

# Hand Off

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## i: Joe

I knew something had to be up by the way Joe kept toying with his Coke can.

Fiddling with stuff was a nervous habit of Joe's for as long as I've known him, but what struck me right then was that this was the first time in months that I'd seen him do it. And way down deep, a bitter little piece of me was a bit glad.

Not, I hasten to say, that I had any reason to want Joe to suffer. We've been friends longer than either of us can accurately say. But right then, we were at a point where our lives had been diverging more and more. My marriage was all but done, my finances were in the toilet, and I couldn't shake the increasing sense that my job hung on every new piece I wrote for *Tech Toys*, the magazine I'd been working for since getting out of college. Joe, on the other hand, was thriving like nobody's business: he'd patched things up with Alice after nearing divorce, gotten two promotions at his government job, and hadn't complained about the prices at our favorite deli in ages. So if Joe was having a problem, maybe it meant the law of averages was about to correct a few things for me, too.

Still, I'm human. I put down my corned beef sandwich and broke Joe's reverie by snatching the empty can from his fingers. "Spill it -- what's bugging you?"

The answer surprised me. "You," he said, looking me straight in the eye. "What's going on with you and Nina?"

"Trying to spoil my appetite, eh?" His gaze didn't waver, though. "Okay, fine. Nothing's going on. She doesn't call. She doesn't come over. She doesn't even let Jenny call or come over, and of course I can't do anything about that because I'm just a stepdad. We're being ordered into mediation, which is gonna cost me five hundred, and the lawyer wants another three grand before we go in front of the judge again. That'll kill off the last of my savings, but it'll be worth it if I can get her to at least talk to me."

"You know what I think about her," he reminded me. "But still, man, I'm sorry."

I just shrugged. Joe had tried to warn me about marrying Nina. Even now, 18 months later, with the marriage in shambles, I still wanted to make it work and he still thought I was nuts. "It's not your fault. None of the shit that's been dropped on me lately is your fault."

"No," he agreed. And then a weird sort of look came over him. "But what if I could help you get out from under it?"

"We've been there before. I don't want your money. I'll find resources as I need them."

"I'm not talking about money, Sam."

The bitterness welled up in me at exactly the wrong time, as usual. "Then what, Joe? What are you gonna do? Call Nina and tell her how I still feel, and hope that you can somehow do that more persuasively than I did? Convince my editor that even though I remember CP/M I can still write for an

audience raised on PlayStation? Maybe get my bloodsucking lawyer to take a pay cut? What?"

Joe had to have heard the ugliness, but he ignored it. "Is that what you'd do if you could?"

He said it so quietly and seriously that it brought me up short. Would I do those things if I could? "Okay, probably not. As much as I love Nina, I can't keep her if she won't stay. And the lawyer earns his money, I just don't like having to use him because I don't want this divorce."

"And your editor?"

That took less thought. "I was writing about technology before he could spell the word. That arrogant, know-nothing prick should be working for me."

"All right," Joe replied, "two out of three is good enough."

"I'm happy I passed the test. Good enough for what?"

Joe looked around as if he was checking for an audience and leaned in closer. His voice dropped to half volume, which forced me to lean in as well. "What if I told you I could give you the power to control people's minds?"

For about three seconds I just sat there dumbfounded. Then I picked up his Coke can. "I'd take this to the nearest lab and have it analyzed. What's the punch line?"

"No punch line. Here, I'll prove it to you. There's an attractive woman somewhere behind me, isn't there?"

The non-sequitur made me blink. "Yeah, but how ...?"

"You've been looking over my shoulder every two minutes since we sat down. Your heart may be pining for Nina, but your balls are still working the way nature intended. Now watch this."

Joe stood up and walked over to the back table where I'd spotted her -- a hot, smartly dressed redhead with no ring on her left hand, having lunch with two female friends, or maybe coworkers. Out of my league, even if I had been looking for someone other than my wife. I saw Joe lay a hand lightly on her shoulder and say something. Her face flashed blank for a second, then she stood up and followed him back to where I sat.

She looked a little confused at first. Then Joe took her by the elbow, every so discreetly, and her face got that dazed look on it again. "What's your name?" he asked her.

"Audrey." Her voice was soft and calm, almost as if she was talking in her sleep. She had a sort of vapid stare, too.

"Good," Joe said. "Audrey, this is my friend Sam. Say hello to him."

"Hello, Sam."

"Umm ... hello," I said, feeling a weak little smile on my face. This was just too weird.

"Audrey," Joe continued, "Sam here is very attracted to you, and the more you look at him the more you feel that you're attracted to him as well. I want you to write your full name and phone number on this napkin here and give it to him, and if he calls you to ask for a date you'll be happy to accept because you know that Sam is a great guy that any woman would love to have."

"Oh. Sure." Audrey took the pen Joe offered her and wrote her name and phone number on the napkin as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do. "Here, Sam," she said as she passed it over to me. "You can call me any time; I live alone."

I took the napkin and stared at it, then her. "Thanks," I said, still not sure exactly what was going on.

Joe touched her one more time. "Go back to your friends now. If they ask you about us, just make up something they'll believe."

"Okay. It was really nice meeting you, Sam."

"Likewise." And I watched her walk back to her table and sit down to an immediate flurry of questions from her companions. She seemed to be answering calmly and whatever she said seemed to satisfy them. Interesting.

"Do you believe me now?" Joe asked.

I almost couldn't believe my own answer. "I think so. If that was an elaborate hoax of some kind you'd have a smug grin on your face instead of looking like you're about to read your own will. What the hell did you just do?"

"It's all in the touch," he told me. "I have this ... power. It's not mine; it was given to me almost a year ago -- I can't tell you by whom -- and now I need to pass it on to someone else. I want to give it to you."

"How?" It was just too strange to argue about.

"Give me your hand." Joe held out his hand as if to shake mine, and I complied. "From my hand to your hand, my mind to your mind. The Power is now yours."

One time I tried to replace a flaky light switch without turning off the power first. The sudden hard tingle, that unpleasant surge that you feel when you accidentally shock yourself ... I felt something very much like that as Joe finished speaking. My body gave a hard, not-entirely-pleasant sort of shiver and I jerked back as soon as Joe let go of my hand. "What the fuck?" I said when I recovered a little.

Joe cracked a smile. "Forgot about that. It does sort of feel like a souped-up joy buzzer when it transfers from one person to the next. That'll pass quickly."

And he was right -- it was passing already. I held up my hand and examined it. "It doesn't look any different."

"Nope. And it won't feel any different, not physically anyway. But anybody you touch now with that hand will automatically think and do anything you say."

"That simple?"

"That simple," he assured me.

"Okay, then." I reached out and grabbed his arm. "Give me your wallet, your watch, and the keys to your car."

No sooner did I get the words out, though, then someone split my head in half with a giant meat cleaver. That's what it felt like, anyway. The pain was momentarily blinding and it took every bit of self-control I could muster to spit out a string of quiet cuss words instead of screaming in the middle of the deli. I dropped back into my chair and held my head for a minute until the place stopped spinning.

"Sorry, Sam," Joe was saying when I came to my senses. "I should've warned you before I passed it on. There are rules to this thing."

"Oh, yeah?" The pain was receding and I could think again. "You want to fill me in now?"

"I need to. There are three rules that you need to know.

"First: the Power is yours now, but you can only keep it for a maximum of one year. Sometime in the next 365 days, Sam, you have to choose someone else and pass it on to them as I just did to you.

"Second: once you've had the Power, you can never receive it again and you become immune to its use. If you try to use the Power on someone who's had it before ... well, you just found out what happens.

"Third: the effects of the Power are permanent. Audrey is now attracted to you and thinks you're a great guy, and will continue to think that way unless you do something to change it. So be damned careful what you say to people while you touch them."

I kept looking at my hand, half expecting it to glow or something. "So how do I use it?"

"Exactly like you just tried with me, but not on me. Touch the person with your right hand and tell them what you want them to think or do. Doesn't matter where you touch them or how hard you touch; just keep contact while you speak and the order goes straight to their mind."

"Don't people get pissed when you let go?"

"Did Audrey?" Joe shrugged at me. "I don't completely understand how this thing works, but people seem to rationalize why they're doing or thinking exactly what you said. Sometimes they think it was their idea, or that you just agreed with what they were already thinking; sometimes they forget you said anything. With some people you don't even have to say anything out loud, which helps."

"Okay. Suppose I decide to keep the power? What happens if I don't pass it on after a year?"

Joe's face got white. "When I asked that question the only answer I got was, 'You do not want to find out.' So please, don't find out."

That creeped me out enough to agree instantly.

Joe looked at his watch. "I need to get back. Any more questions for now?"

Yes, I had one. "Why me?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Joe suddenly looked a little sheepish. "All the good things that have happened for me in the past year -- Alice and I reconciling, the promotions -- have been partly luck and partly from using the Power. You need some of that kind of luck. So use it wisely, for a year, and then pass it on to someone else who needs it."

We got up and tossed away our trash. "I don't know what to say. Thanks, for starters."

"I'm just glad I could give it to you," Joe said. "One request: don't tell anyone, okay? I mean, they'd think you were crazy unless you demonstrated it for them, but I'd rather people think I got everything I have now the hard way."

"Sure."

As we headed for our separate offices, I couldn't help but wonder about Alice.

I'd like to say that I was a model of restraint; that I weighed carefully everything that Joe had told me and gave serious thought to how I would use this strange, fascinating gift. That would make me sound so much better than I really am.

No, the truth is my first use of the power was an accident. In the elevator I ran into Leah, the research assistant I share with several other writers. She pointedly looked at her watch and said, "You're seven minutes late, big guy. His Nibs will not be happy."

She was joking, of course, but there was an element of truth there. Amid general rumors of an impending shake-up, my boss had been riding me like a rented pony for weeks. Without thinking, I

winked at her and said, "Then before I get fired, you should take me to the supply room and give me that blow job you keep offering."

Leah's face went blank and when I finished talking I realized that I had my hand on her arm. Before I could open my mouth again, though, the elevator dinged and the doors opened. "You're right," she told me. "Let's go." And without waiting for a response from me Leah hustled out of the elevator.

I followed her and sure enough, she was heading to the supply room. She closed the door behind us and flipped the deadbolt. "Look, Leah," I started to say, but she launched herself at me and smothered my words with a hot kiss. She pressed up against a metal cabinet and her hand snaked its way inside my pants in nothing flat. My cock felt a female touch for the first time in months and almost took over. Almost.

Instead I broke the kiss and, with my hand on her face, said, "Leah, I was joking. We can't actually do this."

Again I saw the blank expression, which quickly turned back into her usual teasing look. "Of course not," she replied with a broad wink. "I just wanted to see how far you'd take it before chickening out." She extracted her hand and unlocked the door. "Nice package, by the way." And with a mock licking of her lips she left.

I took my time fixing my clothes. Once my hard-on subsided I grabbed a few batteries and a notebook and headed for my desk.

Chad, my editor, found me there a little bit later. He heralded his arrival with a fake clearing of his throat and a quick, "Sam, my office." Jerk-off. His "office" is nothing but a cubicle with taller sides and a flimsy see-through door. Talk about delusions of grandeur.

"Close the door," he said as I followed him inside.

*Sure, I thought. That's gonna keep everyone on this side of the floor from hearing this conversation.* We writers were divided on whether Chad didn't know, or just didn't care, that everything said in that "office" is clearly audible to anyone in the area regardless of the state of the door. Without saying anything I stood in front of his desk and waited to be chewed out for coming back late from lunch. That wasn't the problem, though.

"I'm reassigning the CES round-up to Melissa," he said without even bothering to look at me. "I expect you to hand your notes over to her this afternoon."

I wanted to ring his pencil neck. "The Consumer Electronics Show round-up has always been my story. I have contacts and sources that I've developed over years. Melissa's been here, what, three months?"

"Which is exactly why I'm sending her. It's time for some fresh perspective. She'll bring a new level of excitement to the material."

"And a new level of ignorance," I grumbled. "Melissa thinks WiMAX is a premium cable channel. What, is she fucking you or something?"

That did it. Chad finally looked me in the eye. "Sam, your attitude has been deteriorating almost as quickly as the quality of your work. I know you've had some tough times at home, but that's no excuse for insubordination and I won't tolerate it any longer. I think it would be best if you start looking for a new job."

*Nice going, Sam, I thought grimly. What do you do for an encore, stick your leg in a wood chipper?* He that is down fears no fall -- I leaned over the desk and let my hand close over Chad's forearm. "You don't want my resignation," I said, fighting back the urge to do an Alec Guinness impression. "I am a first-class writer and an invaluable member of the staff. In fact, it would be a very good idea to send me to the CES with Melissa so I can supervise her and provide needed guidance and experience. You agree, don't you?"

Chad blinked a couple of times and swallowed. "I ... yes, I was just going to say that. You should make your travel arrangements soon."

"So you don't really want me to leave." A statement, not a question.

"No, of course not," he parroted. "You're a first-class writer and an invaluable member of the staff."

*Holy fuck, it works!* I thought. "Great," I told him. "I'm glad we have an understanding. It's good to be appreciated." I held out my hand to shake and of course he took it. While I shook his hand, I also added, "All I need is a few days off to decompress. You should push back my deadlines into next week and tell me to take a long weekend."

Again, he blinked and swallowed. "You're right, Sam. A break would be good for you. Don't worry about this week's deadlines."

"Okay," I replied, suppressing a shit-eating grin. "If you think that's best."

I walked out of the office at 2:30 on a Wednesday afternoon, felt the sun on my face, and couldn't help but smile. Lady Luck was on my side at last.

## ii: Audrey

The initial rush of excitement at my new power faded a bit on the way home. Sure, being able to make people think and do what I wanted was a boon, but it wasn't going to solve my problems overnight. Not without creating even bigger ones, anyway.

I needed a plan.

In the spare bedroom that I used as a study I cleared off the whiteboard and divided it into three columns: *Nina*, *Work*, and *Finances*.

It was so tempting to find Nina and use the power to get her to come back to me. The more I thought about that, though, the more I knew I couldn't do it. If I compelled Nina to come back it would be a hollow, joyless win. I'd either have to win her love back the old-fashioned way or let her go. That didn't mean I couldn't do my best to smooth the way, though. I scribbled a few things in the Nina column:

*Jenny?*

*Ron?*

*Alice?*

I drew a line through Jenny almost immediately. As valuable an ally as a headstrong teenager can be, Nina's daughter from her first marriage was also too important to me to mess with. That left Ron, the guy she was sleeping with at the time, and Alice, the closest thing Nina had to a female friend. Alice was also Joe's wife. She and I had a bit of a history, so I could easily visit with little or no need for a pretext. I also figured that Joe of all people would understand if I needed Alice to do some of my groundwork.

The Work column beckoned and I brainstormed:

*Chad*

*Gayle*

*Melissa?*

Fewer question marks here because none of these mattered to me personally. Chad would have to go, probably. But he was young; he'd bounce back. The right words to Gayle, our managing editor, would

make me the front runner to replace him. Melissa I barely knew, but since Chad had put her in the picture I figured she might be useful. And she was damned attractive, too. Not that I'd cheat on Nina, even while I knew she was cheating on me.

The Finance column, the more I thought about it, was unnecessary. Taking Chad's job, which I should've had anyway, would get me a respectable salary bump plus the freedom to start some new income-producing projects without having to stress over my own writing deadlines. Getting Nina back would eliminate the major money drain of paying a divorce lawyer. Sure, I supposed I could try using the Power on a bank teller or two, but my conscience rebelled at the thought. Besides, my moral qualms paled in comparison to the difficulty of hiding that kind of money from the IRS. No, I'd have to earn my living honestly. Or at least make it look that way.

*Watch it, Sam, I warned myself. Power corrupts.*

By Friday I was feeling pretty confident. I had a plan, I had the means to execute the plan, and if I did it well there'd be no negative repercussions for anyone who didn't deserve them. That put me in a festive mood, so when Joe called and invited me to join him and Walt for happy hour I agreed right away.

My pals were halfway through their first round of beers when I got there. They waved me over and I pulled up a stool at the small round table they'd staked out near the bar. "Hey, guys."

Walt was in mid story. "So I write the guy up for an unsafe lane change and for failure to produce his registration. The fine can be 20 to 120 bucks, my discretion. I'm feeling magnanimous, so I write it for the minimum. But when I give the guy the citation to sign, he gets all red in the face and starts sputtering how this is an outrage, he'll fight this every step of the way and sue me for harassment, yadda yadda yadda. I let him rage for a minute, and when he runs out of steam I just say, 'Sir, this is the minimum fine for this offense. Do you want me to increase it by a hundred dollars?'"

I sensed a movement behind me and beer appeared at my elbow. "Wow," I said to the waitress who'd brought it, "that was quick. Are you psychic?"

"Not me, hon," she confessed. "This is from the lady at that corner table over there."

My eyes followed the motion of her head and spied the table in question. A lone redhead grinned at me and raised her glass. "It's Audrey, from the deli," I told Joe as I tipped my glass in thanks. "How the hell?"

Joe had a spit-eating grin on his face. "Saw her there again today and she asked about you. I may have mentioned in passing that we'd be here tonight, about this time, and that you like Black and Tan."

There was nothing funny about it to me. "I'm married, Joe."

"On paper, maybe," Walt said. "If you'd seen Nina and Whats-his-face at Barlow's the other night ... well, I'm just saying."

A cold sort of anger took hold. "Just saying what, Walt?"

"Easy, pal. It's just that, well, they put on a helluva show. If I wasn't off duty I'd have been tempted to cite them for lewd public behavior."

"The show was for your benefit, moron," Joe said, giving Walt a stiff punch to the bicep. "So you'd tell Sam about it and twist the knife a little deeper for her. Nice going." Then, to me, he added, "Nina's moved on; it's time you did, too. Go talk to Audrey. It'll be good practice. Besides, you already know she wants you."

*And we both know why, don't we?* I thought to myself. Instead of voicing that, I just said, "Practice?"

Joe glanced pointedly at my right hand. "Trust me."

So with my drink in hand I wandered over to Audrey's table. "May I?"

She sat up straighter and tossed her hair. "Please do."

So I took the other chair and sat. "Thanks for the beer."

"Oh, you're welcome. I admit it was just a ploy to get you to come sit with me." She sat forward in the chair and toyed with her own glass. "You've been taking some time off, your friend said."

"Just a couple of days," I told her. "To unwind. I have a trip coming up for work that's going to be pretty intense."

"Sounds interesting."

The way Audrey was looking at me, I think I could've said I was going to go strangle squirrels and she'd have found it interesting. But it was flattering, so I opened up and told her about the Consumer Electronics Show, the magazine, and technology writing in general. She was a Human Resources coordinator for the accounting firm up the street from my office, which explained our frequenting the same lunch spot. More interesting than our small talk, though, was her behavior. She leaned toward me, toyed with things on my side of the table, laughed quickly at my jokes. Then, as she was telling me about a trip to Cancun, I felt her foot brush against my leg. She worked hard to make it seem accidental, but I wasn't buying it.

That put me in a quandary. I was married to Nina and still in love with Nina; I'd made a promise to forsake all others and all that. But then I recalled Walt's story, which wasn't the first time I'd heard about my wife being publicly cozy with her new lover, and started to wonder why I should have to put my balls in cold storage when she wasn't. Joe said I should practice, and he knew what he was talking about. Audrey was damned attractive, and clearly wanted me. And her foot was rubbing against my leg again, draining the blood from my brain at a critical moment.

I reached out and put my right hand over hers. "Tell me what you really want right now."

Her face got that vacant look as she answered. "I really want to know you better so I can decide whether I want to sleep with you." When I let go Audrey's face turned bright pink. She covered it with both hands and mumbled, "I can't believe I just said that! God, I'm such a slut!"

And with barely a moment's thought I reached over and made contact again, pulling a hand down and clasping it. "You're no slut," I assured her, staring into her blank eyes. "You're just very attracted to me. So attracted, in fact, that you've already decided to take me back to your place and seduce me. You will forget that I told you this and fully believe that it's your own idea."

As her expression returned to normal I felt her squeeze my hand. "You're so sweet, Sam." Then she sat up and made a point of looking around. "It's too noisy here. I live nearby; why don't we go to my place, where we can hear ourselves talk?"

"Sure," I said, pretending the offer was a pleasant surprise. "Lead the way."

As we walked hand in hand the four blocks to her building I told myself I was just experimenting. There had to be limits to this power, so it was important that I learn what they were. If anything did happen, it would be purely physical and done for the greater good of saving my marriage.

I bullshit myself a lot.

Just the possibility that I was about to get laid for the first time in months had me semi-hard in the elevator. Audrey noticed, and every time she brushed against me it got more obvious. By the time she opened the apartment door and ushered me inside Little Sam was at full salute and there was no hiding it.



She waved me to the couch, trying to look casual. "I have some white wine in the fridge. Interested?"

"Very."

I enjoyed watching Audrey's body move as she stepped into the kitchen, removed a bottle of wine from the refrigerator, and poured two glasses. She paused in the doorway, out of my view, and when she emerged again one of the glasses had a lot less in it. A gulp for courage, maybe?

As I expected, she sat down next to me and turned her body so that her legs pressed against mine just above the knee. She was in a dark blue slip dress that rode up just enough as she sat to show me some stocking-clad thigh, and the way she leaned toward me seemed intended to draw my eye down the top of the dress to her breasts. It was hormonally impossible for me not to look; in fact, I mused to myself, she might as well just take the dress off and give me the full view.

"I ..." Audrey looked suddenly confused. She let go of my hand and stood up slowly. "I ... might as well ... take this off," she said, as much to herself as to me.

In the back of my mind I remembered Joe's voice -- *With some people you don't even have to say anything out loud.* Yes, Joe, that could be handy.

Audrey still looked conflicted, though. Even as she slowly reached back and unzipped the dress, I could see her struggling with the idea. It took almost a minute, but eventually she shucked it off to reveal a very sheer midnight blue bra, panty, and garter/stocking set. "I ... umm ..." Her face turned six shades of red, but the bra was nowhere near substantial enough to hide the state of her nipples. "Sam ... I need you to know that I don't normally ... I mean, I'm not ... I don't ..."

I set my wine glass down on an end table and took both of her hands. "It's okay," I told her. "I understand. You don't normally do this sort of thing, but tonight, right now, you want more than anything else to have sex with me. There's nothing wrong with that; you should feel confident and certain and absolutely okay with it."

The blankness cleared and Audrey's hesitation was gone. "You're right. You always seem to be right. It's what we both want, so why pretend?"

She took two steps and climbed right onto my lap, straddling me as she pressed her groin against the tent pole in my pants. Before I could say a word her arms were around me and her lips were pressing into mine. I hadn't been kissed that way in months either, and it was just about enough to shut down my higher brain functions. My hands decided all on their own to go undo the clasp on her bra and Audrey took that as permission to yank my shirt up and off me and press my face in between her beautiful teardrop-shaped breasts. My head filled with her scent and the next thing I knew there was a nipple in my mouth and a shapely ass in my hands.

We shifted position and in the process my pants and underwear ended up around my ankles and her panties joined the dress and bra on the floor. She pumped my cock with her hand and for a second I thought for sure I was going to come in her hand if she didn't stop that and climb on right now. She did -- of course, because I was still grabbing her ass when I thought it -- and as she enveloped my cock in hot, wet, tight flesh it was all I could do to hold on for just a few seconds. I grabbed her breasts and squeezed them and came so hard I saw stars. Audrey's body went incredibly tense and she squeezed down on me at the same time and let out a series of long, loud grunts while her hands enveloped mine and held them up against her chest.

Our bodies relaxed together and as I folded Audrey into my arms I couldn't help but feel a little rush of manly pride at how fast and hard she'd come. Nina never came that fast. Hell, porn stars don't come that fast.

*And why do you suppose that is?* my inner voice posed. And okay, I had to admit, the chances that my cock had suddenly become a magic orgasm wand were about nil. I had an orgasm, I was touching Audrey at the time, so the power pushed that feeling into her mind and made it an order. Good to know, I figured as I made sure my right hand wasn't touching her just then, but not all that useful in the long term. Once I got Nina back, though, we'd have months of dynamite sex.

Nina. My rationalizations from before came back to mock me, reminding me that I had just cheated on her with a total stranger and justified it by classic cock logic.

Audrey stirred above me and started kissing the side of my neck. For a moment my body responded, but this time there was too much guilt in my heart. I put my hand on her shoulder and said, "Sleep." Audrey flopped down on top of me like a big, beautifully-built, wet rag and I heard her sigh a little as she settled into unconsciousness. I slipped out from under her as gently as I could and got dressed, making an effort to avoid looking at her inviting naked form.

As I was about to leave, though, I remembered Rule Three. Would she wake up in the morning? Would she wake up at all? Leaving that to chance would be potentially disastrous. I laid a hand on her head and said, "Wake normally in the morning with no regrets." Then, with one more glance back, I headed home to my empty bed.

### **iii: Chad and Gayle**

My little attitude adjustment on Chad was still working for me Monday morning. I actually got a smile and a wave from His Nibs as he passed my desk rather than the customary stone face. It was almost enough to make me a little sorry for what was going to happen to him. Almost.

"Got a second, Chad?"

He stopped and turned back to me. "Sure, Sam. What's on your mind?"

"Just a small thing." I stood and moved closer, as if I was going to say something I didn't want overheard. He took the cue and cocked his head to lend me his ear, and he didn't seem to notice that I also gently put my hand on his arm. "I've got a lot to dig up before the CES trip, and in order to do it I'm going to need exclusive use of Leah this week." And then, as Chad thought about his answer, I let a bunch of URLs I'd looked up over the weekend run through my mind along with the desire that Chad should check them out for possible story material.

It may have been a little too much input, because it took Chad a minute to clear the blank look. "Sorry, Sam, I sort of zonked for a second there. Leah, you say? Okay. I'll let her know that she's yours exclusively for the week."

"Thanks."

I was happy to note that Chad closed the door behind him when he went into his cube.

Thanks to a couple of long phone calls it was almost lunchtime before I got to sit down with Leah. She seemed uncomfortable, shifting in her seat and not looking at me directly. So I tapped her on the knee and let my fingers linger there long enough to say, "Tell me what's bothering you."

The blank look came and went and her face turned two shades more red. "Look, Sam, about the other day..."

"You mean in the supply room?"

"Ssh! Yeah, that." Her voice dropped to a near whisper. "I ... uhh ... went a little too far there for a joke, and I didn't want you to think ... well, you know ..."

"No, I don't know."

"I just hope it doesn't ... change anything."

Good researchers are hard to find and harder to keep. Besides, it was bad enough that I needed to avoid my favorite deli for a while. So I laid my hand on her knee again and looked her in the eyes. "It changes nothing. We have a good working relationship and a good friendship, and you will always feel comfortable around me. You can talk to me about anything because you know I'll understand."

"That's right," she agreed as the blank face faded. "You're so smart about this stuff. Now I feel a little stupid for worrying."

"There's nothing to worry about," I assured her. "Now, let's focus on the things I need you to run down this week."

I gave Leah more than enough work to keep her busy feeding me specifications and vendor data all week. Leah was sharp; I needed that sharpness, but I wanted her too busy to notice anything unusual in my own activities.

In order for my plan to work I had to make sure I wasn't seen as slacking on the job, so I spent a long afternoon finishing off an interview piece that would have been due the previous week, had Chad not magnanimously given me that extension. It would still get to layout on time so there'd be no problem with production. As a bonus, Chad felt obligated to discuss it, which gave me an opportunity to stand behind him with a hand on his shoulder long enough to mentally suggest a couple of "intimate dating" websites he should join and patronize as part of his top secret research into Internet porn.

Gayle proved a tougher nut to crack. When she wasn't up at Corporate doing meetings she was generally closeted in her office with other members of the editorial staff. That alone had already been fueling the rumors of a staff shake-up. I tried to get on her calendar but either her pit bull of an assistant wasn't giving her the message or Gayle was choosing to ignore me. By Wednesday I was getting antsy enough to seriously consider staking out the ladies' room.

Fortunately, I didn't have to. When I punched the Down button to go meet Joe for lunch the elevator dinged almost immediately, the door opened, and there was my managing editor, all alone and obviously headed out. Our eyes met and for just a second I caught a flash of discomfort.

I chose to ignore it, and instead pointed casually at her stuffed portfolio. "Another lunchtime meeting?"

She gave me a polite smile. "Not today, for once. Just a little paperwork." But she still didn't want to look at me.

As the elevator dinged at the lobby level, I stuck out my hand. "Then I guess this is goodbye."

"You're leaving?" The relieved surprise on her face, almost but not totally hidden, told me all that I needed to know. Fortunately she took my gambit, and as her hand gripped mine her face went blank.

"You really don't want me to leave, Gayle. Invite me to lunch with you so we can discuss it."

"You're right, Sam," she agreed as we walked into the lobby. "Why don't you come to lunch with me? There are some things we need to discuss."

"I'd love to," I said, and risked a light guiding hand on her elbow. "You have a lot on your mind and my insight would be valuable to you."

"Yes ... yes, it would."

Gayle took me to an Italian place a few blocks from the office. I deliberately sat on her left instead of across from her so that I could 'accidentally' touch her more easily with my right hand. This turned out to be a good idea, as her uneasiness increased sharply once we were seated.

"Look, Sam," she began. "Asking you to join me probably wasn't such a great idea. I need to work

through some, uh, personnel decisions, and it's just too hard to do that with the people involved right there at hand. And, well ..."

"That includes me?"

"Frankly, yes."

I laid a casual hand on her arm. "I understand completely. But now that you know I'm leaving anyway, you can tell me what changes are coming and get my opinion on them as an unbiased observer. It will help to clarify things for you."

Okay, sure, I'll admit I was enjoying the idea of being the first to find out. But I was also well aware that an already-planned reorganization could make excellent cover for my own schemes. All I had to do was exert a little influence on the right people, starting with Gayle.

"Subscription and print advertising revenues are in decline," Gayle explained. "Nobody is surprised by that, of course; it's a trend that's been going on for a while. But with the economy in the state it's in, we're being pressured by Tate to trim costs and diversify."

I nodded. Tate was shorthand for Tate Global Media, the faceless conglomerate that had bought *Tech Toys* from the original founders a few years back. "So what's the plan?"

"A pretty big staff cut, Sam. We're looking at releasing half of the writing staff outright, including a lot of the more senior people because they have the highest salaries. Then we make up the difference in content generation by taking more freelance pieces and we generate more ad revenue by expanding our online presence: featured blogs, short reviews, company profiles -- anything that will draw eyeballs and give us a place to sell ad space."

"So in essence, you fire your full-time staff writers and rely on freelancers whom you can pay in cash and save the cost of benefits. Who's the driving force behind this?"

"Chad, mostly," she admitted. "But he's got a lot of support from Tate, since they hand-picked him for the job. I still have the final say, but I get the feeling that if I resist too much I may end up on the goner list myself. I'm perceived as the last of the old guard, and that's not usually a good thing."

The more in depth we discussed the plan, the less I liked it. The three senior staff writers, myself included, were due to be axed; that would also enable Chad to drop one of the two full-time researchers and a part-timer. We'd be faced with the choice of either trying to catch on with a competing tech publication or, in a worst-case scenario, freelancing back to *Tech Toys* on a per-story basis like a bunch of newbies. The good news from my perspective was that it all hinged on Chad staying in Tate's good graces; break that link and Chad would lose his ability to undermine Gayle. That would buy some time, and possibly a visit from some of the higher-ups at Tate. I looked forward to meeting them and shaking hands.

"What do you think, Sam?"

I'd almost forgotten that I owed Gayle some feedback. Again I put a hand on her arm. "I think what you think," I told her carefully. "That cutting out the most senior staff is not only a bad idea from a journalistic standpoint, but might also open you up to an age discrimination complaint. You might save money by relying heavily on freelance writing, but you lose a degree of control over your editorial calendar. If Chad had more experience in tech journalism he would understand that, but he's too focused on looking good to Tate."

Gayle's face flashed that blank look, but only a little; she probably agreed with a lot of what I'd said anyway. "All things I've already thought or expressed. Chad's ideas get more mindshare than mine, though."

"Chad is young, arrogant, and not nearly as clever as he thinks he is," I said with my hand still on her arm. "Stall as long as you can and watch Chad carefully; I'm sure you will find a weakness you can use. I'll stay a little longer to help you keep an eye on him."

As I watched Gayle assimilate those instructions, I realized I was becoming more than normally aware of the neckline of her business blouse and the way her eyes seemed to stare into space. A tingling began to spread from my groin and my imagination speculated as to what other instructions I could give her. Before any of that could transfer to Gayle's mind I quickly let go of her hand. I excused myself and left her to lunch by herself as she'd originally planned.

It wasn't just Gayle, I noticed as I stepped out into the sidewalk. Every woman around me seemed prettier, sexier. I looked them over, met their gaze, undressed them with my eyes. I hadn't been this horny since ... well, since Friday night with Audrey, when my body had taken the lead in jumping her bones while my mind rationalized it. Audrey ...

Without thinking, I found myself entering my favorite deli. Sure enough, there she was, standing in line waiting to order a sandwich. She abandoned her place and rushed to greet me with a look of near rapture on her face. "Sam!"

Her arms went around me and our mouths met for an open kiss that my body instinctively returned and then some. Her scent filled my nose and Sam Junior started thinking for me. He thought in pictures: of Audrey leading me back to her place, stripping our clothes off and having a nooner.

Audrey's hand snuck a quick feel at my crotch and I realized I was touching her. "I'm so glad you came," she almost moaned at me. "Let's go to my place and satisfy our appetites."

I knew I shouldn't. I really did. But with Sam Junior in charge I found myself following her out to the street and into a cab. We kissed a few times in the cab and I started to feel an urgent need to reach inside her dress. She held me off and pulled out a cell phone. "Hi, Joyce," she said, clearly talking to a voice mailbox, "it's Audrey. I think I completely forgot to mention it before, but I have an appointment this afternoon and won't be back in today. Sorry for the short notice." Then she snapped the phone shut and looked at me with unbridled lust. "Your turn."

So I called the office and told them I'd be doing background the rest of the day and to call my cell if they needed me. We hustled inside Audrey's apartment and started groping each other immediately.

"There's something you need to know, Sam," she said breathlessly as she tugged at my shirt.

"What's that?" I asked while my fingers found the zipper at the back of her dress.

The shirt came off and I felt her fingers at my belt. "You know what? It can wait."

A few moments later we were naked and going at it on the living room floor. I pinned her down and suckled at each breast, then worked my way downward toward her red-carpeted snatch. A few minutes of focused attention to her clit and lips had Audrey moaning and grabbing at my hair, so I rose to my knees and teased her by sliding my hard cock up and down along the wet crease of her slit. I kept that up until she was practically jumping at me, then slipped inside her and held her hips as I thrust into her again and again. My stamina was better this time; I lasted a minute or so, versus the few seconds of our first encounter, before my cock took over and pumped into her. Just as before, the moment I started to come Audrey arched her back and gasped her way through an orgasm with me.

We spent a few minutes quietly panting on the floor before I was clear-headed enough to speak. "What was it?"

Audrey gave a breathless chuckle. "It's called an orgasm, silly. And if they're always going to be that good with you, this could be habit-forming."

"Not that -- what was the something I need to know?"

"I forgot," she said with a wink. "I think you've scrambled my brain. It wasn't important, anyway."

I was too dazed to pursue it.

#### iv: Alice

To make up for the lost afternoon with Audrey I spent extra time going through the material I'd gotten from Leah so far and lining up a couple of interviews with execs at the CES. As a result I didn't catch up with Joe again until lunch the next day. To avoid running into Audrey I suggested the burger joint right across from Joe's office.

We chomped down and made small talk until the meal was done. Then I cleared my throat and tossed out the big question. "I need to borrow Alice."

I could almost see him turning that one over in his mind. "Borrow her for ... ?"

"Relax, buddy. I just want to ask her some things about Nina and enlist her aid in setting up a face to face."

"She's not going to want to do that. They're friends."

"Of course," I said. "But you know how persuasive I can be if I have to."

"Yes, I do," Joe replied. "I'd just rather you didn't get *persuasive* with my wife."

I couldn't fault him for that. If the positions were reversed, I wouldn't have wanted Joe using his influence on Nina. "If it helps any, I promise I won't use the power unless there's no other way."

"That doesn't help nearly as much as you seem to think. Remember, I've had the power; I know what it can do to your head early on."

"Oh?" I did my best to look confused.

"I can still tell when you're bullshitting, Sam. Look me in the eye and tell me you haven't used the power to get laid."

"You mean aside from the lady you threw at me?" I countered. "No, I haven't."

Joe looked at me sharply. "Then you're a better man than I am. The first few weeks, once I realized I could have any woman I wanted ... well, let's just say I did some things I'm not proud of."

"I won't say I haven't been tempted," I allowed. "I'm human, after all." *But you don't need to know just how human*, I added silently.

He kept a watchful eye on me for another half minute, then yielded. "Okay, I'll trust your judgment. Stop by the house whenever and I'll stay out of the way while you talk to Alice."

"Thanks, Joe."

There was one other errand on my list for the day, so after a quick consult with Leah I got in the car and drove to a nondescript downtown office building. I found a parking spot with a good view of the main doors, pulled out my cell phone, and dialed.

A polished female voice answered quickly. "Mortimer and Oakes."

"Is Desmond Oakes available, please?" I suppressed a shudder at the name of my wife's lawyer even as it passed my lips.

"I'm sorry, he's in court this afternoon. Can I take a message please?"

"Not necessary," I ad-libbed, "I'll just meet him there as planned. Thank you."

That was a lucky break. I'd been prepared to loiter around the lobby until Oakes left for the day; this way would be much quicker.

Like any overpriced lawyer -- and I know what I'm talking about, as one of his first successes was to saddle me with a portion of Nina's legal fees -- Desmond Oakes had his offices within easy walking distance of the courthouse. I strolled inside, as any citizen is entitled to do, got through security, and found myself a seat in the corridor leading to the courtrooms. From there I'd be able to see Oakes coming and arrange an accidental meeting.

I settled in and passed the time people-watching. A courthouse is a fun place to do that. I saw dozens of people wearing suits for the first time, or so they looked; lots of whispered, earnest conversations between lawyers and their clients; guarded individuals sitting quietly and waiting to be called inside. I could imagine a story for each of them. *Heck, that frenzied-looking guy on the bench across the way could just as easily be me*, I guessed from the way he whispered to the well-dressed guy with him.

For a little while, I let myself speculate inwardly about how handy the power would be in here. An occasional touch and a quiet whispered "You must tell the truth in this building" could go a long way toward seeing that justice prevailed more often. And for the first time I thought about what I would do when my year was up and I had to pass on the power to someone else. A bailiff, maybe, or a court reporter? I could do worse.

The late afternoon came and judges started adjourning for the day, flooding the corridor with people. In a mob of men in suits it was harder than I'd anticipated, but I did manage to spot Desmond Oakes before he got past me.

I used the crowd to my advantage by coming up beside Oakes and then suddenly crashing into him. His briefcase fell but stayed closed, so I gave it a subtle kick to send it sliding away a bit. "I'm so sorry," I stammered. "Someone bumped me and I wasn't expecting ... say, aren't you Mr. Oakes?"

Oakes's face took on that I-know-you-from-somewhere look, then returned to a professional mask. "Mr. Maskell, isn't it? I'm sorry, but you realize I can't discuss the case with you."

"No, of course not," I threw out hastily as I retrieved his case for him. "I'm here to see someone else entirely; if we hadn't bumped into each other ... Anyway, I apologize. Have a good evening."

God bless human nature! I held out my hand, and like any well-bred polite person he took it. "Listen to me very carefully," I said immediately as his face went distant. "You have discovered a serious ethical concern that makes it impossible for you, or anyone in your firm, to continue representing Nina Maskell. You must withdraw from the case immediately for personal reasons and forget that this conversation ever took place."

"Yes," he muttered, "that would be best under the circumstances." He took his case from me and wandered away, still in a bit of a daze. I knew now from experience that his mind would fill in the details I'd left out, and by the time he got to his office it would all be clear and justifiable to him.

Nina was going to have to find a new lawyer. That should buy me some time.

It was still kind of early for visiting, but there I was in the car and I really didn't feel like going back to work. I thought for a minute of dropping in on Audrey, but I knew what would happen if I did that and

the rationalizations were wearing thin. Instead I headed for Joe's house to see Alice.

His car wasn't there yet, which was no big surprise. Rush hour had barely started, and Joe was on the four-by-ten schedule: four 10-hour days per week with every Friday off. I'd be in and out before he even left work, most likely.

Alice answered the door in a green cotton t-shirt and white shorts. A look of genuine surprise crossed her face when she saw me. "Sam!"

"Hi, Alice."

I put my hand out to shake but she bypassed that and went for the hug. She felt good and smelled better. "Invite me in so we can talk."

Even as I said it I realized it was stupid -- she'd do that anyway. Still, I got a little thrill from the dazed tone in her voice. "Yes, of course, Sam. Please come in."

She led me to the kitchen and without even asking started the coffee maker. "I'm sorry, Sam," she said. "I must look awful."

"Not even remotely," I told her, admiring the way the shorts hugged her bottom. "You never did give yourself enough credit."

"Still the charmer, aren't you?" She flashed me a smile. "I'm glad; it'll make things easier for you when all this Nina business is over."

She crossed back to the table with two steaming coffee mugs. "Mmmm," I said, tasting mine. "You remembered how I take it."

"Black with two sugars -- same as Joe."

"Of course. Thank you."

Alice watched me expectantly from her seat on my right. "You're not here for the coffee, Sam."

"No." I started to reach for her hand, but then I remembered my promise to Joe. "I want you to help me get Nina back."

She took another sip and made an I-knew-it face. "Why?"

"Because you're friends with her. You can talk to her and she'll listen more than she would to me."

"That's not what I meant," Alice said, putting down her mug. "Why do you want Nina back?"

What kind of question was that? "Because I love her, of course. Because we belong together, and now we're not, and I don't even know why. This divorce is a mistake."

Alice was shaking her head. "No, Sam. That marriage was a mistake."

"How can you say that?"

"Because I know you both. I'll even admit I didn't like Nina much at first because it was so clear that she was just using you as a father figure for Jenny. It took me a while to get past that. But as much as I like her now, I can still see that she was never right for you. That doesn't mean anything negative about either of you; you just don't fit together."



"So you won't help?"

A grim look came over Alice. "I am helping, Sam. I'm helping the best way I can think of, by telling you to give it up. Let Nina go and get on with your life."

*Sorry, Joe*, I said silently into my coffee. Then I reached for Alice's hand and watched her face go blank. "You want me to be happy, don't you?"

"Yes," she replied. Her face and voice were those of a sleepwalker. "Of course."

"And you want Nina to be happy."

"Yes."

"Nina and I will both be happy," I told her, "if she comes back to me. You're her friend; you can talk to her and get her to listen to what I have to say."

"I can talk to her," Alice agreed blankly. Then her face scrunched up a little and she added, "but I don't think she'll listen."

"Why not?"

"Because she's already planning to marry Ron."

That disturbed me so much I broke contact with Alice so I could fume for a moment without transferring it to her. Nina was already set to marry again? And to Ron, an empty suit of a stock broker that Jenny couldn't stand? What the hell was she thinking?

"I'm sorry," Alice said, the blank look fading. "I don't know why I told you that. I wasn't supposed to."

"I'm glad you did, though." Again I put my hand on hers and watched Alice's beautiful face fade to an obedient blank. "Alice, Ron is a bad match for Nina. He's shallow, materialistic, vain, and would not be a good role model for Jenny. It's important that you remind Nina of this every time you talk with her."

"I ... should ..."

Her face showed signs of confusion, so I poured all my will into my next words. "Yes, Alice. It's your responsibility as a friend to keep Nina from making the mistake of divorcing me and marrying Ron. Jenny loves me; I'm a good stepfather to her and a good husband to Nina. Nina needs to understand that before she ruins Jenny's life by separating her from me."

"Yes, you're right."

At her blank look and agreement, I felt that surge again and a tingle between my legs -- Sam Junior was awake. Which led to another idea. "And you know what a good lover I am, Alice. You remember from before you met Joe, and you can remind Nina how well I can please a woman. That's important to her, too."

"I remember," she agreed, and for just a moment I flashed back to the brief fling we'd had years before. It was just a rebound affair for both of us, and when it ended I'd cared enough for Alice to set her up with my best friend. My mind imagined her as she was then: naked, eager, unapologetically taking what she wanted.

With a start I yanked my hand away again, but it was too late. Even as the fog left her face I saw her nostrils flare and her cheeks begin to take on color. My eyes dropped to the front of the T-shirt and saw her nipples poking out -- or maybe it was just the imaginings of a horny ex.

Alice reached forward and put her hand on my thigh. "You know, Sam," she said in the husky voice I used to hear in my dreams, "you can do a lot better for yourself. You seem different today. Compelling." She picked up my right hand and held it against her breast. "You could have any woman you want. Even me."

More memories came flooding through my head of nights spent nuzzling that breast and this time I made no attempt to break contact. "Is that so?"

"You know it is. In fact ..." Her fingers walked up my thigh and found the bulge in my pants. "Just as I thought." She began to stroke me through my clothes and the screaming voice of my conscience got carried off by a tidal wave of raging hormones.

"Show me." In my head I imagined her leading me to the bedroom and sucking me off.

Sure enough, Alice rose, tucked my magic hand in the back waistband of her shorts, and playfully led me to the bedroom. She stripped her shirt and bra off in two easy motions, turned, and presented her breasts with a Vanna White wave. "Remember these?"

"Oh, yes, and they're still spectacular. Hi, girls." I flattened my hands and just touched a palm to each nipple, rotating them in a slow circle that caused the nipples to dance against my palms in a way that made Alice moan out loud.

She reached over and undid my pants and then pushed me down on the bed face up. "As nice as that is," she moaned, "I'm in the mood for a snack." A quick tug on my boxers got them out of the way and left my hard cock staring straight up at her. "Hello, Sam Junior. It's been a long time, and I'm pleased that you're so happy to see me."

Alice reached into a drawer in the night stand and came up with a little plastic bottle. She poured a palm full of clear fluid into her hand, warmed it by rubbing both hands together, and then clasped them both around my cock. The lube warmed my skin as her hands slid deliciously up and down my shaft and I groaned involuntarily in pleasure at the amazing sensation. "I'll take that as a green light," Alice teased.

My head flopped back in bliss and I felt movement as she knelt down between my legs. Moments later a warm pair of lips began kissing the side of my shaft, up and down, even as her lubed-up hands kept working the tip and tickling my balls. I was just this side of sensory overload and she knew it -- every time I thought I was about to come she'd slow down, give a squeeze near the base, and take the edge off just a bit. Her lips and tongue caressed my shaft, my balls, my head, and I was in hog heaven, grabbing at the sheets and twitching at the hips. Finally she plunged her mouth down over me and licked the whole way around the head of my cock with the flat of her tongue. I groaned, she sucked, and that was all she wrote. I reached out with my magic hand just in time. My fingers closed on her hair just as my cock exploded into her mouth. Alice squealed and sucked harder and I felt her weight fall onto my legs as she came hard with me.

We grunted in unison through our climaxes and then relaxed into a spent pile of arms and legs. Alice flopped on the bed next to me and sighed. I tried to think of something appropriate to say but lost it when the phone rang. Alice jumped up and grabbed a cordless handset from the night stand.

"Hi, honey," she said in a tone that sounded perfectly normal -- which, considering she was standing there topless and breathing heavily still from the blow job, was impressive. "Heading home now? ... No, that's okay, Sam's already here. ... Yes, he stopped by a little bit ago. ... We were talking about Nina and all that. Do you want to talk to him? ... Oh, okay. ... Love you too."

And listening to that, I felt low enough to play handball against the curb. Alice turned back to see me struggling to rise off the bed. "Sam," she said, in a voice that tugged at my reviving conscience, "I don't know what came over me there. Anyway, it can't happen again. It shouldn't have happened this time."

"I know, and I'm sorry. I feel responsible."

"Don't. I get that way sometimes. Usually only with Joe, but there was something about you today." For a second she seemed to be puzzling, but then she just shook her head and let it go. I was glad.

There wasn't much more to talk about at that point. I pulled my pants up and slunk home while four damning words played on a tape loop in my head:

*Your best friend's wife!*

## **v: Jenny**

My cell phone started ringing before I got out of the shower Friday morning. Joe, of course. I let it go to voice mail. Repeatedly.

I was being stupid. Sooner or later -- sooner, in all probability -- I was going to have to face Joe and tell him something. But what? 'Hey, sorry I boffed your wife; my bad'? How the hell do you atone for that?

Then again, maybe Joe would be the one guy who would understand. He had to know from experience how easily things can get out of hand. He could have ...

*Could have set me up with a willing woman I could call on to take the edge off, I finished to myself. Someone like Audrey, perhaps?*

Fuck.

I'd been treating Audrey like my personal call girl -- someone to stick my cock into when it was convenient and to ignore otherwise. Well, that was something I could at least do a little about. I grabbed my cell and dialed.

"Sam?" The surprise in her voice was clearly audible. "Good morning!"

"Morning. Look, I know it's kind of short notice, but I feel an overpowering urge to take you to dinner and I'm leaving town for that show tomorrow. Are you free tonight?"

"Dinner? You mean, like a real date?"

I paused. Was that reproach in her voice, or something else? "Well, yeah, I suppose you could call it that."

Then she laughed and relief flooded through me. "I'd like that very much," she replied. "Pick me up at seven?"

"I will," I promised. "And Audrey?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you. For everything."

Leah was waiting for me when I got to my desk. "There you are," she said, tossing an SD card in its little plastic case onto the desk. "All the specs you asked for, background on the execs, plucked web pages, all in a neat little package you can use from your mini."

"You're the best," I said, and I meant it. Without Leah I'd have spent all week chasing down that

material instead of setting things up for the show and, equally importantly, laying the groundwork for my promotion.

Leah was still there, smirking. "Okay, spill it," I told her.

She bent in and whispered, "Owen Thompson was in Chad's cube early this morning."

Owen is the IT security guy. Nobody wants to see him at their desk, because if he's around it typically means they've done something incredibly stupid, like opening one of those 'I love you' file attachments. "Was he?"

The twinkle in Leah's eye was nearly blinding. "Yes! And he had that patented weary, why-are-people-so-stupid look on his face, too."

I returned her gleeful smirk with a cautiously measured one of my own. "Very interesting. You'll keep me posted while I'm in Vegas, won't you?"

"Bet on it!"

As Leah slipped back to her desk, I relaxed. I had been fully prepared to tip off the IT manager myself if I had to, but it was even better coming from someone else. Didn't really matter who -- Chad had so many unhappy subordinates that whoever it was had plenty of cover.

By late morning I was immersed in the material Leah had dug up for me. When my desk phone rang I picked it up without even thinking first. "Maskell."

"You're not answering your cell."

Fortunately, the voice belonged to my stepdaughter Jenny, not Joe. "Forgot to turn it on, I guess. Sorry. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I heard a giggle. "I'm feeling rebellious."

"I see. Do you have any particular form of rebellion in mind?"

"I don't know," she replied in a teasing tone. "All kinds of devious ideas are flooding through my mind. I think I need some firm step-paternal guidance to keep me out of mischief. And some pizza. Mushrooms, green peppers, black olives --"

"And no dead fish," I completed for her. "Do you think you can resist the temptation to mayhem for another hour and then meet me at Mama Ziti's?"

"No promises on the mayhem, but I'll be there."

I tried to slip out a little early for lunch but ran into Chad by the elevator. "Ready for the CES, Sam?"

"Oh, yes," I assured him. "Leah got me the background data I need and I've got some interviews set up already. I just have to pack and go."

"Melissa says you haven't talked to her yet. Remember, you're going as her mentor; I'd like to see a closer working relationship with the two of you."

Shit -- I'd forgotten completely about Melissa. "We'll have a sit-down before the opening, I promise. Divide and conquer is always the best approach. Thanks for the heads-up."

As I patted Chad on the shoulder I projected a few interesting search terms into his head and sent him

off to Google them.

Jenny's favorite pizza joint was a bit of a schlep from my office, which was probably just as well since I was still ducking Joe. He'd stopped calling, but that didn't mean anything was resolved.

She was already waiting for me at a table near the window. Jenny grinned and waved at me as I entered the place and sat across from her. There was already a glass of something at my seat.

"Root beer," she said with a nod to the glass. "And I took the liberty of ordering for us because I know you'll be in a hurry."

"Very considerate of you, sweetie." I couldn't help but smile back; it'd been too long since I'd seen Jenny.

We spent a few minutes catching up on Jenny's day to day -- school, boyfriend, job -- until the pizza came. Then the aroma of homemade crust, abundant cheese, and Jenny's favorite toppings put our stomachs in command for a bit. By the time she'd downed her third piece she was ready to talk.

"So tell me," she began. "What did you do?"

That brought me up short. "Can you be a little more specific?"

"Do I really have to? Okay, fine. Mommy Dearest has been stomping around the house all morning cursing your name. You must have done something to cause that, and I'm intrigued enough to ply you with pizza and root beer to find out what."

To touch her I'd have had to lunge across the table, so I'd have to get by on my bluff skills alone. "I did hear that she may be having some trouble with her lawyer, but I can't claim responsibility for that."

"No? That sounds like exactly the sort of thing you'd do: something to obstruct the process without confronting her directly."

Did I mention that Jenny's a smart girl? "Not this time," I lied. "You give me too much credit for deviousness, my dear. Or maybe your mother does."

I gave her my best sincere face while she thought about it. "Okay," she allowed, "you're probably right. Besides, lately she can't have a bad hair day without it somehow being your fault. I'm disappointed, though -- I really wanted to see you showing some of your old backbone. You deserve better than her."

"That's sweet and noble of you to say," I answered. "But admit it, you were really just hoping it was something you could use yourself."

"That, too," she chuckled. "Somebody's got to remind her that she doesn't rule the world just yet."

"She rules yours, remember."

Jenny made a mock retching motion. "Only for another five months and twelve days. Then I'll be a legal adult and able to hang out with whoever I want. Even you." I started to protest, but she was ready. "I know, I know, she's my mother and I should love her and you won't condone my being disobedient or disrespectful, yadda, yadda, yadda ... Leave it, Sam. I've known my mom a lot longer than you have and I do love her, but I'm also old enough to know her for what she is."

"Five months and twelve days?" I quoted to lighten the mood. "Not that you're counting or anything."

"Of course not," she said with a wink.

There was a spring in my step for the rest of the afternoon. Not only had my encounter with Desmond

Oakes proved a success, but I'd made it through the entire lunch without using the power on Jenny. It didn't exactly make up for my screwing Alice, but at least I could still say I had some standards.

That gave me the strength to contact Joe -- by text, admittedly, to avoid hearing his voice -- and suggest meeting for a drink right after work. He agreed, and we found ourselves back at our favorite pub shortly after five. There was just enough crowd to provide sound cover for a private conversation, though the place would fill up quickly on a Friday night.

I didn't even wait for the first round to arrive. "Look, Joe ... I don't know what to say. Lately I've been letting my cock think for me too much, and I'm finding out that it's dangerous to do that when your passing thoughts can end up in someone else's head. You didn't give me this ability so I could fuck any woman who'll hold still, and I have tried to be ... discreet. Alice was an accident. We were talking about Nina, I got emotional, I started remembering from before, and ... well ..."

"You compelled her to give you a blow job," he finished for me. "I got the story from Alice. She was crying so hard it took her an hour to get through it. She still doesn't know why it happened but she thinks it was her idea."

"Oh, shit, Joe. Look, do you want me to fix it? I can make her think --"

"No!" His look was sharp enough to stop me in my tracks. "No, I don't want you to fix anything. I want you to leave her alone. Stay away from her until you've passed on the power to someone else. I can deal with the rest. Fair enough?"

*Wait a minute*, I thought. *Just 24 hours ago my cock was in your wife's mouth, and you're ready to move on already?* That made no sense to me, unless ... "You were expecting this, weren't you?"

Joe's shoulders slumped and he sighed heavily. "I don't know, maybe. Part of me wants to rip your balls off and feed them to you, but I can't help thinking that I might have brought this on myself. I know what the power can do to your head, Sam. For me it was like a kind of feedback loop -- the more I used the power, the hornier I got, until I just had to grab the nearest woman and fuck her silly. I lost count of how many in the first month or two. And knowing that, and knowing your history with her, I didn't insist on being there with the two of you. I should have."

"And I should have paid attention to what you were trying to tell me with Audrey. I thought I was in control, and I wasn't. The last thing I wanted to do was fuck things up with you. You don't deserve that."

"Maybe I do."

I sat up straight and stared. "What the fuck?"

Joe was twiddling his coaster and staring into its cork center. "Maybe I do," he repeated. "I never told you this because I didn't know how before. But now ... " He met my gaze and his face went flat. "You know the old saying about how what goes around comes around?"

My jaw opened as the realization hit me. "Nina?"

He just nodded and frowned.

"You fucked Nina."

Joe remained silent.

"Before or after she left me?"

Our beers arrived at precisely the wrong time. I handed the waitress a twenty and told her to keep the change just to get rid of her quickly. Joe sipped from his glass, gulped, and answered the lingering question. "Before. I didn't want to -- well, okay, on some level I must have wanted to. But I didn't plan it."

"Like me and Alice?"

"Close enough. I really don't think going into detail is a good idea."

I thought for a minute about Joe and Nina, sweating and grunting on our bed, and felt my stomach lurch to the left. "Agreed."

That sickly feeling was still with me when I got to Audrey's. Then she answered the door in a white halter dress that took my mind in a whole different direction, and by the time we got to the restaurant I was able to hold up my end of the conversation without incident.

We had a pleasant dinner, followed by a nice little stroll around the neighborhood, and then a quiet drive back to her place. I'd almost forgotten what a civilized date could be like; it was very nice. Even the knowledge that Audrey had been more or less brainwashed into liking me didn't put a damper on it.

I parked the car in front of her building and leaned toward her for a kiss. "Thank you for letting me do this," I said.

Audrey gave me a quizzical look. "Are you saying goodnight?"

"That's the gist of it," I confessed.

"You're not coming up with me?"

I gulped. "Wasn't planning on it. I thought maybe you'd rather take things a little more slowly."

For answer, she pulled me towards her and wrapped me up in a kiss that should have steamed up the windows. "Think again," she told me, and proceeded to stroke Sam Junior through my pants until it became clear that he would do the thinking for me.

We actually made it to Audrey's bedroom for the first time. It was neat and tasteful, with just the right number and size of pillows on the four-poster bed. We undressed each other slowly and eased ourselves down into the middle of the bed for an extended cuddle, which turned into a grope, which turned into me putting Audrey's legs over my shoulders and going down on her until I couldn't wait anymore. I reared up and brought Sam Junior into play; his thrusts and a little help from my finger on Audrey's button ensured that she came before I did.

Afterwards we lay together panting and cuddling, until Audrey kissed my shoulder and said, "That was worth waiting for. I might just let you keep doing that."

That brought on a sharp pang of post-coital guilt. "Look, Audrey ... I should have told you up front--"

"That you're married," she finished for me. "I know; I saw the ring, and I'm okay with it. Joe told me that you're getting divorced soon."

"Maybe," I corrected. "It's not certain yet."

Audrey rolled over and propped herself up on my chest. "He told me that, too. Can I offer you the benefit of my experience? When one person in a relationship says it's over, it is. You can't make your wife love you, Sam. The best you can do is let her go and start living your own life again."

"And what makes you such an expert?"

She held up her left hand and wiggled the third finger. Sure enough, a faint band of lighter skin encircled the area just above the base. "Eight years," she told me. "I thought for sure he'd get tired of screwing his assistant and come back to me. I was half right; he got tired of screwing his assistant and moved on to a 24-year-old bartender with fake tits."

"I don't know what to say. I'm sorry."

She pulled me closer and kissed me again. "Don't be. I'm over it. And if you'll let me, I can help you get over yours."

"I'm not sure yet," I said. Yeah, I know -- there I was naked with Audrey, plus having just recently screwed my best friend's wife, and yet I was still pining for Nina. Love is not rational.

"I know. And I'm not going to push. In fact, I want you to go to Vegas for your show and forget about all of it for a few days. Geek out over electronic toys. Ogle the show girls. Do things you wouldn't dream of doing. Remember, what happens in Vegas stays there, so give yourself permission to play. Live a little."

Seemed like good advice to me.

When I got home there was a plain white envelope in the mail from my lawyer's office. It was the wrong time of the month for a bill and too soon to be anything related to Desmond Oakes, so I opened it right away.

Inside was a brochure from a divorce mediation service and a note from my lawyer.

*Sam,*

*This is the mediator that you and Nina agreed to see as part of the pre-settlement order. I know you're reluctant, but it will look better for you if you keep the appointment as ordered. We can talk when you get back from your work trip if you need to.*

I dropped the letter on the kitchen table and sat down with a beer to contemplate my options. The purpose of a divorce mediator is to give a divorcing couple every chance to determine their own division of assets and things. By keeping that appointment I would be tacitly conceding that the divorce was going to happen, like it or not. I still wasn't ready to agree to that.

*Then again, Sammy, I thought, flexing my right hand, that meeting might be your only chance to see Nina face to face before it's too late.*

People do change their minds, after all.

## **vi: Melissa**

Everyone has their favorite Vegas hangouts. Mine is the Four Queens, a hotel and casino on Fremont. It's old style, a reminder of the Vegas of the 1940s, and a stark contrast to the flash and glitz of the Strip. Being downtown, it was also just a short walk from the convention center, which gave me independence from the hotel shuttles. I suppose if I were a proper mentor, I'd have shared that preference with Melissa. Oh, well.

I'd told her to meet me for a late lunch at the Four Queens on Sunday so we could plot strategy before going to the pre-show keynote. When she showed up forty minutes late looking as if she'd just been through a natural disaster I chuckled inwardly. "Did you have trouble finding it?"

Melissa is no rocket scientist but she has more brains than her airhead-cheerleader looks convey. I could see her trying to decide whether to take offense or just let it go. Letting it go won. "The monorail will take some getting used to."



"Monorail? Where are you staying?" I knew because I'd seen her itinerary, but it made as good a conversation starter as any.

"The Mirage," she said. "Nobody told me that the convention center wasn't on the Strip. On the bright side, though, I now know exactly how to get to the center from here because I walked it."

"Lesson One, Grasshopper: Stay as close to the convention center as you can. Makes it easier to slip away from the crowd to do some writing or have a quiet interview."

Her smile got a little less convincing, and I could see her preparing her words carefully. "Yeah, about that. I'm not sure why Chad thought it was necessary to send you here, but I really do know what I'm doing. I may not know the town as well as you do, but that doesn't mean I want or need a babysitter."

I had my response for that ready. "Then don't think of me as a baby sitter." I reached out and grabbed her hand and watched her face go blank before she could pull it away. "Think of me as a trusted colleague, someone you enjoy working with and learning from and with whom you feel completely comfortable and safe."

"Safe ..." The blank look faded slowly. "You're right, Sam. I think I'm going to be glad you're here. To be honest, I'm a little intimidated by the size of this assignment. There have been times I've wondered how I got it."

Sometimes my mouth just blurts something out before my brain can screen it. "Probably from sleeping with Chad." I realized even as the words came out that they were unspeakably tacky but there they were, hanging in the air. The best I could do was to try and disavow responsibility. "I mean, that's the office gossip."

Melissa's face turned three shades of red, but the way she slumped in her seat told me anger had nothing to do with it. "Oh my God, Sam. What are they saying?"

I have to admit I'd made the remark out of cynicism; there really wasn't any office gossip to speak of on that subject, at least not that I'd heard. This didn't seem like the right time to own up to that, though, so I just let her talk.

"It's not ... well, what you probably think. I didn't sleep my way into this job, Sam. Chad was an accident." My eyebrow rose involuntarily and she blushed even harder. "Remember Leslie Foreman's retirement party? After that wound down, a handful of us ended up at Sullivan's. I was the only woman in that group and there were three guys buying me drinks. I lost track and got blitzed out of my mind. Chad called a taxi, we ended up at his place, and the next thing I knew I was wishing the bedroom would stop spinning so I could suck him off without getting motion sickness. When we woke up in the morning we were both hung over, I was mortified, and he was in love. Now I'm stuck -- Chad's all right in a bland sort of way, I suppose, but if I wasn't afraid of losing my job I'd have dropped him already."

"Has he ... said anything?"

"Anything actionable, you mean?" She shot me a sharp glance and then softened again. "No. He just gives me the puppy-dog look and I go along because even if he doesn't threaten it I'm afraid that if I end it he'll just ride me until he finds a plausible excuse, the way he was doing you. How did you get off his shit list, anyway?"

"Friends in low places," I lied, and covered her hand with mine again. "Melissa, it's very important that you distance yourself from Chad. I will be there for you, and I can protect your job from him if it comes to it."

"Yes," she murmured through her blank face. "Yes, I should do that. It's good of you to be there for me."

They say that the average man has a sexual thought every seven seconds. I used to think that was

bullshit, but looking into Melissa's blank, obedient face was making me rethink that. I could so easily imagine her stripping, kneeling in front of me, opening my zipper ...

I jerked my hand away, but it was clearly too late. Melissa's expression changed and she started regarding me like I was a decadent dessert. Her hand reached out for mine. "It's okay, Sam," she said smoothly. "I like it, and I do it a lot myself. So if you don't mind my touching you, I don't mind having you touch me."

The way she said 'touch' left no doubt as to what kind of touching she had in mind. Willing Sam Junior to stand down, I tried a deflecting joke. "I'm touched. Now, let's go through the background material I got from Leah on tonight's speakers."

"I can't wait. Shall we go up to your room then?"

"We haven't eaten yet." I knew it was risky, but I put my hand on her again and really focused on the next words. "We need to focus on business right now."

"Focus on business," she repeated in a monotone. Then with a quick shake she recovered herself. "Yes, of course. Where's that menu?"

With considerable effort I dragged my mind back to business as well. By the time we'd ordered, eaten, and finished getting Melissa up to speed on the speakers it was time to head to the convention center.

I'll spare you the details on the speeches. Suffice to say that I spent a couple of hours half listening to industry luminaries explain their vision for the next year while the rest of my mind plotted strategy for the week. Melissa's fingers ticked away on her netbook, taking notes that she'd need to write the obligatory summary. Having a protege wasn't all that bad, come to think of it.

In fact, as I took furtive peeks at Melissa in her slinky black dress, I was rapidly reconsidering my plans for the evening. I'd intended to send her back to the Mirage with a writing assignment, but better ideas were forming the more I thought about it.

The speeches ended and we joined the mob heading out of the hall. Melissa slipped her arm through mine and asked, "Back to your place?"

I struggled to suppress the pornographic thoughts that invoked. "Not just yet."

"What? Business is over for the night; it's time to have some fun."

"The real business is only just beginning," I corrected her. "At the Hilton, a social gathering of industry pundits and power journalists is forming as we speak. An entire banquet room full of people anyone would kill to have in their Rolodex, and I happen to have an invite."

Melissa's professional ambition quickly overcame her power-induced lust. "And you'll take me with you?"

"As my associate," I confirmed. "Eat your heart out, Chad."

She winked. "Chad who?"

We strolled to the Hilton at an easy pace enjoying the night air. I kept an eye out for well-dressed people and vaguely familiar faces and followed the largest group of them into the Hilton and through the lobby to the banquet rooms, doing my best to project an air of someone who knows exactly where he's going and has every right to be there.

Sure enough, there was a muscular man in a well-fitting suit standing guard at the door to the press banquet. As each person or couple entered he inspected their invitations and then waved them through.

Soon our turn came. "Your invitation, sir?"

"Oh, of course." Not actually having an invitation, I tried extending my hand in the familiar greeting. The guy wasn't buying it, though. So I tried Plan B, a conspiratorial approach and a light touch on his elbow. "I am Mr. Maskell from Tate Global, and this young lady is my associate Miss Graves. You remember that I showed you my invitation earlier, when we first arrived, so it's perfectly okay to let us back in."

"Yes," the guy said in a daze. "Welcome back, Mr. Maskell. Please step inside."

As soon as we were out of earshot of the door, Melissa pulled me aside by the arm. "What did you do to that guy? He bought that story as if it was real."

Uh-oh. "It was real," I told her as I ran my finger along her upper arm and watched her face go blank. "You saw me show him a legitimate invitation, and he let us inside as he was supposed to."

"Oh." It took several blinks for her eyes to focus again, though I could be a little off since I was mostly staring down the plunging neckline of her dress. "I must be getting loopy or something. For a second I thought ... well, never mind."

"There's a waiter over there with champagne; why don't you get us some?"

"Good idea." She broke contact and followed her orders, and I found myself admiring the way the dress clung to all the right curves. *Down, Sam*, a voice reminded me. *You've got business to do.*

After a quick drink we split up to work the room. I managed to shake hands with several publishing execs and the owner of a highly regarded technology blog, leaving them with a strong positive impression of me and the vague notion that they would very much like to have me on their team. Chad's job wasn't all that much better than mine, after all, but it was a managerial position -- once I had that it would be easier for one of my new friends to justify making me a better offer.

At one point I looked around and saw Melissa in the middle of a ring of admiring guys. I wasn't the only one making contacts here. Still, it wouldn't do to have my underling outshine me -- a minor correction was in order. I gave her a come-hither gesture and was pleased to see her excuse herself to join me.

"Are we done already?" she asked.

"No," I replied, taking her elbow again and watching the thousand-yard stare return. "We need more time to network, but while I do that you need to have a few more drinks. Don't worry if you get a little tipsy -- in fact, that's perfectly okay in this company -- but stop short of getting sloppy drunk."

"You'll be my designated driver, won't you?" she giggled.

"Of course."

This time as she headed for the nearest waiter I imagined I had x-ray vision and could see through her dress. Oh, the things I could do with that body ...

*Could do?* my inner critic sneered. *You know damned well how this night is going to end.*

Another hour of schmoozing later I had a full calendar of interviews for the week, a pocket full of contact cards to add to my database, and a half-dozen potential future employers primed and ready to seduce me away from Tate at the first opportunity.

Melissa was having a good time, too. Her laugh came easily and was just a bit too loud, and the young guys around her were getting bolder about touching and looking. The real powers in the room, male and female, looked at her just often enough to confirm that it was time for me to show my managerial finesse by getting her out before she embarrassed herself.

The timing couldn't have been better. I'd been using the power a lot, and the side effects were getting

intense. To my eye every woman in the place looked like a supermodel under a spotlight. Sam Junior was perilously close to taking over for the rest of the night, and that was a sure fire way to destroy all the work I'd done at the party. I needed a safe recipient for my amped-up libido, and Melissa would be it.

I came up behind her in mid giggle and put my hands on her hips. "Time to go now." This time I made no attempt to suppress the mental image of me ripping that dress off her body and taking her repeatedly.

She wheeled around and steadied herself on my arm. "I was afraid you'd never ask!"

By the time we walked the block and a half from the Hilton to the Four Queens we'd abandoned all pretense. Melissa groped my ass as we walked through the lobby and in the elevator I blatantly slid my hand up her dress and fingered her. When the doors opened at the fourth floor she was already dripping wet.

Once inside my room I grabbed her dress and yanked it up and off her in one determined motion. Underneath she wore only a black thong, which quickly flew across the room in my haste to get between her legs. Melissa was almost as fast at getting my shirt and pants off me before I flung her onto the bed and dove face first into her sopping wet sex.

I like to think that I'm a pretty cunning linguist naturally, if you get my drift, but with my magic hand on Melissa's thigh my arousal and lust fed into hers and produced a rousing chorus of groans, gasps, and fervent references to God that culminated in a fast, loud, strong orgasm. I recall thinking to myself that she'd have an even better one when she felt me come inside her.

As soon as that thought cleared my head Melissa grabbed my hair and yanked me up toward her chest -- that one thought was enough to get her ready for more. Her feet clawed at my shorts and shoved them down and her hand reached for my hard cock. "That's what I want," she moaned, and I felt her stroking me and pulling me toward her slit.

I moved with her and grabbed a handful of exquisite tit as she guided me inside her. Her muscles clenched around Sam Junior and her hips rocked. I picked up her rhythm and moved with her, in and out, back and forth, and when I felt that surge beginning I squeezed her tit with my right hand willed her to come just as I did. Her body jerked and squeezed harder on me and mine went into delightful spasms until my knees gave out and I collapsed on top of her, both of us panting and blowing like winded sprinters.

"Oh ... my ... God," she said between breaths as we slowly recovered. "I can't believe we did this. Am I going to regret it when the champagne wears off?"

Which was a good point, considering her history with Chad. I reached out for the first handy body part, which happened to be a breast. "No, you won't regret it. We're friendly coworkers away from home; it's perfectly natural that we hook up a few times during the week. You are completely okay with that, though you'll never tell anyone else about it, and when the trip ends it will be just as natural for us to resume our normal working relationship."

"Perfectly natural," she repeated. Then, as her eyes cleared, "And you can keep doing that as much as you want."

That was all the encouragement Sam Junior needed. I played with her breasts until I was ready for another go and let Melissa ride me to orgasm, which of course triggered her into one as well. Then we crawled under the sheets and passed out. I woke in the morning alone with a vague memory of Melissa searching for her panties in the dark and muttering something about the Walk of Shame.

It went pretty much that way for the rest of the week. The Four Queens became our forward base where we'd work, conduct interviews, and eat. Sometimes we'd sleep there; other times we'd grab the monorail back to the Mirage and rumple Melissa's bedsheets instead, largely depending on how fast a

release I needed from using the power on people. The more sex we had the more Melissa seemed to want, probably from exposure to me and the side effects of the power.

We did get actual work done, too. My improvised excuse to Chad turned out to be a hell of a good idea: dividing up the labor let us cover a lot more material, and in better depth, than either of us could have alone. We got notes taken and outlines done for a dozen pieces and would have no trouble at all filling the space we'd been committed to. And in the process I assembled an impressive array of contacts and sources for future stories, if I did end up having to keep writing.

Wednesday morning, the last day of the show, I was yanked out of sleep by the ringing of my cell. It took longer than normal to get oriented because I was in Melissa's bed and had to find my pants before I could grab the phone out of the pocket. I did my best to sound awake as I answered. "Maskell."

The voice on the other end was Gayle's. "Where are you, Sam? There was no answer at the number for your room."

"Sorry -- I'm up and about already, working with Melissa on schedules." At the mention of her name Melissa suppressed a yelp.

"I should have known. You've got strong leadership qualities, Sam. Which leads directly to the reason for my call."

While I listened Melissa rolled quietly out of bed. I watched her naked figure skulking about looking for a bathrobe and smiled. Yep, strong leadership qualities. "Thank you. What can I do for you?"

Gayle's voice lowered to a conspiratorial murmur. "You were right when you advised me to watch Chad. I can't go into details on the phone, but Chad is going to be taking some time off. I need someone to step in and handle the department, Sam, and I can't think of anyone who'd be better at it than you."

"Me? I'm flattered, Gayle. Of course I'll step up. Is this public knowledge?"

"Not yet. I wanted to get your answer first, of course. A discreet announcement will be made by email this morning stating only that Chad is going on special assignment and that you will be interim editor until further notice. You can share that much with Melissa, since she's out there with you. Any questions?"

"Always, but they can wait." I knew she'd expect that answer. "I'll make the necessary arrangements to postpone that other matter."

"Thank you, Sam. I'm hoping that you'll like the position enough to consider staying on."

"We'll talk about that later," I replied, smiling.

Melissa watched me hang up the phone. "That was Gayle? What did she want? Step up how?"

I beamed at her. "Chad is going on special assignment."

She hadn't been with the company long, but even Melissa knew what 'special assignment' means in Tate-speak: Chad would be given a month, at most, to find a new job and resign with dignity. "What happens now?"

"Starting Monday, your new interim boss is me."

The bathrobe dropped to the floor and Melissa knocked me backward on the bed with a congratulatory hug. Her hips pressed against mine and I became acutely aware of the feel of her mound against me. Sam Junior was on yellow alert anyway, what with my having just woken up and then watching Melissa walk around in her birthday suit. An image of Melissa on her knees at the edge of the bed sucking me off drifted through my mind and, naturally, into hers. She reached between us and stroked my cock until it was hard. In due course her hand gave way to her mouth and I drifted off into sexual bliss. My

orgasm came so fast it almost caught me off guard -- I barely managed to grab on to her before I felt myself spurting into her mouth.

"Jesus," she said after swallowing. "That's the first time I've come from *giving* a blow job!"

"You're just that good," I told her. And she was, sincerely. Nina could learn a few things from her.

Nina.

The reality I'd been quietly denying all week came crashing down on me. As Melissa retreated into the shower I sat there wondering what the hell I'd turned into.

## **vii: Nina**

The price of success for me was that I had to come in to work Thursday after flying home Wednesday evening. I'd been meaning to take the rest of the week off -- especially Friday, which was the day of my mediation session with Nina -- but Chad's ouster forced a slight change in priorities.

Leah spotted me on my way in and greeted me with mock bows. "Oh great and exalted editor!"

"Please, Leah, you're embarrassing me. 'Your Lordship' will do."

She giggled. "I just hope you remember the little people who helped get you there, Your Lordship."

"And I hope you have some juicy details for me on how all this came about," I countered.

"I've done a little research. Buy me a drink after work and I might get loose-lipped."

"Okay, you're on. Sullivan's?"

"Why not?"

At Gayle's request I went straight to her office first. We talked about what my new duties would be -- no surprises there -- and then she formally presented me to the team as their new editor. It's a good group; they clapped for me and seemed genuinely happy, though it may also have been relief that Chad was gone. I'd have been pretty happy in their position no matter who the replacement was.

Since the promotion was technically interim I didn't bother moving into Chad's cube/office. My regular desk, right in the middle of the people who now worked for me, would do just fine. Instead I turned Chad's space into a temporary war room for me and Melissa to work on CES stories. We sat on opposite sides of the desk with our netbooks to collaborate on the main story and divided up the sidebars and interview pieces to do individually.

Melissa's attitude was interesting. Away from Vegas her manner was still friendly but now, instead of flirting and making cute innuendos, she was all business. Nothing in her behavior or speech reflected that we'd just spent five nights doing the horizontal mambo together. And after spending the week working with her, I had to admit the girl could write.

When I wasn't working with Melissa that day I was with the other writers, going over their assignments and deadlines and getting my head around the editorial calendar. I even had to skip lunch with Joe in favor of delivery. Before I knew it the day was over and people were filing out.

A lot of those people ended up at Sullivan's, a pub around the corner that was our favorite location for

office social gatherings. A lot of retirement parties had ended up there, along with birthdays and anniversaries and what-the-fuck-it's-Fridays. So I was more or less prepared to walk in there with Leah and find half the office crew already gathered and a big WAY TO GO, SAM banner posted on the wall. It still got me a little teary, though.

As the happy hour progressed I'll admit I watched Melissa closely. If a few drinks had been enough to get her into bed with Chad, I had to figure that it wouldn't take much to get her talking about Vegas. She did well, though -- the only stories she told had nothing to do with our extracurricular activities. Perhaps I was getting better at using the power, I mused.

"She was fucking him, you know."

Leah had quietly appeared in the seat to my right. From the look of her she'd had her drink and then a couple. "Excuse me?"

"Chad," Leah elaborated, pointing openly at Melissa. "She was fucking him."

Feigning surprise seemed like the best move. "Really?"

"For a couple of months now. That's probably how she earned the CES trip."

I felt a sudden paternal need to defend Melissa. "She did a good job, though. Is that why Chad got the boot?"

"Maybe partly. She must not be that good, though, 'cause word is that His Nibs was spending his day surfing porn sites and hanging out in sleazy chatrooms. He even used his company credit card to join a hookup club."

Having started out playing innocent, I figured I should continue. "A what?"

"It's like a dating site," she explained, "except it's just about one-night stands. Accounting saw the charge, checked out the site, and then got IT involved."

"Ah ... hence the early morning visit by Owen."

Leah aimed a light punch at my shoulder and almost missed. "Bingo."

"You're blitzed," I said. "How did you plan on getting home?"

"I'm fine, Boss. A little fresh air will clear my head for the drive home."

"Negative." I reached out with my magic hand and placed it on Leah's forearm. "You're going to give me your car keys now and take a cab home." The sight of her face going blank got Sam Junior's attention; I had to let go fast before my mind went into the gutter.

I stuck with Leah long enough to get her into a cab and headed home. For a moment I considered calling up Audrey for a spur-of-the-moment dinner date, but no. My appointment with the mediator was the next day; in less than 24 hours I'd be in the blissful embrace of my wife once again. Audrey had served her purpose.

Even as I finished that thought, though, I felt a tweak in my conscience. Audrey was still hung up on me, thanks to the power. I needed to cut her loose cleanly, for her sake and for mine. A quick phone call confirmed that she was home and had no plans.

Audrey opened the door on the first knock. She wore a clingy tank top and a gauzy skirt that swished invitingly when she walked. Her hair was neatly arranged and her makeup subtle and clean. "Is all this for my benefit?"

She blushed. "I guess I need to pretend harder that I wasn't hoping you'd call. A drink?"

"No thanks. Actually, Audrey, we need to talk."

The seriousness of my tone was not lost on her. "In that case, I think *I'd* better have a drink."

She poured herself a glass of wine, took a long pull from it, and topped off the glass before coming into the living room. She curled herself up on the end of the sofa, facing me, and cradled the wine glass in her hands. "Ready."

Audrey was so obviously bracing herself to be dumped. I looked at her, felt my heart go heavy, and trashed my original plan. "Audrey," I began, "I need to tell you some things you're going to have trouble believing. Just hear me out, okay?"

And then, in a long stream of words, I laid out the whole story. I told her about the power, about how Joe had compelled her to feel attracted to me, how he'd passed the power to me, and how I'd been using it to turn my life around (but not about my sleeping with Alice and Melissa -- I do have some sense of decency). I explained how the power affected me and apologized as sincerely as I could for taking advantage of her with it. I even told her how I planned to use the power to get Nina back.

She listened quietly, obviously suspending disbelief. I watched her face run the gamut of emotions as she digested it all. Minutes passed in silence. Then Audrey sobbed. Instinctively I reached for her.

"Don't touch me!" She leapt from the couch, dropping her now-empty wine glass, and backed away toward the kitchen.

"Audrey ..."

"Stop it, Sam. You've said enough. More than enough. I think you should just go now."

*Great job, Sammy-boy*, I thought, and slinked out the door in shame.

A night's sleep restored my sense of purpose. After all, Audrey had plenty of reason to think of me as a monster. All things considered, her reaction had actually been pretty mild. She could hate me if she wanted to -- I probably would in her position -- but at least the relationship, if you could call it that, was now clearly over.

The mediation office was named, with no apparent sense of irony, The Couples' Empowerment Center. I snorted a little as I opened the door to Suite 8330 a full 45 minutes before our 9:00am appointment time. I wanted to be there, preferably in an unobtrusive corner of the waiting area, when Nina arrived.

I walked in and started toward a seat near the door, where I wouldn't be visible until after Nina had entered, only to have the receptionist stop me. "Can I help you?"

"Not yet," I said. "I'm ridiculously early, I'm afraid. Friday morning traffic wasn't as bad as I expected."

The cute brunette looked at her appointment book. "Are you Mr. Maskell, then?"

I did my best to look harmless. "Guilty."

"You are pretty early. Can I get you anything while you wait?"

"I'm fine," I told her. "I'll just borrow a magazine or three off the table here."

The time dragged like you wouldn't believe. I went through two issues of *Sports Illustrated*, a *Field & Stream*, and was desperate enough to consider the *Redbook* on the end table when a friendly-looking lady in casual clothes came out from an inner office. "Sam?"

"That's me," I said.



"I thought so. I'm Margie Hindle. Would you like to come with me, please, so we can get started?"

"Shouldn't we wait for Nina? My wife, that is?"

Margie gave me a disarming smile. "Nina's already here. My partner Dave is with her now. This way, please."

Before I even realized it I was out of the chair and following Margie down the inner hall. The lady was good at leading people, obviously, but my mind was still on something else. "Nina's already here? What did she do, teleport in?"

She rewarded me with a chuckle. "That's good. No, we haven't found a reliable system for that just yet, so instead we maintain two waiting areas with separate entrances and suite numbers. It helps to avoid awkward scenes. Not every couple is as mature about these things as you and Nina."

I suppressed a bitter urge to laugh back. Nina had been ducking my emails and phone calls for a month now. If that was mature, I'd hate to see what passed for childish in Margie and Dave's world.

Margie led me to a room that looked reminiscent of a shrink's office. There was a rolltop desk in the corner and several bookcases full of titles on conflict resolution, negotiation, and relationships. A small sideboard held a mini refrigerator, a box of pastries, and a supply of paper plates, cups, and napkins. Instead of the customary couch and chair, though, there were two leather sofas set at right angles to each other. One was empty; the other held a friendly-looking guy in shirt, tie, and jeans -- presumably Dave -- and Nina.

I approached Nina with my hand out, trying to keep my heart out of my throat, and almost walked right into the glass-topped coffee table between us. Nina shrank back from me a little with a suspicious look. Dave jumped up, though, and offered me his hand across the table. "Dave Foreman," he said as he pumped my hand.

I kept my thoughts to myself to avoid having him go suddenly blank. "A pleasure. And it's good to see you, too, Nina."

Nina nodded to me but still didn't take my hand. *Patience*, I told myself.

The session started with Margie and Dave talking about how it was in both of our interests to set aside whatever suspicions or fears we may have had and sincerely work toward finding things we could agree on. Margie sat on the second sofa, with her and Dave on the inside corners and me and Nina on the outside. As they droned on about the process I reflected that this situation was about as bad for my purposes as it could get. In order to touch Nina I'd have to get up and cover six feet of distance, either climbing over the coffee table or walking around it. No way could I do that casually. And while Dave and Margie seemed harmless enough, I suspected that if I made a move that looked too deliberate toward Nina they'd find a way to block it.

Instead I focused on gaining their trust by cooperating with the process. Dave took notes on a legal pad while Margie led me and Nina through building a list of "points of agreement" -- her term for things we had to address in our negotiations to make sure we were dividing things up reasonably. Ah, the power of language to obscure true meaning!

The first "point of agreement," of course, was my insistence that there shouldn't be a divorce in the first place; that Nina should agree to work with me on our differences instead of just cutting and running. Dave skillfully went to work on that one. "Nothing is agreed to until everything is agreed to," he said, "so it harms nothing to let that point go until we see how much else we can agree on." And I had to give him that. We tabled that item until the end.

That actually made the session much easier for me, because I knew it was all an academic exercise. It cost me nothing to yield to Nina on a few items -- letting her have a share of my 401k, for instance -- because I knew that everything would eventually hinge on that first point. Win that and everything else would become moot.

At about 11:30 the receptionist came in with a platter of little sandwiches, a veggie tray, and a few water bottles. Considering Nina and I had each kicked in \$500 for this session, I indulged freely. Nina hung back until Dave gently nudged her into picking something off the tray.

"Oops," I noted as she was loading her plate, "I forgot to grab a napkin. Nina, would you mind please?" And I held my hand out to her.

She was about to go for it, too, but then Margie reached right over and dropped two in my lap. "Here, Sam, I have extras." Nina put the napkins back down and retreated to her corner of the other couch again. So close!

After we ate, Dave flipped through his legal pad and recapped the discussion. We'd reached agreement on the 401k, the joint credit cards, alimony (none requested), visitation with Jenny (basically, Nina agreeing that Jenny can visit me when she wants to), and division of household property. The only point left to discuss was the real sticking point for me: getting Nina to reconsider the whole process. Margie suggested that I state my case, and then give Nina equal time to state hers.

"My case is very simple," I said directly to Nina. "I love you. I've loved you since soon after we first met. I'm a good husband and a good stepfather for Jenny. I still don't understand why we're here at all, Nina. We didn't fight, we didn't cheat on each other." I choked back any reference to Ron, knowing she'd probably started sleeping with him before I knew about it. "You just ... shut me out. It hasn't even been two years yet since we took the vows; I think we owe it to each other to try harder and make this work."

"So what you're saying, Sam," Dave summarized, "is that you feel Nina is giving up too quickly. You want her to, what? Agree to some counseling with you?"

"That would be a good start," I conceded. "If she'll just meet me halfway on this I don't think anything is so broken we can't fix it. Getting divorced is a mistake."

"I am fixing it," Nina insisted. "Sam, you need to realize that it was getting married in the first place that was the mistake. It's my fault, really. I knew you loved me, and I thought that I needed you and that needing you was close enough. But it isn't. I was taking advantage of your kindness, and making it easier for me to live without my ex, and providing a father figure for Jenny. None of those things are reasons to be married, even to someone who loves you."

"And then I met Ron, and I really did fall in love. I know you don't like him, and I can't blame you for that. Understand, though, that I feel about him the way you say you feel about me. No amount of marriage counseling is going to change that, Sam. We just aren't meant to be. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is. You'll meet someone else, too, but first you have to let me go."

Margie cleared her throat. "You've each heard the other's viewpoint on this. Sam, I know this is hard for you to listen to, but if Nina is adamant that she's not going to change her mind, that limits your options to just two. You can keep fighting this, and let a judge who doesn't know either of you arbitrarily decide how this divorce is going to be done. Or you can take the agreement points you've worked out here and decide your own fate, within the limits of what's possible. It will be a lot faster, cleaner, and less traumatic for both of you if you take the second option. I think you're a smart guy, Sam, and deep down you already know the right thing to do here. You just need to do it."

She was good. Painted that way, for a second or two I really did want to agree with her. And then I thought of an even better reason. "One condition," I said.

Dave smiled. "And what's that, Sam?"

"I want Nina to shake my hand on it."

Nina looked more surprised than anyone. "That's it? I shake your hand and you'll agree to everything else?"

"If that's really what you want, yes."

She still looked unsure. "I'm looking for a catch. That's just too simple."

"No catch," I assured her. "Dave and Margie made good points, and so did you. Will you shake on it?" I stood up and moved halfway across to her, stopping at the edge of the coffee table, and waited.

Nina looked at Dave and Margie as if for a cue. They both nodded at her, so she stood up and reached across the coffee table with a hand. My right hand closed over hers and the thrill of victory swept through me. I squeezed lightly, looked into her open eyes, and said, "Stay with m--"

The words choked off because right then somebody caved in the back of my skull with a cast iron skillet or something. I staggered backward, banged against the sideboard, and landed on my ass in a heap. A couple of water bottles rolled off and fell into my lap.

"Sam, are you all right?" Margie's face was hovering over me. "Should we call 911?"

"No, I'll be okay. Just give me a minute." As the room stopped spinning I looked across at Nina, who had returned to her seat on the couch. A hand went to her hair as if to brush it out of her face, but there was no mistaking the triumphant smirk it was hiding from Dave's view.

*She knew! She fucking knew!* My inner voice repeated those words like a mantra while the pieces fell together in my head. I knew then why I had fallen so hard for someone so different from me; married someone after knowing her such a short time; found it nearly impossible to deny her anything she asked, to the point where Jenny even noted my lack of backbone. Joe had said he couldn't tell me who had given him the power. I could take a gander as to why at that point.

Margie had gone for smelling salts or something, leaving me on the floor with Dave and Nina across from me. Dave looked a little scared but also unsure of what to do. Nina, on the other hand, was perfectly composed. "Damned Joe," she mused softly. "I should've known he'd pass it to you when the time came."

I climbed back to my feet with the aid of the coffee table and sideboard. I started to lurch a little toward Dave when I heard Nina again. "A deal is a deal, Sam. I shook."

So instead of putting a hand on Dave I plopped onto the sofa. I searched my aching mind for an idea, any idea, and came up empty. "All right, Nina," I sighed, "you win."

I had taken the whole day off figuring I'd spend the afternoon making love with Nina at my house. Instead I drove home with the bitter taste of defeat in my mouth. And what a defeat: not only had I failed to win Nina back, but my impulsive honesty with Audrey suddenly seemed like the stupidest thing I'd done since getting the power in the first place.

I'd taken quite a liking to Audrey since meeting her. Had I known that Nina would be immune to the power ... oh, well. Too late now. Unless I could sneak up on Audrey from behind, before she realized I was there, and touch ...?

*No*, came the voice of my bloodied conscience. *You fucked up. Accept it and move on.*

As I approached the house, I noticed Joe's car parked on the street. There was nobody in it, but Joe had a key and standing permission to use it so it was no surprise when I found him sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. The surprise was that he wasn't alone.

"Hi, Sam," Audrey said with a weak smile. "We, umm, need to talk."

No clever comeback came to me. I pulled out the third chair and sat with them, looking from Audrey to Joe and making no attempt to hide my confusion. "I'm all ears."

"Let me start this." Joe drained his mug and contemplated the inside for a second. "There's a lot I still can't tell you, not because I don't want to but because I literally can't."

"I can guess some of it," I told him. "Nina gave you the power. But first she used it on you to prevent you from telling me where you got it."

"That's right," Audrey confirmed. "And there's more than that. But she didn't prevent him from telling someone else ... like me, for instance."

"Audrey and I have known each other a while," Joe confessed. "She and Alice used to be coworkers. It's been in our heads -- Alice's and mine, that is -- that the two of you would be great together once you got free of Nina."

I looked at them both. "So when you introduced us in the deli that day ..."

"It was arranged," Audrey confirmed. "Joe had told me about you, what kind of guy you are and a little about your situation. He did a good job; I wanted to meet you. I agreed to keep it casual because you weren't ready to let go of your wife yet." Then, with a sidewise glance at Joe that screamed of prior discussion, she added, "I did not agree to having my mind made up for me in advance -- but I realize now that I can't blame you for that, Sam."

"Okay," I answered cautiously.

"After you left last night, I was upset. I realized that Joe had to have used that power on me, and that you had been using it on me since then. I called Joe and we had a long talk about why he did that to me. We talked about you and what you were doing as well, and Joe realized that if you tried to use the power on Nina today it wouldn't work. And then he told me ... well, things that Nina expressly forbade him from ever telling you."

Joe stood up and put his mug in the dishwasher. "I think it would be better if I wasn't here for the rest. Sam, will you get Audrey home when she's ready to go?"

"Of course."

Joe nodded to us both and left by the kitchen door. Audrey waited to hear his car start up before continuing. "Joe doesn't know where Nina got the power from. He does know that she got it shortly after she met you and that she used it to get you to fall in love with her and marry her."

"At first, apparently, Nina didn't realize how strong this power is. She'd latched onto you to keep her in the lifestyle she wanted and to be a role model for Jenny, but as her understanding of the power grew she started looking to upgrade, financially if nothing else, before her year was up. She used the power to seduce Joe, but then she met that guy Ron. Ron has more money than you and Joe put together, is single, and is tolerably good-looking. She set her sights on him and started the process of getting the divorce from you."

"But Nina miscalculated and moved too slowly. Her year ran out and she had to pass on the power to somebody. With no time to really think about it she and gave the power to Joe, figuring she could more or less control him by threatening to tell Alice or you about their affair. If she'd had more time to think about that ... well, maybe it's better for you that she didn't."

"Maybe," I agreed. "So then Joe used the power to patch things up with Alice and get himself set up at work, and passed it on to me."

"Which is where I come in." Audrey reached across the table and took my left hand in hers. "Or maybe where we come in. Sam, this has not been a great way to start a relationship. I'm still not entirely sure how I would have felt about you if we'd met in the normal way, without Joe fiddling with my head first. But one thing I did glean from this whole mess is that when you touch me with your right hand without speaking, the power takes your thoughts and feelings and transmits them to me. So if you touched me and made me want to make love to you, it's because that's what you wanted. If you touch me now and I feel drawn to you again, it's because you feel that way about me. Last night I thought

you were a rapist; today, after thinking it over, I think maybe you're exactly what Joe said -- a good, decent guy dealing with a bad situation the best way he can." She put her right hand out toward me. "Show me, Sam. Show me how you really feel."

Doing my best not to think, I reached over and took her hand in my right hand. My eyes met hers and I just let whatever wanted to happen, happen.

My heart fluttered a little in my chest and I felt myself being drawn into Audrey's gaze. I remembered the warmth of her embrace, the caring in her voice when she was advising me to let go of Nina, the smooth texture of her skin, the throaty noises she makes when she comes...

We both stood up and kissed across the table. The kiss was loaded with passion and desire and energy. We did our best to keep it going as we rounded the table to embrace, holding and groping each other as if we'd never done it before. Her hands tugged at my clothes and I acted in kind, stripping her shirt off while she worked at my pants.

Mindful of the many windows in my kitchen, we slowly moved toward the bedroom but by the time we made it to the stairs they looked good and private enough for our purpose. I pulled Audrey's panties off and she yanked my boxers down, leaving us both naked. Audrey lay back against the stairs and opened her legs for me, and that was an invitation I absolutely couldn't refuse. I tucked her legs over my shoulders and dove in with my mouth, licking and kissing and sucking until her thighs clamped around my head to tell me she was coming.

I let her orgasm pass and then kissed my way up her belly to her breasts, nuzzling first one and then the other. My lips played over her nipples, rolling and stroking against the nibs until they stood out hard and firm again. Audrey's hand went searching and found Sam Junior in full battle readiness. She pumped me with her hand and pulled me toward her snatch, and I was in no frame of mind to argue with her. I plunged myself inside her and stroked hard, holding her legs and counting on forward momentum to keep me in place. As my cock slid so easily in and out, I watched her face and her breasts and her eyes and then suddenly I wasn't watching anything because my head jerked back and my cock took over. I felt Audrey clench around me and milk me for every drop. And then, spent and weak, I flopped down on top of her and rolled to one side.

"Wow," she said after a minute or two. "These stairs are horribly uncomfortable."

"You're right," I laughed. "Let's see if the bed is any better."

## **viii: Sam**

A smidge over five months later I found myself once again at Mama Ziti's, chomping on pizza and drinking root beer. This time it was my treat in honor of Jenny's eighteenth birthday having just passed.

"That's right," she crowed between bites, "I'm free of that manipulating bitch!"

"Hey! That's still your mother you're talking about." I hoped my frown was suitably sincere.

"She's not your wife anymore," Jenny reminded me. "You're allowed to agree with me now."

"Maybe, but it's still a good policy to show some respect. Especially when she's paying your room, board, and college fees."

Jenny made a sour face. "With Ron's money? I can't take that, Sam. I'd rather go to community college and pay my own way."

"You dislike Ron that much?"

"No," she replied, putting down her crust. "Ron's nothing to write home about, but I don't have a beef with him. I just don't think it's right that Mommy Dearest married him for his money when she could've stayed with you. If I let Ron pay for my college that makes me an accomplice."

I had to admire the girl's convictions. It's so easy to be idealistic at eighteen. "Speaking of college," I segued. "I have something for you. It might come in handy." I reached across the table and handed Jenny a small box wrapped in silvery paper and a white bow. "Happy birthday, honey."

"You didn't have to do that, Sam." Still, she accepted the box and opened it to reveal an HP Mininote. Jenny looked wide-eyed at the tiny but fully-functional laptop, then back to me. "You're doing pretty well with the new job, I guess."

"I know a few people," I said with a shrug. Truthfully, my new job with the top technology publisher was paying me quite well, but I'd used a connection to get the laptop at a deep discount. Well, a connection and a handshake.

Jenny leaned across the table to kiss my cheek. "Thank you, Sam. I'm so glad things are finally working out for you again. You deserve it."

"It's my pleasure, sweetie. You know, you deserve some good fortune, too."

It was Jenny's turn to shrug. "We'll be fine. I just wish sometimes that I could get Ron to see that he doesn't have to buy me off for Mother's sake. Maybe get him to quit letting her walk all over him the way she did you."

I grinned broadly and leaned closer. "Funny you should mention that," I told her. "Jenny, I have another gift I'd like to give you. But first, let me explain the rules."

-wg  
6/22/08