I told the leasing agent, it isn't a surprise that they are going out of business."

Mom looked troubled. "The payment would be \$200,000 a month? That doesn't sound like a very affordable house payment. We could buy a couple of places in the Country Club for that."

"I'm working on something. It's not quite ready for you to see yet. Hopefully tonight."



It was Dad's turn to look troubled. "Craig isn't fond of quick, sloppy work. Your mom and I aren't either. You should take your time with it, Tom. You need to be careful. There are a lot of questions."

"There are," I admitted. "Still, a lot of the questions are just engineering; the concept's solid," I said that with a smile. I'd heard that from Dad since I was little, when he was working as an engineer. Concepts, he'd told me a thousand times, are the hard part. Once you've got the concept, the rest is engineering. It's like a jigsaw puzzle; once you have the picture, the rest is just fitting the pieces together.

When Elizabeth got in the van, she told me she'd gotten my email. Jenny chipped in that she'd gotten it too. "I don't see any problems with it, except you need to put in money for remodeling expenses," Elizabeth told me. "If you make it pretty, people will pay more to have their offices there."

I'd been thinking the other way, cutting the price. Remodeling? Everything I'd ever heard about remodeling said it was expensive. I was sure I didn't have to ask anyone about it, even though I would. I bet remodeling cost about as much as you were willing to pay, and you had to be very careful to get what you paid for.

Jenny said something to Elizabeth, that I didn't catch, then turned to me. "Sometimes, Tom, less can be more too."

I was driving by then, so I couldn't pay her much direct attention. "What do you mean?" I asked, while watching the traffic around me.

"Well, we went to a dentist that had an office in a building with an atrium, with plants and fountains and all of that," Jenny told me.

I remembered my dream, and I was suddenly a lot more interested in what Jenny had to say.

"The dental assistant that I saw when I went there told me once that the dentist's wife complained a lot about how much the building spent on the plants and fountains, but the dentist had laughed, saying a lot of people thought it was restful. The assistant agreed, she brought her lunch and she'd go out to the

atrium to eat it. And, she said, some patients came early so they could just sit and watch the fountains, and be near the plants."

That came under the heading of another good idea.

I stopped at Mr. Miller's desk before homeroom started. "Who's principal today?" I asked.

He looked at me, and for a second I thought he was going to laugh. "That's up in the air, Brad Jones for the time being."

I was sure that wouldn't be acceptable to Uncle Craig, but I just nodded. A girl in the front row spoke up. "I heard you're a millionaire and that terrorists are going to be beating down a path to the front door of the school."

I hadn't really thought about what to say. I'd spoken to Tony about it; maybe I'd been hoping that would take care of it.

I shrugged. "My grandparents on both sides set up trust funds for my sister and I. In addition, we have cousins... there's like ten of us altogether. I don't know where the school got their information, but it's not really that big of a deal. The amount wasn't accurate, either."

I said it all like it was no big deal, that it was all a mistake.

The girl, Sharon Crossland, nodded. "I wondered, because I've seen where you live. It didn't seem likely someone with that much money would live there. And you drive a beat up old Camry."

"Not any more. The Camry got totaled."

Mr. Miller nodded towards my seat. "You have just about enough time to get seated, Tom."

I hustled, laughing to myself. Yeah, do the small things, and don't forget, no matter what. You don't do people favors by cutting them a little slack, unless you were really careful.

And that was pretty much it. I mean, in high school these days, no one much cares about anything except what they and their friends are doing. I didn't have that many friends, ergo,

no one cared about me and what I did. And the people who knew me just laughed at the thought of my being hugely rich.

I suppose it's unfair, that it's a bad thing to mislead your friends, even more or less out and out lie to them. But it wasn't any of their business, and having money in the bank didn't make any difference to who I am.

There were kids at the school who could run faster than me, throw a football, baseball or basketball better than me. Better golfers, better bowlers, better at Scrabble, at Monopoly, who could sing better than me, play an instrument better than me, draw better than me. All kinds of things for all kinds of people. Some were taller, some shorter, some fatter, some skinnier. So what? I had a bigger bank account than they did. Big deal!

I bet the woman who wrote the Harry Potter books has a bigger bank account than I do! Randy Johnson, the baseball pitcher. Quite a few people in the world have bigger bank accounts than me.

I just put it out of my mind. As far as I was concerned, my bank balance was like my computer. A tool to work with, to get the job done.

At lunch, I saw Anna Jackson walking past, I decided that it would be nice to talk to her; I had never talked to her except at the orgy.

I jumped up from the table and went after her. She saw me coming and stopped. "Having a good day, Tom?"

"Pretty good," I told her, "Could I talk to you for a second?"

"Sure."

We went and found a patch of shade; it gave me time to get my thoughts together.

"At Sue Ellen and Janey's party..."

I could see mild concern in her eyes; I saw her glance back at Elizabeth and Shannon at the lunch table. I met her eyes and shook my head. No, this wasn't about the party theme, or my

asking her out on a date.

"You said something about how you've never been discriminated against by white people, just, mostly your own family."

"Blacks in general," she said coolly, looking at me with curiosity. "So?"

"I talked to a man who runs an outreach program for kids on the street. He's black, and I'm not sure but what he's rather down on people who aren't black."

"Two things, Tom. It's really complicated, but there are two things you should think about. Look back at where you were sitting."

I did, it was just the usual crew at the table. Tony and Sue Ellen were popular; there were always different people around them. Our tables sat eight, and right now there were two other cheerleaders at the table, and a guy I didn't recognize, but who was a boyfriend of one of the cheerleaders.

"They're all white. Tell me, Tom. What would happen if a black member of the football team wanted to sit down at your table?"

"I don't think anyone would give him their seat, but if there was room, he'd be welcome."

"And what would happen if Tony went and sat down over there," she pointed about thirty feet away, to a table with black football and basketball players.

I shrugged, "I don't know."

"Tony wouldn't have a problem letting anyone on the team sit down. He'd just move over, make room, and treat the guy just like he would anyone else on the team. It's no secret that everyone on the football team isn't bosom buddies, but it didn't stop them from presenting a united face to everyone else.

"But if Tony tried to sit down at their table, they'd tell him there wasn't room. Even if there was. That's called solidarity, standing together. If Tony refused to let a black sit at his table, he'd be called a racist. It might start a

fight; they could complain, and very likely get Tony in trouble. If Tony complains about the double standard, he's still a racist."

I nodded. Talk about double standards! "I think I need to learn more about it," I told her. "I just don't understand."

"That's because you think about it. Look back at your table, Tom. Two guys now, three with you there. Five black boys and two girls at the other table. How many guys at your table are going to jail in their lifetime, Tom?"

"Not me!" I said emphatically. "I don't see anyone likely to, although I don't know the guy talking to Tony."

"Tom, two or three of the guys at the black table are likely to go to jail. In fact, it's not even worth betting, because I know two of them have already been in jail. Half of all black men, Tom, go to jail before they're thirty."

That didn't seem to make any sense at all, and I said so.

"No, it doesn't. Some blacks will tell you that it's you white people, putting them down. But the crimes they go to jail for are real; mostly. It's them putting themselves down."

She sniffed, "Something like one in ten is going to get shot or stabbed too, at some point."

I shivered, remembering. "That's not limited to blacks," I said, my mouth dry. The memory seemed fresh and vivid; like it had happened just a little while before.

"Yeah. Good people like you Tom; you have to stay on your toes. Just do your best; even if a good many blacks don't like you. But hey, that's being brothers and sisters, not racism."

I'd been thinking, something was tickling the back of my mind. What had Janey said? She was going to have a Janey party? I needed to talk to her. I wondered if she wanted to have a Janey and Tom party?

"Thanks, Anna."

"You go back to your table," she told me. "I'm going to hear about this as it is."

"Maybe you should think about sitting elsewhere," I said levelly.

"I wish! I have enough trouble as it is! I gotta save it for the fights that count!"

Little things, big things. "Maybe all the fights count, and if more people wouldn't give up on the little ones, the big ones would be easier," I offered.

She looked at me and shook her head. "Easy to say, just a little hard to live. Like I said, it's complicated."

She went towards the other black students, and I shook my head and went back to Tony's table.

No one said anything, or seemed concerned about my having talked to Anna. From what Anna said, some of the people she ate lunch with were going to have issues because we talked. One of these days I should go over there and sit down and talk to her at the table. Not bother to ask, just sit down.

I looked around the area where the tables were. It was outside; when the weather was nice, the tables were usually full. It had been steadily warming up all week, and was likely to hit 90 about four in the afternoon; it was already 80, or close to it. Nothing, for those of us who've lived here for a long time.

All of which was distracting me. Tables with blacks, whites, browns, Asians. There was some mixing, but the blacks were least mixed, whites and Asians the most. But, regardless, there wasn't anything like an even mix.

Even as I saw that, I saw Gloria Rodriguez coming our way. I smiled at her, and moved over. She sat down, glancing at Elizabeth.

"How have you been, Tom?"

"Okay," I told her.

"Could I ask a favor?"

"Sure," I told her.

"Could I come visit you this afternoon? I'd like to talk to you. I can't do it at home, and I don't want to do it here."

"Okay," I paused, and then added, "Do you know if Janey is still in the hospital?"

"She comes home tomorrow. I'll probably go visit her this evening. She likes the company."

"Cool. Maybe we could go earlier, after school? I wanted to ask her a question."

"Could I ride with you, this afternoon?" she asked.

"Sure, always room for one more," I said. I told her where I parked, and she said she'd be there right after school.

I should stop doing it, but I glanced at Elizabeth. It was an odd feeling that I sometimes get from her. When I could tell she knew something, and I had no idea what. Now, she just smiled at me.

When she smiled, that dream I'd had, with the girl, her words echoed in my mind. "You have that look again." Well, Elizabeth had that look again.

"You have so many admirers," Elizabeth told me.

"Better than people who don't like me," I said, seeing Roger Parker a ways off. He was coming our way, too.

He didn't change course, and after a second, I called Tony's name, and jerked my head at Roger. "Battle stations," I said quietly.

Tony looked, grimaced and said, "Man, neither of us can afford to get into it." That was sure true.

"I'll punch him in the nose," Shannon offered. "I owe him."

"No, I get first dibs," Sue Ellen said, laughing.

Roger reached the table and glared at me. "Think you're the big cock on the block, doncha?"

"Better than someone this big," Shannon said, holding up her thumb and forefinger about a long inch apart.

"Joanna said he was really teeny," Sue Ellen said, holding her fingers about a quarter inch apart. "More like this."

Roger's face turned dark red, and he started forward.

Unexpectedly, the other guy at the table spoke. "Say, do you know who I am?"

Roger glanced at him, and went back to glaring.

"I'm called The Rat by some people, Steve Jones to my friends. My dad's the vice principal."

"He's the principal, today," I said.

Steve ignored me. "A lot of people are sure I rat out just about everyone around me. It's not true, because I'm a Steve, not a Rat. But there's a first time for everything."

It wasn't going to be necessary, I thought. Mr. Jones and two other teachers were headed our way. Roger turned and saw them, turned back, hawked and started to spit at me.

He was too slow. Roger's always been slow, I guess. Mr. Jones had grabbed his shoulder, and spun him part way around. The spittle hit one of the other teachers in the face. Coach Jimenez, one of the football coaches.

The two teachers each took an arm, and the three headed in the direction of the office; they didn't speak a word to us.

Steve started talking, speaking in an odd cadence, making it pretty clear he was reciting a poem.

"Often, to amuse themselves, the crew of the ship  
Would fell an albatross, the largest of sea birds,  
Indolent companions of their trip  
As they slide across the deep sea's bitters.

Scarcely had they dropped to the plank  
Than these blue kings, maladroit and ashamed  
Let their great white wings sink



Like an oar dragging under the water's plane.

The winged visitor, so awkward and weak!  
So recently beautiful, now comic and ugly!  
One sailor grinds a pipe into his beak,  
Another, limping, mimics the infirm bird that once could fly.

The poet is like the prince of the clouds  
Who haunts the storm and laughs at lightning.  
He's exiled to the ground and its hooting crowds;  
His giant wings prevent him from walking."

Steve chuckled, adding, "That guy is an albatross, about to walk the plank."

We all laughed at that. It wasn't my father's idea of a joke, but a piece of what I guess was poetry. I wasn't entirely sure how the poem fit, but it was pretty clear it was meant in the same spirit as one of Dad's jokes.

"Are you the princely poet?" I asked.

Steve shook his head. "Nope, Charles Baudelaire wrote it, a poem called the Albatross. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner is about the bad luck a sailor experiences when he kills an albatross. It's where the phrase, 'having an albatross around your neck' comes from. It didn't seem to work as well."

He looked at the rest of us, and smiled. "I like poetry; what can I say?"

"Cool," Shannon said. "Did you know about poetic albatrosses, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth shook her head.

"Double cool!" Shannon enthused before going on. "I need to learn some poetry too! I think it's something my sister isn't that fond of."

Elizabeth stuck her tongue out at Shannon, and everyone smiled. The bell rang, and I squeezed Elizabeth's hand, and she smiled back at me. Yep, a nice day, and Roger had rained on a football coach's day, not mine. I was pretty sure it wasn't any wiser to rain on a football coach's parade than it was to rain

on the team's parade.

School wound down for the day; I have to admit my thoughts were pretty much elsewhere. I was thinking about tomorrow evening, riding along with Marcus; about my report to the family.

Jenny asked if I could come and pick her up later from Elizabeth's, so I let her out there, along with Shannon. JR wanted to go to Penny's; they had some test coming that they wanted to study for.

I drove with Gloria to the hospital. I still didn't know what she wanted to talk about, but I figured that she'd get to it in time.

Janey was much more chipper than she'd been when I'd last seen her. So much so, that she even gave me a hug, right after she hugged Gloria. I took that as a good sign, and an opportunity to ask her about the party.

"I am so glad I get out of here tomorrow," she exclaimed. "There were times I thought I'd go crazy from boredom, then they'd come bore a new hole someplace in me and I just wanted to get away. Monday, I don't care what they say, I'll be in school... even if I have to stand for all my classes."

"I'm glad that you're going to be okay," I told her.

"Well, I'm not going to be a big fan of skimpy bikinis after this. I'm not going to be parading around in a thong," she said, laughing. "They let me look; they say the scarring will diminish over time. By the time I'm fifty, it won't be noticeable."

I had to laugh at that. Talk about long-term prospects!

"Janey, you were talking about having a party towards the end of the school year. Are you still thinking about doing that?"

She nodded, "Yeah, but not another party like Sue Ellen's and mine. That didn't work out at all like we expected. No, a regular party. Sue Ellen says though, I can use her house again, just that it's got to wrap up by midnight. I was going to have people over for a swim and barbeque. Just a regular

party where everyone has a good time, hanging with their friends."

"That would be late afternoon and evening, right?" I asked.

She was curious, but nodded.

"I took some friends out last Friday. Dinner and a movie."

She nodded again, "I wish I could afford something like that. I know how you felt; that is was damn good to be alive. Being with your friends, being able to put it out of your mind."

It was my turn to nod. "I had a good time, Janey." I contemplated how to say it; I decided not to bother with fluff.

"There's a rumor around school I'm a gigamillionaire," I told her. "That's a lot of BS."

"You have money?" Gloria asked. "I got invited to a thing once at the Phoenix Country Club, some guy invited me to a dinner party. You don't act at all like those people."

"Well, it's not like people say, but let's just say that I don't have as much trouble spending money as some people. I'm not looking to buy friends or anything like that; I just want to help out. I was wondering, Janey, if maybe earlier we could go to that place where they do the go-kart racing. We could go round and round, chasing each other. Earlier in the afternoon."

"That would be cool," Janey said. She did look intrigued.

"What I'll do is work out a deal with them, one low price for everyone, then we'd split it up. They're bound to have group rates." And if they didn't, I'd negotiate one. Or better yet, let Uncle Craig do it. Or Miriam.

We talked a little bit more, and I told her I'd get back to her with more information. She admitted she hadn't made any firm decision about the date. It was, she said, still a work in progress.

Gloria and I left after about a half hour. As we were walking back to the van, I looked back at the hospital. "My dad says he hates coming here, even if it's just to visit someone. That last time I came to visit Janey, he stayed in the car."

"I broke my arm two years ago," Gloria told me. "It hurt, but it hurt more after I went to the emergency room. I think the only way you like hospitals is if you work there, or have never been in one."

We got in the van, and I looked at her. "Do you still want to talk?"

"Yes."

"We can go to my house; no one's there." I didn't want her to be surprised.

"That would be good."

When went in, and she looked up the stairs, towards my room. I mentally gulped. She wanted to talk up there? The girl was virgin and proud of it, willing to go to considerable lengths to defend it.

"If you're sure," I told her.

"Please, Tom. I want to talk in some place very private."

I led the way up to my room. Gloria was wearing jeans and a color print blouse; nothing fancy, but not shabby. She walked over and sat down on my bed, and patted the spot next to her.

I sat down, and she giggled. "You look like you're afraid I'm going grab you and have my way with you."

"I don't know what to expect," I told her honestly.

"I had a long talk with my grandmother the other day. My father is being a real pain; no one can talk to him any more. He's sure that I'm one step away from being a tramp."

"Ah," I stammered, "you don't qualify. You have to, ah, mess around a lot to be that. You don't mess around at all."

"That's not what he thinks. It used to be grandmother could talk to him and calm him down. She knows, I think, that I'm going to leave as soon as I graduate. I can't live like this."

"You told me about what you wanted to do. I think that's really cool. Tomorrow I'm going to ride along with a guy who does outreach to teens at risk, on the street. I'm curious what it's really like."

She looked at me. "Grandmother, I don't know how she understands things. She sees things more clearly than most people, even if she's nearly blind. She said you were a good boy, and that you were more likely to help than hinder. She said that I should talk to you, that you would know a lot about scholarships and colleges. She told me that I have a wonderful dream, an important goal.

"I don't like to ask for help, Tom. But I'm desperate. I don't want to live at home any longer than I have to."

I felt like someone an inch tall. Maybe more like the short interval Sue Ellen held up, representing Roger's penis size.

"I like your grandmother," I said, dreading saying anything to what Gloria had asked. I was only too aware that a lot of my classmates were consumed with college and getting information on potential choices. Next year would be the big year; SATs, scholarship and loan applications. Actually applying for college.

I could admit to myself that I didn't have a plan of my own, yet the thought of opening my mouth and telling Gloria I had no idea how to help her because I'd never made any plans at all, stuck in my throat.

Then I remembered Marcus and the 'orientation'. How many and what types of questions had I asked him? I hadn't even asked his name, he'd told me. Zero questions. Zero. That's what I was in his universe, a big zero. All he'd done was tell me to keep my mouth shut and not to be judgmental. I'd disagreed with that, but I hadn't told him so, and hadn't asked why it was important, as it obviously was.

"I didn't think my asking for help was that deep," Gloria said, next to me.

"Oh, I go off on tangents now and then. Particularly when I realize I'm messing up. In this case, really messing up."

I faced her, reached out and took her hand in both of mine. "I have a confession to make. I don't give a shit about college and never have. My parents expect me to go, but it never seemed important to me. It was what they wanted, and I've been pretending for years it's what I want, too. But the truth? I don't know. I simply don't know. Gloria, I'd give you every bit of knowledge I have on the subject, but it doesn't amount to a thimble full of spit."

She looked at me, and for a second, I thought she was going to cry.

"Gloria, you're the one with the right attitude; college is important, way too important to blow off like I'm doing. We're juniors, right?" She nodded.

"Then, this will be just like any other project we have in class. We buckle down and study. We're not the only ones either. We should form, oh, call it a study group. We trade information, we can support each other, and we do whatever we can to help each other."

She fidgeted. "You mean it?"

"Sure," I told her. "Today, I'm not the help your grandmother thinks I am. College is going to happen to me, just like it is going to happen for you and to most of the people I know. I suppose we could go at it like everyone else does, by ourselves. But, gosh..." I thought of Mom's to-do lists and chores in general.

More than once in the last couple of weeks people had missed their turns, for one reason or another. Mostly not, because we all made a point not to. But when Mom had gone to look after JR instead of fixing breakfast, I'd stepped up. I'd been supposed to do the dishes the night I'd spent at Mary's. They'd been done. We stepped up and did them, usually without discussion. Whoever was there. Sure, having someone there to help with chores made them easier. Knowing there was someone who'd step up if you couldn't do yours for some reason, that was a big deal. Bigger than I thought. Doing things as a group was important; you got synergy. I remembered synergy from my dream about God, from Shannon's music.

"You keep going away," Gloria said softly.

"Yeah. I keep thinking about things. I do that. If you asked me a month ago if I was grown up, I'd have said sure, of course. And would have been way off, because I had no idea what that means. Sex... I can't say that that isn't a part of it, but everything else has been important too. Right down to knocking on your front door and meeting your father."

"He's sure you will never be back, he's proud of it."

"Then, shortly I will drive you home and walk you to the door. Then I will smile at him."

"You've really never thought about college?" Gloria asked, making it sound like I was eating babies or something.

"Not really. A couple of times I wondered why I didn't care... but since I didn't care, I didn't think about it too much. I was wrong, Gloria. I don't mind saying I'm wrong when I'm wrong. I don't know what it takes to be an adult, but I know that I don't know as much as I think I do."

I'd been sitting with her hand wrapped in both of mine. Something changed in that instant. I wasn't sure what, but I had an erection that seemed to spring to attention in record time.

She pulled her hand away. "I was stupid coming here, wasn't I? What should I expect, sitting on a boy's bed, alone in his house?"

I let go of her hand, and tried to will my erection away. "Gloria, I swear. I'm not most guys. I'm sorry I felt... like that."

She looked at me and I looked at her. "Why should I believe you?"

"I could take you home now, smile at your father." Even as I spoke, I realized how I'd phrased it. Like I didn't expect to take her home. Not yet.

I got up off the bed. "It's getting on towards five. People are going to be coming home soon. I should get you back, then do a little studying."

She blushed; I think it was a blush. "I'm sorry, Tom."

"Gloria, you're right about what I was thinking and wishing. I won't ever lie to you, I promise. I want to get together with a bunch of us, set up a group to look at college. One for all and all for one, that sort of thing. That's more important than anything else for us right now."

"I saw you with that girl today. She's a freshman. And I heard from Janey about the party. You..."

"I made love to a lot of girls at the party," I told her. "They wanted me, and I wanted them. Did Janey tell you about her and I?"

Gloria shook her head.

"Let's just say, we agreed that she didn't want me and I didn't want her. I tried, she tried. It just didn't work. I walked away, and she went back to dozing on the couch. Gloria, I like sex. God, I'd like to make love to you. But unless you want it, it's not ever going to happen."

She was silent for a long time, and then looked up at me. She stood up. "There are times when all that shit from my father... I can't get rid of my hang-ups that easy, you understand?"

"I understand."

"Anyway, I'm the one who's wrong here. You didn't say anything; you didn't do anything. You just looked at me. Jeez, a dozen guys a day look at me like that."

I grimaced, "Next time, I'll make a more overt pass." She looked surprised, "The guys who look at you and don't say anything... they are really the clueless ones. You're a smart person, Gloria. You're cute, a cheerleader. Someone nice and wonderful, who will, one day, make someone a fine wife. You have goals, lofty, worthy goals. Most of us, too many of us, are like me. Goal? Isn't that something you score in soccer?"

We went downstairs, but just in front of the door Gloria asked me to wait. She came close and kissed me on the mouth. It was a pleasant kiss, but without a lot of the wattage that was more common for me lately. Still, a month before I'd have been hard and eager, thinking about my chances. Now I knew it



for what it was, and simply didn't push, content.

"Thanks, Tom."

"No problem, Gloria." We both giggled, and we went out to the van. A little later, I walked her up to her front door. Her father came out before we got there. Gloria simply bobbed her head, and went on in.

"Evening, sir." I told him. "Gloria and I went to see Janey Sussman, then we had a little talk. She and I are going to be seeing a lot of each other here in the next year or so. We're going to be working on getting into good colleges." I bobbed my head, turned and walked back to the van. For whatever reason, he just went into the house, without saying a word.

I went back to my room and flopped on the bed. I was aware that it was still a little mussed from the two of us sitting on it. Did I really want to make love to Gloria?

I slid to the floor, helpless with laughter. I'd promised Elizabeth that I was going to be faithful. I'd promptly slept with other girls. More than one. Tom, how many different girls had you slept with in the two weeks before the orgy? How many girls at the orgy? Do the math, Tom! How many new girls have you been with since? Can you count as high as zero?

Aunt Shirley was supposed to be a voracious lover of guys (and girls) my age. I'd not felt any urge; in fact, I'd not been curious at all. Kim had come back. Nothing there, either. Penny; Penny was number three on Tom Ferguson's hit parade. She had a life; I had a life. Since she'd come back from LA, we'd said about ten words. What about she and JR sharing a boyfriend? I was tolerably sure that was now history.

Elizabeth and Mary; JR. Jenny, Mom. Are five enough for you, Tom? Except, not Mom, not since the weekend. I'd groped her, we'd kissed really hot, but that was it. Jenny had Katrina now; she'd always loved Elizabeth. JR and Shannon; I knew there was a deep current there between them, and I knew that half the time Shannon was trying to tell herself it wasn't true. Then she'd see JR, and they'd slide between the sheets and spend some quality time together.

Elizabeth, Mary and myself. The core, the center of things I wanted in my life. I didn't think I'd spend the rest of my

life ignoring other women; if Gloria hadn't pulled back; I was sure where I wanted to go. But she had, and so I did too.

I eventually got up, knowing it was getting close to dinner. I read through what Elizabeth and JR had written back to me. JR had sent back a simple, "Whatever you want, Tom." That was, I thought, a complete cop-out, but it was pretty clear that if Jenny was going to be in commission tonight, the same was not true for JR.

JR appeared for dinner, helped with dishes afterwards, and then vanished. Jenny and I spent two hours studying, doing a minimum of talking. Mom and Dad came up for hugs, this time with JR in tow. I hugged them all, including a JR who leaned into the hug, not wanting to touch anything below her shoulders.

With barely a word, JR was gone.

Mom watched her go, before turning to me. "It's different for all of us, Tom. We all have patterns, but they are all different. And no matter how much you think you have a settled pattern, sometimes they go awry. This, Tom, is Joanna's first; usually your first time isn't that bad. Joanna's has been. I'm glad you're cutting her a lot of slack."

"She's JR," I said, stating the self-evident. "I'll take care of her until I'm old, toothless and senile."

Mom hugged me, then she and Dad left.

Jenny and I looked at each other, and then I went to the door and closed it. On the way back to bed, I shed my jockey shorts.

Jenny laughed, pulling off her nightie. "Gosh, go for two days without sex, and it's all you can think about!"

"We can curl up again, like we did the first night you were here," I told her.

Jenny grinned. "You'd do that too, wouldn't you? I meant it, Tom. I like sex, just not with Sam. And you aren't Sam," she said, coming into my arms.

Jenny didn't want me to go down on her, but she didn't have a problem with me using my finger. Which I did. And she went

down on me, and I didn't have any problems at all. None.

Then she moved on top of me, and we made love. It's odd, I thought, as I moved inside of her, as I caressed her breasts. I make love according to the mood I share with whoever I'm with. Usually with Jenny, I was more excited, happy to move in and out of her. Tonight, I was relaxed and happy. Twice to my slow movements she came, then she started kissing me hard, rubbing my nipples with her fingers, and otherwise just plain making it fine. I came, and almost at once, we were asleep.

Friday, April 12, 2002

It's easy to get spoiled; I'd learned that a while ago. Even spending one night alone made me long to have someone else in bed with me. Having someone beside made me feel complete in a way I didn't really understand. JR complained I needed a bigger bed, but I wasn't sure. It was nice to feel the warmth of someone beside me. If I had a big bed, they could wander away... What would be the point of sleeping together then?

I heard a soft sound in my dream; I thought it was someone talking behind me. I tried to turn in my dream, but I was stiff, and I couldn't manage it. Frustrated, I tried harder, like I'd done in the upside down car. I still couldn't turn in the dream, but I woke up.

I heard JR say in a quiet voice, "Thanks, Jenny."

"Sister Joanna, you never have to say that to me."

JR giggled. "I don't think sisters are supposed to do what I want you to do to me. And vice versa."

I felt JR sit down on the bed, then move to lie down.

"We'll wake up Tom," Jenny whispered.

"He can watch if he likes. But it was you I missed more than Tom."

"Joanna, I love Katrina."

There was silence for a second; they were kissing.

"And I'm not sure who I have the hots for. Shannon is so

confused, so desperate to have some guy to cling to for all time. She likes our love making, but it's not the same thing to her. Penny and I... we just plain like to do it. God, sex is good! Sue Ellen... that was a surprise! I was in the mood, but I never figured her to be. Wham! Bam! It was everything I've ever done with Penny, it sure wasn't her first time!"

Jenny's voice sounded nervous. "It makes me uncomfortable when you talk about other people."

JR put her arm around Jenny, and there was another moment of silence. "It upsets Tom, too. I don't understand why I do it. Once Mom and Kim found out about Penny and me, they had all this history they told us about. And when I wanted to do it with Tom, there was more history. They didn't mind talking about it, so neither did Penny or I. It was a really easy bad habit to pick up."

Jenny giggled, and I felt the two squirming around. Jenny giggled again. "How come such a small girl is so good at tickling?"

I mentally answered that. Because growing up our parents had tickled us; we'd tickled each other. For years, if either of us were slow getting up in the morning, the 'tickle bugs' would come for us. It took the sting out of being admonished for not getting up on your own, and provided a motivation down the line to take care of it yourself.

They were still kissing when the alarm went off, and I reached over and pushed it, without looking behind me.

"You got that awful fast, Tom," JR told me. "Were you awake?"

"Yes," I said economically.

"Would you mind taking the first shower?" JR asked.

"No, of course not." I got up, got my things and headed out the door. Behind me, JR said in a frustrated voice, "You could have at least looked!"

I stood at the door, still looking the other way. "Oh, think of this as a more adult version of tickle bugs."

She started giggling, and I made the short trip down the hall. When I went back to my room to dress, JR was resting in Jenny's arms.

"Morning, sleepy heads," I told them. "Someone else's turn to get wet."

"Tom, are you really cool with this?" JR asked, wrapping an arm around Jenny, and kissing Jenny on her cheek.

"Very cool with it, JR. I love the two of you. In different ways for each of you, but I love you. Maybe it's my male ego talking, but I think you love me. JR, I understand about wanting to be safe. Oh my gosh! Do I understand that! I understand waking up in the morning wanting to make love.

"I am not," I said emphatically, "going to be the one and only in either of your lives. I'm going to be there, now and then. I can deal with it. And you know why? Because if I can't make love to you right now, there's later."

I stopped, realizing something. I walked over to my desk and sat down, then put my head down.

"Tom?" Jenny asked, now sitting up on the bed.

"You know, I keep thinking I'm getting a handle on life. On being grown up. I said that about there's later. I don't know there's really going to be a later. Hope that there will be, faith that there will be; that's what sustains my belief. But it's not just faith in who I'll wake up next to, tomorrow, but in all sorts of things.

"You, Jenny. You knew a lot more despair than hope and faith. I thought I understood what drove you to Kim's, then here. But I think I have it backwards. I thought you had faith the adults could protect you; but it wasn't that, was it? It was just hope."

"You taught me faith," Jenny told me. "You laid between me and the door. I knew that if Sam wanted me, you'd be there. I knew that you'd stand up to him and win. With Kim, with your mom, that was hope that they'd keep me safe. You taught me faith. The promise of protection, not the hope of it. Am I making sense?"

"Oh yeah!"

"Too deep for me!" JR said.

I met Jenny's eyes. I willed her to understand that I never wanted JR to find out what the distinction was because in order to understand, she'd have to pay the price. I'd gotten off lucky; Jenny hadn't. Mary and her daughters hadn't been lucky. Or Gloria, or Janey. Even Sue Ellen and Tony had paid to learn about faith and hope. What else is it, I thought, when you can look a friend in the eye, and say, "Tomorrow we'll be back together again?"

And of course, prognosticating about the future brought me back to Elizabeth. It would be impossible to believe in the future, I thought, without faith and hope.

I was still quiet at breakfast; but Mom had questions. "You haven't really said what you are doing tonight. 'Going out.' Okay, that's fine. When might we expect you back? What are you going to be doing and where?"

It would be, I thought, easy to get on my 16-year-old high horse and say it was none of her business. Maybe I could have done that before I'd made love to my mom; I wasn't going to do it now.

"I don't know for sure when I'll be back, and I'm not sure exactly where I'm going to be. I'm going out with a fellow who does outreach for teens in trouble. Late, almost certainly. And wherever it is he takes me."

"And just what is it exactly, that you're going to be doing?" Mom asked.

"That I don't know. I went to an orientation Tuesday, but that didn't work out as well as I expected. Now, I'm going to be more humble, and more interested in learning what I need to know." I paused, and smiled at her. "If I'm going to be past two, I'll call."

Dad chimed in. "Thanks, but no thanks. Calls at that time of the night are too scary. Just call if you need help, okay?"

"Okay," I told him. I could see Mom was troubled, but I knew I had to shake it off.

Finally, it was van pool time. We picked up Penny, and then went to get Elizabeth and Shannon.

I was mildly disappointed to still see Mr. Miller in homeroom, but I didn't say anything. I just sat down.

First on the morning announcements was the message that Dr. Stone had retired 'for reasons of health' and that there was a search in progress for a new principal; in the meantime Mr. Jones had the job. Later in the day Uncle Craig called and told me that the school district had capitulated entirely.

April and May, I thought. It really was too much to hope that they'd find someone I liked and put them in the job for such a short time. That, and I wasn't exactly in charge; they, whoever 'they' were, had a job to do, and no doubt they'd do it. I hoped they found someone better than Dr. Stone.

At lunch, I talked to Tony, Sue Ellen, Elizabeth, Shannon and Gloria about starting a college search group. Tony just shrugged. "Man, next year the scouts come, Tom. I may or may not get offers, depending on how good a year I have. If I get offers, I can pick and choose. If I don't get any offers, or don't get any I like, then I have to decide if I really want to play. Because what I'll have to do is show up at a college, and tryout as a walk-on. That's really, really hard."

"I'm going to Cal Tech," Elizabeth said emphatically.

"Are you?" I asked. "Have you looked at their catalog? How likely are you to meet their requirements?"

Elizabeth met my eyes; her expression was a little smug. "I don't want to sound like I'm speaking out of turn," I told her, "but I think I'd want to make sure my 'i's' are dotted and 't's' are crossed before I made my own predictions."

I saw a sudden wilderness in Elizabeth's eyes. I felt insignificant; a tiny pimple on the ass end of human existence. I'd popped the bubble of my true love's fantasies, and I'd thought it was a joke; something she would have been sure to take care of.

Elizabeth drew herself up, a fraction from tears. "I'm only a freshman, but I think you're right. It's going to be a

lot of work; I should get started now on getting the job done."

"I think," Sue Ellen interjected, "that was a yes. As for me, I'm eager to join in. Tom's right, if we go at this together, it will be a lot easier than everyone for themselves." She flashed me a grin. "Not to mention, more fun."

Everyone smiled, and I saw Elizabeth throw Sue Ellen a glance. The expression on her face said it all; Elizabeth had written Sue Ellen off as the brainless girlfriend of a jock, a cheerleader wannabe with big breasts. I smiled inwardly. You rely too much on what you think you know; I could tell you a lot about how wrong that is. But there are times to let even someone you love, find it out for themselves. But not about going to Cal Tech.

"Freshman and juniors, and everywhere in between."

Steve Jones was sitting at the table again, and he laughed. "And what about us seniors?"

"It's April," I said with a straight face. "If you haven't gotten something lined up, you are pretty much beyond hope. There's always a community college or Arizona State."

Everyone smiled at that, but I knew it was true. And if I'd kept on like I'd have been, come next April I'd be sitting at a cafeteria, wondering what the hell I could do to fix the mess I'd made. Better, I thought, to take care of messes when they are little.

All too soon, lunch was over. Elizabeth gave me a warm hug, albeit brief. I grinned at her, telling her I loved her in all ways.

The afternoon seemed to drag on interminably. The high point in the afternoon came when Tony stopped me on the way to our last class of the day. "You know what Mrs. Walcott did in study hall?"

I shook my head. What did you do in study hall? Pretty much what you pleased, so long as it didn't include talking, getting up or disturbing others.

"She announced a snap quiz."



I looked at Tony as if he just had to be pulling my leg. A snap quiz? In study hall? Talk about improbable!

"She told everyone that the class was pass/fail, and if we didn't pass the quiz, we failed study hall. So, when she handed out the test, I went to the last page, looking for the 'Write your name on the first page and don't do anything else,' directions. Except she hadn't told us to read the directions, there weren't any, really. Just two hundred questions about virtually everything.

"About half the class was still working on it, when the bell rang."

"That's bizarre," I told him.

"I think Phil is right," Tony said. I remembered Phil from the orgy. "She's really a pod person, come to snatch bodies. Anyway, I didn't think it was a very hard test; I had lots of time."

I nodded, and he headed off for class, while I was left to wonder what else could possibly happen in high school this year.

The last bell rang, and I gathered up my friends, dropping them off at home. JR, Jenny and Penny went to our house; there was going to be a big dinner again. Shannon and Elizabeth to Shannon's music teacher's house, for Shannon's lesson. I hugged Elizabeth, and she clung for a second, communicating love silently.

I went inside when I was dropping off my sister and the others at home, and changed. I put on an old pair of jeans, not that they looked that old. I contemplated a t-shirt, and decided on my own that I wasn't going to do that. Instead, I had a long-sleeved tan turtleneck with North High on the back; I put that on.

I arrived at Marcus' office well ahead of when I was supposed to be there. He was sitting at his desk, talking on the phone. He waved me to a seat, and I sat down.

After a bit, he hung up. "A little early."

"I'm not supposed to be judgmental. Okay, I'll try to keep that in mind. I can't believe that's the only thing I need to

concern myself about."

"I kept waiting to hear from Eleanor; you jumping up and down about how I was racist bigot.

"You sounded like one," I told him. "I have a friend who told me about what it's like for her being black. I decided I didn't know what a bigot was, so I kept my mouth shut.""

"African-American," he interjected.

"She's black," I told him, "but I think she just thinks of herself as a human being first, and lets the rest of it go."

"Well, have you ever put on a pair of rubber gloves?"

My eyes widened. Huh?

He reached into his desk, pulled out a box, and tossed me a pair. "Practice. On and off, on and off. See how quickly you can do it."

It was awkward the first time, and I didn't do it very well. It didn't stop Marcus from talking.

"On the street, you want to avoid fluids. You're not macho; if someone spits at you, treat it like she fired a bullet at you. Try to get out of the way. A lot of the girls spit. Everyone does, now and then, though. You'll want to think long and hard about touching someone who's bleeding."

"AIDS," I said, nodding.

He snickered. "AIDS, Hepatitis, mono, valley fever; there's a dozen things you can catch. Better not to."

I looked at him thinking it wasn't that important. Instead, he thumped his stomach. "I look pretty good, hey? Right?"

I shrugged. Six foot six black men didn't do much for me.

"I'm HIV positive, I have Hep A and C. You think I look like this because I work out? My idea of heaven, boy, was ribs, grits, fries; a baked potato slathered in butter and sour cream. A huge stack of pancakes, drowned in maple syrup and dripping

more butter. Lobster? Love them! More butter. Crab legs and butter! Biscuits and butter! Butter and just about anything you name."

I swallowed.

"Still eager to go out tonight?"

"I was never eager," I told him honestly, "just curious. I have no idea what to expect. None. Gosh, I don't know what to say..." Just what do you say to a dead man walking?

Marcus laughed. "The retrovirals have the AIDS in check, I beat hepatitis, I beat mono and valley fever. The only way I check out is screaming and shouting, fighting all the way."

He waved around us, "Out there, what I care about are the kids. Kids who are lost, afraid. Fucked up by themselves, their parents, society and school. Doesn't matter; they are out there.

"You can talk to kids like that from now to forever; they've heard it all before. They wouldn't be out there on the streets, if they were willing to listen, if they understood. Nope, every last one is sure, no matter how screwed up their life is, that they are one of the ones that are going to beat the odds.

"And when it goes bad, I get them to the hospital. Twice now, twice in the last three years, someone lying in a hospital bed held my hand and told me that they were giving it up. They were fucked up, and wanted out. One of them actually did make it."

"I take it optimism isn't much more use than a whoopee cushion," I said, my voice bitter.

"You might get a laugh from one of those. When someone on the streets laughs, it usually means someone is about to get dead or already is."

"So what do you do?" I asked him.

"I'm there. They all know who I am; they all know I have little tickets in my pocket to a shelter, to the kitchens. I can get them a safe place to sleep, a couple of free meals. If

they pick the right time of year, they can get clothes and other things. Seasonal, you know. Thanksgiving, Christmas, like that."

I nodded. Christmas wasn't a big deal at our house, Thanksgiving was the big holiday. Maybe more people should give thanks.

"I can refer them to treatment centers for drugs and alcohol; I can see that they get medical care for whatever ails them, and that can be a mind-blowing list. I routinely send kids to the hospital with nutritional diseases like scurvy and beriberi. Abscessed teeth, you name it. What can go wrong, does. Usually," he told me, "I find them before they die. Not always. It's a risk you'll face out there. This time of year, it's not too bad. A cold snap in the winter... a week later and there's a lot of kids in bad, bad trouble."

It would be easy, I thought, to believe he was making this all up. But I remembered Anna Jackson's comments.

"So, you will be careful out there," Marcus went on. "Try not to talk; if you do talk, be careful of what you say. They can detect phonies, do-gooders, cops, lies; you name it; all just by looking at you. They like to push until something breaks; that's what a lot of their home lives were like. If someone starts ragging on you, pushing at you... back off. Go sit in the van and ignore them. I'll deal with it."

"If someone has a weapon, back to the van. I'll call the cops. I don't want you to think with your usual white liberal goody-goody mindset; you see an African-American on the street, headed towards you, you back away. Let me know. The kids in trouble are mainly white, occasionally yellow. Rarely brown, virtually never black. Blacks, browns, and now Orientals, they're problems. You want to be careful of them."

"You only help white kids?" The thought was literally mind-boggling.

"Tom, African-Americans are the pimps, the drug dealers, the wheeler dealers. Hispanics are into drugs, not as many pimps. Asians are the coldest, least emotional people on the street. They do it all, and with no heart at all. You don't want to mess with any of them; hell, I don't want to mess with them. They tolerate me, because dead kids bring cops; I clean

up the streets."

I sat silently, contemplating it. "I'm sorry about Tuesday."

He shook his head. "I pushed, boy. You didn't push back, but that's something that takes experience. You came today; that takes commitment. Eleanor said you had that. I just like to be sure."

I shook my head. "I'm not sure of anything."

He shrugged. "Some nights, it's a piece of cake. Nice weather, no one's screwed up. We have a few conversations, and come back. Nothing to it. Other nights; well, it can be hell. It seems to run in cycles, even after nearly ten years out there, I can't tell what it's going to be like on any particular night."

"And the bad nights?" I asked.

"People die," he said bluntly. "People get really badly messed up. Usually, kids start on the edges, slowly getting in deeper. It's like quicksand, pulling them in. Once they get trapped, the suction pulling them down gets immense. Not many can pull free. Almost no one can."

I contemplated that. "The solution would be not to let kids get out on the street."

Even as I said that, I saw his eyes flash and his head shake. "There is no solution. 'Let'?" Marcus asked rhetorically. "We don't 'let' kids get on the street, they go there of their own free will. And that's why they stay. Granted, drugs and booze cloud that, but that's what they think is true; you will never, ever, argue a kid off the street. Not unless it's their first day."

"Scared straight? Are you kidding? They live on the street. Every day in every way, life on the street is worse than any jail or boot camp. The bottom line is that they are out there by their own choice. Arguing just gets their backs up. They turn you off; start to mess with you."

"I want to learn what it's like," I told him. "I suppose

that sounds stupid."

He shook his head. "Thinking you can stop it; that's stupid. Thinking you can save them all; that's stupid. Learning what it's like; that's not stupid. Wanting to help them isn't stupid. The problem is, they are basically stupid. The best thing that can happen for most of them would be their parents doing whatever they have to, to keep their kids safe at home."

A little after that we left in his van.

It was an interesting evening; I very carefully made as few assumptions as I could before it started. I tried very hard not to be judgmental, or least not to voice or show it. I asked Marcus at one point if he'd varied his route because I was with him.

"I go where the kids are," is what he said. That's not really an answer.

Our first destination was a camp near 35th Avenue and Buckeye Road. It was simply a cluster of various forms of shelters ranging from a few tents to plastics sheets to, literally, cardboard boxes.

"You can't put up anything substantial at a camp like this," Marcus told me. "Every now and then the City or the police or whoever decide to make them move. Then they have to pack up. There's some sort of coordination between the campers and the authorities, because almost always the campers show up the next day at a new site."

There were about fifty people in the camp, ranging in ages from infants to a number of older men, and one older woman. Age wasn't a factor in determining who was in charge, though. The leader was a large black man in his early thirties, named simply 'Mohammad'. He was a physical presence when you were close to him; instinctively you felt a strong urge not to mess with him. He had a number of assistants, all young, large and appearing tough; most of his assistants were black, but a couple were white as well. I didn't see any Hispanics or other races at the camp.

Marcus told me he was going to look around, but that I should ask Mohammad about life in the camp. That turned out to

be a plan because Mohammad just plain liked to talk. He was glib, he didn't speak with any street accent; if he'd been dressed neatly he could have read the evening news and there wouldn't have been any raised eyebrows.

"We look out for each other," he said simply. "We don't allow anyone to beat someone else up. We don't let people steal; we catch a thief, we kick them out.

"We don't like drugs, much. Can't do a lot about that, but if someone gets wasted and starts bad-mouthing people, getting into hassles with other people, we kick them out. We just want to get along, you know?"

I nodded like I understood. I contemplated asking questions, but I couldn't think of a way not to make them sound judgmental.

He laughed at my expression. "You're asking yourself, why we choose to live like this."

"I guess," I said, trying to be noncommittal and nonjudgmental.

"Marcus, he's a good man; he used to live in a place like this, so he understands. Sometimes life is a bitch, you wake up one day with everything gone. You piss away your life; that or suck it up your nose, or shoot it in your arm, or drink it out of a bottle. We had one guy once who had been an executive in a computer company; he lost a fortune, and came here to try to forget, to drown in a bottle.

"Only way to really forget is to die; otherwise, you wake up mornings, sober or getting there, and the world is still there, what you did, what happened, it's still there too. Worse, you feel like shit.

"One day he looked around and laughed. That's all, he just laughed. 'Made a fortune once, it's not like I'm dead. Just go make me another.' I don't know if that was talk or what, but he walked away and I haven't seen him since. I like to think he's back living like he used to."

"Is that a good thing?" I asked.

Mohammad looked at me. "Sometimes. Sometimes, going back

to what used to be is like being eaten by tigers and lions. No fun at all. Everyone here is different, everyone has an excuse for why they are here."

Eventually, Marcus returned and we moved on. "The seem well organized," I told him.

Marcus laughed. "A couple years ago, up in Oregon, Mohammad nearly got the City of Portland to give them 45 acres for a homeless camp. I think he still has dreams of doing that. Then I expect he'll promptly sell it, and live off the money for a couple of years."

That was, I thought, hard to square with a man who was such an obvious force. Marcus shook his head. "Tom, the people who live like that are like everyone else on the street. They are there by their own choice. For every person in a camp you just saw, we have ten or fifteen in local shelters. Everyone in that camp knows that if they want a roof over their head, a lock on the door and hot meals, all they have to do is hold out their hand to me, or someone like me, and we'll give it to them."

I thought about that. "For some people, being in that position must really hurt. Maybe enough not to be able to ask." I was thinking about Mary, right then.

He shrugged. "Usually after you get beaten or robbed, raped or whatever, you decide that pride is a luxury for better times."

The next place was even further away from the city; it was a migrant camp. That is, mainly Hispanic farm workers. There were a large number of unattached males, a lot of women and a lot of kids.

"Here, you just keep your mouth shut, try not to meet a woman's eyes. This camp is run by a local farmer; he's not the greatest human being in the world, but at least these people have a built outhouse, and a couple of water faucets with safe drinking water."

Obviously, even if I hadn't thought about it, the first camp had lacked those amenities.

We weren't there long; Marcus walked around, with me at his side. I don't think I heard a single word of English the entire



time we were there.

Then we went to another field, north of Tolleson. Instead of a rag-tag camp like the first one we visited, this one consisted of a dozen vehicles, all of which, Marcus assured me, could run. Not often, not far, but as needed. These were almost all families, mostly white. Several of them had what I'd call 'Southern' accents. It turned out the Marcus also had some bus passes, and maps to the county hospital.

A number of the kids had health problems; at the first two camps I hadn't really noticed, but at the third camp I did notice. He talked to a few mothers, who listened to him explain that the County Hospital was a little slow if you were a walk-in, but if you got there early, they would see you before the day was done.

Then we were back downtown. He parked his van, a van much older and a lot more run down than mine, and we started walking. The kids we saw were white, more or less my age, more boys than girls. They were in small groups; some just two or three, some as many as seven or eight. Marcus would say hello, and ask if anyone wanted to spend the night in a shelter. Mostly the replies were obscene, but good-natured for all of that. Again, Marcus was well known to them, and it was more like a game. A game that no one wanted to play, though.

We spent several hours walking the streets of downtown. Odd, I lived not that many miles away from downtown, less than five miles. I'd been downtown often in the last few weeks, and had been there now and again before then. I'd never noticed these groups of kids. Of course, this was the first time I was there after dark.

It was after ten, Marcus and I were back to his van. "This next part is where life gets interesting," he told me. "I have a favor to ask."

"Sure," I told him.

"We're going to cruise down Van Buren, Washington and all that for the next little while. We're going to stop and chat with the working kids. They are going to walk up to your side of the van and ask if you want to party.

"What I want you to say is that you're with me, that you

have shelter tickets if they are interested. I'll give you a couple; sometimes the girls come in pairs. The guys are usually singletons. If they nod, just hand them the ticket; try to do it carefully, because if their pimp sees it, they'll get beaten up. With a new face, we'll fool some of the pimps, at least for a while. Then they'll get on their cell phones and spread the word. We'll know that's happened because when we pull up next to them, the kids will walk away.

"Don't get out of the van, don't engage them in any conversation at all. Not all of them are kids, some are cops. In theory, the cops know me and leave me alone. In practice, if they feel like hassling us, they will. Say anything about a party, anything at all, and that gives them no legal reason to go after us, but they'll try to use it anyway.

"Just say you're with me, and ask them if they want the ticket. If they nod or hold out their hand, slip them the tickets. Okay?"

"Sure," I told him.

"Can I ask another question?" I went on.

"Keep it simple," he laughed when he said that. "Go ahead, sorry."

"I've noticed there are good cops and bad cops. Yet a lot of people I've met seem only to have met the bad ones."

He simply looked at me, and then made a face. "A good cop; I suppose they exist. I'm African-American. Which means I get roused a lot. Stopped and questioned. How many times have you been stopped on the street and asked questions by the cops?"

"Once," I told him. "It was late at night, when I was walking, trying to think."

He laughed, "Well, there goes that illusion! I get stopped a couple of times a week, Tom. I'm hauled off to jail, on average, once a month or so."

"What for?"

"Being black. For having been in trouble before, for everything else that I am. No reason that I understand. I've

changed; it happens, whether cops believe it or not. Not often, but sometimes you reach the pits of the Abyss. You look around and you get really, really scared. Then you do whatever it is you have to, to get as far away from that place as you can get.

"For me, it was waking up stoned in a jail cell, some guy's cock in my ass. When I told him that wasn't my thing, he beat the shit out of me. He told me of course it wasn't my thing, it was his, and I should get used to it. He made his point rather emphatically."

I made a mental note. Do not sleep in jail. Try to pick your cellmate. I had to laugh. And just what do you get to pick, when you're in jail? Nothing. Nothing at all.

So, we pulled up at places where girls were lounging around. Either talking to another girl, or simply standing a ways back from the street. I asked the question; it had seemed like a simple, harmless thing.

The fear that I saw when I said I was with Marcus was palpable. They'd glance at Marcus; most stepped back away from the curb. Some almost ran away. The terror in their eyes made me want to cry.

They were mostly girls, as I said, my age, fifteen to seventeen. There were older women, but Marcus passed them by. They wore too much makeup, clothes that barely covered them, and the ones who came up to the window of the van made it a point to expose even more skin when they did.

We went as far as north of the airport on Van Buren, turned around and went on the other side of the street. Another trip to just north of the airport, this time on Washington. Long before we got back to Central, no one would get near the van.

"Well, let's call it a night," Marcus said. I looked at him. It was close to midnight, a little early, I thought, to quit.

I contemplated asking him if he really was going to quit for the night, but I decided not to. The last two hours had been hard on me; much harder than I'd thought it would be. The camps, the wandering kids downtown, had looked dirty, but normal. The prostitutes, though, lived in abject fear. At a distance they looked normal, but mention who I was with, what I

had, and they reacted.

A lot to think about, I thought. A lot.

"Do you suppose we could do this again?" I asked, as he turned south, back to my van.

"Tell me this isn't a class project," he stated emphatically.

"It's not school related at all. In fact, I nearly got expelled this week."

"Hey, maybe you have unexpected talents!"

"Please," I told him, "I do want to help. I don't care about anything else. Those kids... the fear in their eyes..."

"You're being judgmental, Tom," he told me. "Fear is always with us, Tom. We could be in a car wreck; someone could blitz a light and cream us with no warning."

I swallowed. "Been there, done that. The t-shirt is coming next week."

He looked at me oddly. "We judge risks every minute of every day. Those kids on the street; they can take that ticket. I have had girls literally beg me to take them right then. And I have. I've been shot at, doing that, too."

"Been there, done that, too," I said sadly. "No t-shirts that day. But she's safe and her brother will never hurt her again. Not ever." I was a little shocked at the pleasure I took in knowing Jenny was safe from her brother, and how warm the pride that I'd done my share to make it come about, felt.

Marcus give me another odd look, then he went back to driving. "That's happened just a couple of times, though. Mostly, they turn and walk or run away. Because, they perceive the risks of coming away are higher than staying." He barked a bitter laugh. "Average lifespan of a girl on the street: maybe a year. Maybe. A guy, maybe a little more."

"Is that why you stayed away from the older women?" I asked.

He shook his head. "They didn't start on the streets, they end up there on their slide downhill. They have street smarts, and can exist for a long time. Exist, not live.

"No, a kid leaves home because they can't bear it or they get kicked out; they have no defenses. No street smarts at all; even the ones who are sure they do. The kids downtown, they are there for just a month, sometimes two. Then it becomes a choice: eat or starve. To eat, you have to earn money. You can beg, but that's hard to do when you're a clean-cut, healthy looking teenager. So, there's sex. Sex means pimps, drugs, and nothing else. Violence, in some form, every day for the rest of your life. And you don't live long when you're in that world."

"Yet, they keep choosing it."

"It's like the old story about the frogs in the pot. Start the pot out cold, turn the heat up gradually, and you end up with cooked frog. Toss them in warm water and crank up the fire, and the frog jumps for it. These kids adapt to the street like the frog in the cold water; just slow enough so they don't notice how steep the slope is. Or how slippery the slope is. Then, they're toast."

On that less than cheery note we arrived back at his office. I got in my van, started it up and left the small parking lot at the strip mall. The clock on the dashboard now showed it a bit before midnight.

I made a note to myself, to talk to Elizabeth about fate, karma, luck, seeing the future; whatever you want to call it. It was with me again, then. I was about three hundred feet from the traffic light. To go home I should have crossed the traffic lanes on Buckeye and got in the left turn lane when I got to Central. But the light changed yellow as I pulled out; on a whim I went right at the light, instead of left.

We liked to go to South Mountain Park on the Fourth of July. There weren't any nearby fireworks displays, but you had a clear view of the entire valley; there were times when we'd watched a dozen shows, all at once. I was close, so that's where I went.

The toll collector at the booth explained to me that the park closed in an hour. I nodded and drove the five minutes up to the top, where there are picnic ramadas, places to barbeque

and lots of tables. The parking lot is well lighted and well patrolled, but couples park there anyway. I'd never been to South Mountain Park for that, but a couple of times I'd gotten out of the car and gone and sat down, looking at the lights of the city.

There are millions of lights visible; homes and business, churches and dens of iniquity. Planes, trains and automobiles. Streetlights and security lights, even a few searchlights. I'd had such thoughts before, but I'd never felt so alone before. The thoughts?

Each light was a story; none of the stories were simple. Just a simple street light, if you stop and think about it. People, more than one person, makes the pole. More people make the bulbs; others make the wiring, the light sensors and switches to turn it on and off. Then a crew of men put up the pole, another crew does the wiring, others make sure the controls work. How many people have a hand in getting that solitary light up and working? Dozens, maybe hundreds. Each of those people has a family. Parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles. Spouses and in-laws. Friends and enemies.

They blinked the parking lot lights; I got back in the van and started the engine again. People were in no great hurry to leave, but a police car or two would be around shortly and then you had to move or get a ticket. I just got going, and this time headed for home.

Choices, fate, karma. Luck, good and bad. I'd had some good luck of late. Sex, as much as anyone could ever want, I thought. But while I didn't regret it, I didn't want to do it again. Helping Jenny, helping Mary; I loved helping people. Helping Elizabeth when her heart stopped; helping Shannon in a way, when Roger Parker was bothering her. Helping Gloria, I'd even helped Tony's cousin, JR and Anna's sister Sally with a certain kind of experience.

I was so lost in thought, I missed turning on Osborn to get on home; going up to Indian School instead. I decided to come back on Third Street; I wasn't going very fast, I was still thinking.

It was a shape I saw out of the corner of my eye, as I passed an alley. Just the shortest, briefest, momentary glance at a pattern of shadow and light.

I slowed and stopped. There was parking along the side of the street there, for the shops back on Indian School. I got out and walked back towards the alley.

The alley was dark; there was a fair amount of traffic on Indian School, but not much on Third Street. I stopped at the entrance to the alley, looking to see if I'd been imagining things, or if I'd really seen a foot in the alley. Just that, what looked like a short bit of leg in a white sock, lying next to the buildings.

I couldn't see anything; it was quiet except for the traffic noise a hundred feet away. I took a tentative step down the alley; I still couldn't see anything.

I stood listening again, then moved another few paces forward.

In retrospect, I'd have understood better if I stopped and thought. Which would have done the same thing for me as going slowly did. My eyes had been used to headlights and streetlights. The alley was dark. By going slowly, I let my eyes adjust, and when they did, I could see someone sitting sideways in a doorway ahead of me in the alley.

It was really dark in that doorway, so I moved a little further along, but angling away, which I thought would be reassuring, even as it let a little more light past me.

It was a girl, I saw. She looked up at me, her eyes wide and staring. "Go away," she said, "I have a gun!"

She moved, and I could see it. Yes, she did. It didn't much look like the gun Sam had used, it was more like the guns you see police detectives have on TV. She was holding it nestled between her breasts, the barrel against her chest, and pointing up.

She didn't say anything else, but I didn't need to hear the words. It wasn't me she was threatening to shoot.

Oh, it's so easy to be brave, when you're trapped and have no place to go! It's easy to be brave, when there's no one else but yourself, and a friend is on the street, dying. It's easy to be brave when someone puts a gun to your forehead and makes

demands of you, threatening someone you love.

I could be wrong, I thought, about who was at risk. She wouldn't have to move the gun much, and it would be me in the line of fire, instead of herself. But someone had to be in the line of fire. A year, that's what Marcus had said, that was the lifespan of a girl living on the streets. Just a year. Some didn't even live that long; and if they survived? You broke and ran, or you broke and stayed. It didn't seem like either one was much good to you.

"Could I sit down a ways away, and we can talk?" I asked.

She snorted. "I'm not going to give you a blow job, no matter how long you talk."

"Well, that's good," I said, being judgmental. "God only knows how many other dicks would have been there before me. Thanks, but I'll pass."

I waved at the asphalt of the alley. I was about ten feet away from her now, no longer blocking what little light there was.

She didn't say anything, so I just sat down, Indian fashion, my legs crossed. I reached into my jeans and pulled out some of Marcus's shelter tickets. I leaned forward and put them on the ground three or four feet away from me.

"Those are tickets to a shelter. I'd offer you a ride, but you'd misunderstand. So what I'll do is call a cab, pay the cabbie to take you there."

"I'm fine here. I got lost, trying to find Encanto Park."

I sighed. "Well, this is your lucky day! If you'd have found the park, you'd need the gun to stay alive."

"A girl gave me a map to a clump of bushes. She says no one knows about them."

I lived just a few miles from Encanto Park. I'd been there a hundred times during the day. They had a nice pool, good tennis courts, a golf course... and acres and acres of lagoons, winding walkways and clusters of bushes. I'd been warned since I was five or six, to stay away from the bushes, because people



lurked in the heart of those bushes, people who would hurt little boys and girls. So, I'd kept away myself, and kept JR safe as well. Which wasn't hard, because our parents never let us get very far away from them.

"Trust me," I told her. "Take the shelter. Stay here, if you absolutely must. Avoid the park, particularly at night. But the bushes aren't a good idea, even in the daytime."

"I've been to a shelter; it's worse than living at home. You have to pick everything up, they lecture you at meal times..." her voice ran down. "I don't want to go to a shelter, I'm fine."

Two things happened then. She moved slightly, turned her face just a bit, so I could see her face. It was the girl from my dreams! I felt my jaw scrape the pavement, and I felt tremors running up and down my back. And, for a second, I could see a dark, rectangular shape behind her.

It took me a second to realize what it was; it was a folio case, like art students carried around. What runaway took her art with her?

"I'm fine, thanks," she told me again. "Please leave."

"I just want to talk."

"And I don't," she responded. "Please leave."

For a second, I was listening to Shannon tell Roger to stop, to please leave, a long time ago at school. Roger hadn't gotten the message, and I'd smugly told myself afterwards that if a girl ever told me to leave, why I'd do just that. Yet, it was going to take more than her asking just now to get me moving.

I waved at the folio. "Are you an artist?"

"No!" she said emphatically. "I'm not an artist. I doodle things."

I wondered about that; but I was more concerned about finding a safe topic that she was willing to talk about. Then I remembered the dream content. "Do you doodle houses and floor plans?" I asked.

She snorted. "No."

Back to finding a safe topic. "I was born and raised here in Phoenix," I told her. "Where are you from?"

"Santa Maria. That's a little town in California, north of Santa Barbara."

I knew almost nothing of California geography. Los Angeles was west of Phoenix, San Francisco was north of LA and San Diego was south of LA. I had lots of t-shirts from LA and none from anywhere else in California.

"There are times I think it would be nice to live in a small town," I said, crossing my fingers.

She snorted again. "Sure. Of course. A high school that a few kids get grades that will get them into one of the lower tier of the UC system. Maybe you can get into a top tier school if you are in the top two or three. For most of us, it's the community college to prepare for our life of burger flipping, working at Wal-Mart or picking vegetables."

"Until yesterday," I said, hoping that she was warming to the topic, "I didn't think much about college, even though I'm a junior. A girl I know, she's a lot like you; she has plans, things she wants to do. She's really worried how she's going to be able to do it; so we're going to get together a little group, a support group, and work on getting us all in places where we can chase our dreams."

"I don't have dreams or plans; I gave them up for Lent."

"I'm not Catholic, but I have a friend who's a nun."

She snorted again. "I gave up on nuns in fourth grade."

She was still holding the gun where she'd been holding it before. I didn't think, though, that she had her finger on the trigger any more; but it was too dark to be sure.

I contemplated asking if there was anything she hadn't given up on; decided that was such a stupid question that I should spend more time thinking.

The silence lengthened, then she asked me to leave again.

"I was curious about why you left home. Everyone says it's not something you're supposed to ask; let the person tell you if that's what they want. Please, I'm curious. I have a Mom and Dad that I love, a sister I love loads and loads; a new sort-of sister, a girl we're going to adopt. We're happy; oh, we have issues, but we work through them."

She looked down, staring at the pistol I thought. I wanted to crawl to her on my hands and knees and tell her I was sorry, I just wanted her safe, that was all. Whatever she wanted, I was willing to do.

She looked back up. "So, you're one of the lucky ones. My father drank himself to death when I was eight. Mom works as a waitress in a cafe, making minimum wage and tips in a place that caters to people too poor to have their own kitchens. They almost never tip. We live in a ratty one-room apartment, and ever since I can remember Mom has been on my case about studying, getting good grades so I can get a scholarship and get the hell out of there.

"She hates my doodles; she hates it when I don't get good grades in school. I like math, I do okay there. History? Who needs it? English? Like, what, I'm speaking French? Biology? Every kid in California knows all about reproductive biology. All the rest? Like I care if I can play a stinking flute?"

"What do your doodles look like?" I asked.

"Buildings, mostly. I like to draw buildings. It's not art. It sure as hell isn't floor plans. I think it would be cool to be an architect; but unless I go to a top tier school, that's never going to happen."

Dad had gotten a series of books once by David Macaulay. The one I'd like best was Cathedral, but Castle was good too. Actually, they were all superb. "I read a book once on how to build a cathedral. You needed some history to understand the basics of it; you sure needed to know history to know why they did a lot of things they did."

I was being judgmental again; I knew it. Just how in name of reason can you hold an intelligent conversation about anything without employing judgment? Even mundane conversations

about what's for dinner, what should I wear, is it hot out?

"I read that too. But I don't want to build a cathedral. Office buildings, I guess. Maybe a hotel. There are some cool hotels in Las Vegas, I saw some pictures of them once on TV."

Once again the conversation lagged. How was I supposed to talk to someone about a topic I had zero interest in? I had a little knowledge, but that hadn't gotten me very far. She might actually be okay here, tonight. And maybe tomorrow or the day after. But she knew, I thought. That's why she told up front about a blowjob; she's not there yet.

Which had to mean she was new to Phoenix, new to the streets. It's simple, I thought. I'll get her to go to Mary's.

"How about I call a cab, and have him take you to a woman I know. She has two daughters, one about your age, one my age. She'll put you up for the night. No questions, no hassles, no nothing." I decided 'no breakfast, either' was one 'no' too many.

"Sure, like everyone just lines up to take in a stranger late on a Friday night."

"They're friends," I said quietly. "They won't mind."

I could see her looking at me, so I decided I had to push, just a little. "Let me call them, and tell them you're coming. Please."

She shrugged, and I picked my phone off my belt and dialed the number.

A voice said politely that the number had been disconnected.

I stared at the phone, checked the number. It was the right one. I dialed in manually; it was still disconnected. Evidently, the phone company had a low tolerance for people not paying their bills for a couple of months. Mary was supposed to have gotten some money during the day; obviously not in time.

Kim had my aunt and uncle as houseguests. Our house was full up; I'd offer up my bed in a second, but I was certain that the offer would be misconstrued and put me back where I started,

but with the girl prejudiced against me.

Tony? He'd do it if I asked; but his parents had been having problems. A runaway girl would be like pouring gasoline on the fire, I was afraid. Sue Ellen? She was a friend, that she was. But this kind of a friend? I grimaced; there was only going to be one way to find out.

After a few rings, I got the answering machine. Everyone was, I thought, out. Or at least not answering the phone. I could, I thought, simply take her to a hotel and put her up; I had a credit card that would work for that. Again, it would look bad.

I racked my brain, wondering what I could do. "No room in the inn, eh?" the girl laughed bitterly.

"No one answering the phone this late at night," I told her.

Well, there was one person I could think of. One person who owed me a favor, and the favor I wanted was the one I'd done for her. Of course, there was also Gloria's father to contend with.

The worst that would happen couldn't be worse, I thought, than our first meeting. Or our second. I pushed the speed dial button and waited for events to unfold.

The second ring, a familiar voice answered, "Si?"

"Sir, this is Tom Ferguson, Gloria's friend. I was going to ask her for a favor, but since I have you, I might as well start with you."

"It's after one in the morning."

"Yes, sir. I learned how to read the big and small hands in first grade. Look, I have a friend, a girl, in high school, she's from California. It's Spring Break, there. Anyway, she needs a place to crash for tonight."

"What's wrong with your bed?" he growled.

"Sir, I don't think her mother would approve; I doubt if I could explain it to my mom, either. So, could she crash at your

place tonight? I'm sure I can find her a place elsewhere before tomorrow night."

"You must think I'm crazy," he said, his voice angry.

"I think, sir, you'd be doing me a favor. I think you might want to ask Gloria about if she'd be willing to do all of the work. I'd hate to put you out the least, tiny bit."

"Are you on drugs?" he asked.

"No, sir. I just have a problem that I need some help with. I'd be obliged, sir, if you'd help. If not, sir, something else is always possible." I could just take her to Mary's, stand outside and knock. It wasn't much worse than calling them up this late at night.

"Sir, could you wake up Gloria and ask her for her opinion?"

"You are on drugs!" he said, his voice bitter.

Okay, Mary's it was, then. "I'm sorry to have disturbed you, sir. I really am serious, and I appreciate the time of night. Thanks, anyway."

Someone had said something on the other end, and for a second there was the lack of sound as the speaker was covered up.

"Hello, young man," the new voice was Gloria's grandmother.

"I'm sorry to wake you up, ma'am," I apologized.

She sniffed. "At my age, I don't get but an hour or two at a time. I was listening to the radio. What is it?"

"Ma'am," I said, then repeated the story to her.

"Bring her by. She can use my bed, I won't need it until the afternoon." I think she was trying to chuckle, but it sounded like a cackle.

"Thank you, thanks a lot."

I hung up, and turned to the girl.

"Okay, I have a place that's not a shelter. Trust me, my friend's father is a bit brusque, you don't want to shake hands with him, but her grandmother is really cool. My friend Gloria is nice; she's a cheerleader at my high school."

I sat still for a second. Two things left; one I was willing to compromise about, the other was non negotiable. "I wish you'd trust me, get in my car and let me drive you there. It's about six or seven minutes; if I call a cab it could take an hour. It wouldn't be fair to those people, to wait an hour."

"And I should trust you?" she asked.

"Yes," I told her, "you should. But that isn't the hardest thing I want you to do. I want you to leave the gun there, sitting in the doorway."

She sniffed. "Afraid I'm going to shoot you?"

"No, but it's peace of mind I'd like to have tonight, with you staying with my friend and her family."

"You think I might be some whacked killer? I'll do them all in the night?" She was, I thought, a little pale.

"I don't think so, but like I said, it would help my peace of mind."

"And why should I give a good God damn about your peace of mind? What about mine?"

"Trust me," I told her. "Either everything I've said to you is a lie, or it's the truth. Black or white, girl. Trust me or not. Doesn't matter if it's a little or lot, does it?"

"I suppose." She was silent for a long time, three or four minutes.

"I guess it's something I have to do," she told me. "I think you're wrong, though. I have no where to go. No where. I don't have a place to go tonight; I won't have one tomorrow or the day after that. I don't think about next week or next month; but I don't have a place to go then, either. I am not going home; no one can make me go back."

"No matter what you think about my gender or age, all I want is for you to be safe. Then we can worry about the rest. One thing at a time."

"It was awful at home," she was talking rapidly, a defensive tone in her voice. "I like my doodles; I do them and I feel better. Mom would get on my case about school, and how I shouldn't waste my time. She'd shout and make me upset; at school they made me upset, too. The school shrink gave me some pills to help me with the stress. But I felt so weird. Depressed. I..."

She started crying softly. "I don't know what's happening. It was just one thing after another. I can't go back!"

Again, I realized that things weren't maybe as simple as Marcus had presented them. Then I realized Marcus really hadn't said much about why kids left home; it was easy for me, a teenager to blame it on clueless parents. But in this case, I think it was team effort. This girl had pride; she knew she'd done something stupid, but because of that pride, she wasn't going to admit being stupid, even to herself. Another ten thousand things that made it more difficult to stop and admit to yourself that you need to rethink.

"You don't have to go back," I told her. "I promise, I will find someone who will take you in. They will not, I promise, make an issue with your doodles. If they do, we'll do something else. I just want to help. Please."

She let out a big breath. "I guess. I'm so fucked, does it really matter?" She moved a bit, and I saw she was easing the hammer down on the pistol. I swallowed. I didn't know a whole lot about guns, but I do know it's a lot easier to shoot with the hammer back. All of this time, she'd been a hairbreadth away from death. All it would have taken would have been one wrong choice on my part, and I could have driven her to the ultimate wrong choice.

I watched her put the gun down, stand up and take up her backpack and the folio. "I feel bad about leaving it here."

I unfolded, standing. I wasn't very graceful. "After I see you safe with my friend, I'll call the police and report it. I won't say anything beyond where it's at."



We walked out to my van; I opened the door on the passenger side and she got in. I went around and got in, and drove the short distance to Gloria's.

Gloria and her grandmother were both waiting for us. The girl waited for me to come around to open her door; I reached out and lightly touched her arm, just for the merest fraction of a second. "It would be better if I knew your name," I asked. "Please. Like I said, I'm Tom."

"Helen," she said, and then went past me.

I walked a step behind, and stopped next to her by the door.

"Any friend of Tom's is always welcome," Gloria said.

"I never saw him before tonight," the girl said.

Gloria giggled. "Oh, well, I know how fast Tom can make friends! I hardly knew him at all, and I showed up at his house one night, drunk as a skunk, after my boyfriend tried to rape me. He let me sleep in his bed, while he slept on a couch downstairs. Tom's cool."

I was a little surprised to hear Gloria tell the story here, but I guessed her father had gone back to bed. I wasn't clear why she didn't mind her grandmother knowing, though.

Helen looked at Gloria, then at her grandmother and said something in Spanish. The three of them spoke for some time in Spanish, while I just stood patiently.

Gloria's grandmother stopped talking, walked over, stood on tiptoe and kissed me on my cheek. "In Spain, the word 'hidalgo' is supposed to mean a minor nobleman. But Don Quixote was hidalgo; it really means something like chivalrous, noble. Like Don Quixote. You, young man, you are hidalgo."

She said something to Gloria and Helen, and the two girls went inside the house, Gloria leading.

Gloria's grandmother smiled at me, "Go with God, young man. Come back later."

I turned and went to the van. It was getting close to two

in the morning, and I didn't want to be much later getting home. I stopped at a 7-11 and used the pay phone to make a 911 call about the gun; I hoped that the police wouldn't blow it off.

I pulled up and got out, walked up to the door. Mom and Mary greeted me, both of them wearing nighties.

I didn't say anything; I just hugged my mom as tight as I could, an ounce from tears. She kissed me on my forehead, turned and headed upstairs. I hugged Mary, but this time it was sexual. We kissed too, and then I was as hard as I've ever been.

I took her hand and led her upstairs, to my bed. Like so many others, she looked at it and said, "You need something bigger."

I undressed, and then peeled her nightie over her head. I took her hand and led it to my erection. "I have this; so far you ladies have been willing to make do."

I felt a fraction of an inch thick; that I was on the edge of falling apart. That had been a stupid sixteen year old guy talking, not me. Mary didn't laugh, instead her gripped firmed. I kissed her hard, using my tongue. Her tongue pushed mine aside, easily winning the duel. It felt like she was trying to wrap her tongue around mine.

I ran my hands over her back, down over her bottom. The kiss went on and on, and once again I gloried at the touch of her warm body against mine, my heart soared when I saw her green eyes giggling and laughing, looking at me. I drowned in them, cherished them.

I made love to her; she made love to me. For a long time, after we were complete, I lay with my head on her breast, listening to her heartbeat.

A warm lassitude crept over my body; days and days and days of events passed my eyes. Four weeks ago, I thought, I went to a basketball game with Tony, Sue Ellen and Tony's cousin Marsha. What a difference a few weeks make in your life!

It wasn't so much that I'd grown up; I doubted if I'd grown physically at all. Inside, again, it wasn't so much that I'd grown up, as I'd expanded. Maybe, I thought, the metaphor is

all screwed up. You don't grow up; you just expand to fill the space around you. Until you can push back against your environment as hard as it pushes against you.

I saw Mary's very large nipple come erect. Speaking of pushing against your environment... I leaned close and used my tongue to circle it. It didn't take much of that before Mary pulled me to her, hastily fumbling, guiding me into her.

She reached up to stroke my face. "There are times, Tom, I feel sinful, making love to someone your age. Then I wish I was your age again, so we could just do it, without my hang-ups. Except I'm not your age, I know that. But if there's anything better than being sixteen again, it's being with someone who's sixteen. I love you, Tom."

"I love you, Mary." And I showed her the depth of my love twice more, before I slept.

The End