

In the Moment

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There's nothing like having family to stick by you when you're down.

There I was, sprawled across the sofa in the living room with a six-pack of Bud next to me and a can of Pringles in my lap. I was staring vacantly at the TV, where "Dexter's Laboratory" was on, trying to withdraw temporarily from the human race.

Woman problems, of course. I'd been in love with Wendy since we were teens, and still was. Unfortunately for me, Wendy was in love with white powder. She'd gotten hooked on the shit in our freshman year at college, tried to get me into it too and succeeded for a while. Then I noticed I was looking forward to my next hit more than my next class and called it quits before that stuff took over my life.

Wendy dumped me shortly thereafter, but I couldn't let her go that easily. I kept up with her, tried everything I could think of to get her off the stuff. For a while it worked, and we got back together. We graduated, got an apartment together, and seemed like we'd be okay. Then, a few weeks ago I noticed that she was chronically short of cash, increasingly edgy and short-tempered, and wiping her nose a lot. I asked her flat-out if she was doing coke again. She denied it. We argued. She walked. I pursued. She agreed to get help. I checked her into the clinic myself. She walked out a week later, still hooked. I told her to get back into rehab or move out. She moved out.

I missed her. It felt as though some of my guts had been ripped out, but I knew what I had to do. I changed the locks, changed my phone number, and went to stay with my cousin Lori for a few days.

Lori and I have been there for each other since we were little. My aunt Sylvia and her husband George couldn't have kids of their own. That didn't bother them too much until I was born, but then suddenly there was this cute little guy teetering around stirring up Sylvia's maternal instincts. The more Sylvia played with my curly blonde hair, the more she wanted a

baby of her own. By the time I was crawling, they'd managed to adopt an 18-month-old girl: Lori.

Lori was an orphan. Her mother had died in childbirth and her dad committed suicide shortly after. She became an orphan again at the age of eight, when my aunt and uncle left her with us for a week so they could take a vacation and their plane went down. My folks became Lori's legal guardians and we finished growing up together.

From an early age Lori and I learned to look out for each other. I beat the crap out of Tony Cirico more than once for calling her "Jinx"; she made sure there was a teacher nearby when three of Tony's pals jumped me after school later. I let her use my Atari; she let me use her trampoline. I let Lou Watson know that she'd say yes if he asked her to homecoming; she talked Angie Bennett into letting me take her to the prom.

That's why it wasn't a big surprise when the TV suddenly went dark in the middle of Dexter's greatest experiment. I looked around, half in the bag, and saw Lori standing over me with the remote in her hand.

"Brad, you're a mess," she said. It wasn't a criticism or a nag, just a statement of fact.

"Nice to see you too," I replied sarcastically.

"It's ten minutes to eight. Have you eaten yet?"

I hefted the nearly-empty can of Pringles and belched loudly. I was just buzzed enough to find that hysterically funny and started snickering uncontrollably. Lori tried hard to keep a straight face, but I could tell she was weakening. I flashed her my best "Ain't I cute?" grin and that did it -- she broke into a smile and laughed, shaking her head gently at the same time. "You're incorrigible," she chuckled. "Have you had anything to eat with protein in it?"

I had to think about that one. "Don't think so. I haven't been hungry."

Lori's eyebrows crinkled up a little at that, but she let it go. "Suit yourself," she said simply, "but I'm hungry as a bear. So if you'll excuse me ..."

She punched the power button on the remote again and flipped it into my lap, then retreated to the kitchen. About fifteen minutes later a delicious smell wafted into the living room: beef and tomatoes and chili

powder and Lori's secret taco seasonings. Five minutes after that my stomach was growling for something more substantial than Pringles.

I let my nose lead me out of my chair and back to the kitchen where I found Lori spooning hot, glistening meat out of a cast iron skillet and into an oversized taco shell. "Smells good," I said tentatively.

Lori gave me a sideways look that said she was glad I'd come in. "There's plenty here," she replied. "Help yourself if you want."

That's Lori -- she doesn't preach, push or nag, and she just makes it easy for people to do what they already know they should. "Thanks, Cuz," I said, and grabbed two shells for myself. I filled them with meat and cheese, threw on some shredded lettuce and tomato, and grabbed us each a Pepsi from the fridge.

We didn't talk while we ate. I hadn't been talking much anyway, and Lori isn't one to try and force things. That's largely why I came to her instead of Mom and Dad, who would have insisted on talking things to death for my own good. Lori basically let me do what I felt like, which had been pretty much nothing except eat, sleep, and cry on her shoulder a few times. But just then, with a belly full of homemade tacos, I felt better than I had in a while. I wanted to let her know it somehow.

"Lori?" I started out, and waited for the encouraging look that I knew would come. "Thanks for letting me mope around here. I hope I haven't been too much of a sad-sack."

Lori smiled warmly and grabbed me by the hand. "You're hurting," she said. "You're entitled to lick your wounds for a bit if you need to."

Thanks, I said again. You still leaving in the morning?

Yes. The invitation is still open, by the way.

When I first called Lori to tell her about the breakup, she told me that she had been invited to spend the holiday weekend in a private cottage on the Outer Banks. The party was to consist of Lori and three friends, but she had invited me to come along if I wanted to get out of town. I know a lot of guys who would trade one of their balls for the chance to hang out at the beach with four hot women, but I wasn't one of them. No thanks, I said, echoing my earlier answer. I don't want to drag the party down.

Four single, eligible women on holiday at the beach, she observed. A two-ton weight couldn't drag us down. But it's your call, Brad. I checked with the girls and they're okay with it, so you're totally welcome if you want to change your mind. If not, you can still stay here.

I just grunted and started cleaning up the dishes. Once the kitchen was cleaned up I started the dishwasher and shuffled back to the living room. I was sick of the TV, so I grabbed my Discman and put on some John Cougar Mellencamp (*Lonesome Jubilee*, of course). The hard-driving, regret-laced tones of "Paper in Fire" flowed through my head and I zoned out for a while.

Later on, I started thinking some more about the beach party, and what I knew of the group. They were all friends of Lori's, people I knew by sight but had never really hung out with. I'd be the only guy there, and the only one who wasn't part of their circle -- the textbook definition of a fifth wheel.

Then again, I wasn't exactly living it up anyway of late. The prospect of spending the weekend in Lori's Alexandria apartment, alone with my thoughts and demons, seemed pretty lame. Going back to my own place, where everything in sight had something to do with Wendy, would be downright ugly -- I wasn't ready to face that yet. The more I thought about it, the less I wanted to be alone.

And so it was that I knocked gently on Lori's bedroom door at 10:30 that night. She opened it right away, so at least I hadn't awakened her. "What's up, Brad?"

"About the weekend ... are you sure it's okay if I come?"

She grinned and wrapped her arms around me in a big bear hug. "Absolutely sure. I was hoping you'd change your mind. If anyone needs a weekend at the beach, it's you."

"I'll try not to be a wet blanket," I promised.

Packing was no big trick since I was living out of my gym bag anyway. The only thing I was really missing was a bathing suit, but I figured I could make do with a regular pair of shorts.

We locked up and left at 8:30 in the morning, stopping at a nearby IHOP for breakfast before heading south. I volunteered to start the driving because it would keep at least part of my mind occupied during the 6-

hour trip. Traffic wasn't too bad for a holiday weekend, probably because we had waited until Saturday morning to leave. We finished the first leg, down 95 South to 295 around Richmond to 64 East, in under 2 hours. Things got a little congested through Williamsburg but picked up again after that.

We stopped for a late lunch in Norfolk, where Lori took the wheel because she knew the route from there. I could tell we were leaving the mainland when the amount of land on either side of the highway dwindled to a few hundred yards or less. We meandered down route 168 and into the Outer Banks, seeing signs for Kitty Hawk and Nags Head. Finally, just before Kill Devil Hills, Lori made a right turn and took us inland on Colington Drive.

Our destination turned out to be a small private cottage just outside Colington. It was a two-story structure in a style that evoked images of New England more than the South. The clapboards and square posts were painted in glossy white, the trim in navy blue. It had a wraparound porch for sitting and socializing and a well-trimmed lawn all around. The grass disappeared down a slope as I looked down the side of the house and I could see the water behind.

I grabbed my gym bag and Lori's suitcase and followed her up to the porch. The front door was opened before we got to it by long, lean woman with milk-chocolate skin and finely sculpted features: Diane, our hostess.

"It's about time you guys got here," she remarked with a smile. "I was afraid we'd have to start the party without you." Then to me she added, "Brad, I'm really glad you came. If there's anything I can do ..."

"Thanks," I said, casting my eyes down to the floor. "I'll be okay, really."

Diane lifted my chin, bringing my eyes into contact with hers. "I know you will," she said softly. "Just remember, you're among friends here. You can let it all hang out and nobody will mind."

"I know that. Thanks." From behind her, I saw Lori flash me a sheepish look. So she'd told Diane about my romantic problems. I knew she meant well - - Diane was a counselor of some sort, I remembered -- but I wished she'd asked me first. I really didn't want to spend the weekend fending off well-intentioned offers of help.

Perhaps sensing my discomfort, Diane changed the subject. "Would you like the fifty-cent tour?"

"Sounds good."

We started the tour by going up the stairs to a simple landing. There were two bedrooms of roughly equal size. Diane and Lori would share one, their friends Brandy and Allison taking the other. "You'll be downstairs," she explained to me. "I hope that's okay."

"Fine," I assured her.

The only other room upstairs was the bathroom. It was unexpectedly large compared to the bedrooms, sporting both a whirlpool tub and a large glass-enclosed shower stall. Dual sinks and a large panel mirror stood opposite the shower, with the commode tucked into a corner beside the sink counter. A picture window above the bathtub looked out onto the beach behind the house.

"I detect a remodeling job here," I remarked.

Diane grinned and nodded. "There used to be three bedrooms, one master and two smaller ones. My brother, who owns the place, knocked down the third bedroom. He used most of the space to expand the second bedroom and the rest here."

"Makes for a nice bathroom."

"It has to be, it's the only full bath in the house. There's a powder room on the main floor and an outdoor shower in back, but for regular bathing this is it. We're all going to have to be a little flexible in the mornings."

The main floor featured a spacious foyer, from which the stairs ran up to the second floor. Tucked under the main stairs was a doorway to another staircase leading down. Further along was the powder room, a tiny little thing barely big enough to contain the toilet and pedestal sink. An oval mirror hung from a nail in the wall over the sink. On the other side of the foyer was the living room, done comfortably in country pine. An open doorway led back to the dining room, which had another big picture window looking out onto the beach. I caught a glimpse of a couple of figures sunbathing on the deck behind the house but couldn't make them out clearly from that angle. A saloon-style swinging door led from the dining room to the kitchen, which was brightly lit by sunlight streaming in from windows.

With a quick call of "Get decent, girls!" Diane led us out a pair of French doors from the kitchen to the deck. There we found our other two roommates.

Allison was small and thin, with rich golden hair cropped short like a gymnast's. She had been a gymnast until her early teens, I remembered Lori saying, but had filled out just a little too much in the bust and hips for advanced competition and had gone on to other sports, eventually becoming a middle school gym teacher. She was sitting up when I came onto the deck, quickly fastening the top to her white bikini. She gave me a bright smile and offered her hand. "Hey, Brad."

My eye shifted quickly past Allison to where Brandy lay face-down on a lounge chair. The pieces of a bright red bikini sat on the end table next to her but she made no effort to cover up her long, well-rounded body. She half-turned, offering me a splendid side view as she raised a hand to shield her eyes and looked me over. "Hi, Brad," she said with a wicked smile. "I'd forgotten how cute you are. Want to rub some lotion on me?"

I grinned back and concentrated on maintaining eye contact. "Nice to see you too, Brandy. Maybe later -- Diane is still giving me the tour."

Next we went back to the foyer and down the stairs to the basement. The bottom level was like a different house. The walls were covered in dark paneling, the ceiling in white tile. The little hatch-type windows, high up on the walls inside but at ground level outside, provided a bit of natural light to soften the white glare of the fluorescent fixtures.

Most of the level was finished as one large rec room. A mahogany pool table occupied the middle of the space. Simple shelves made from planks and cinder blocks housed books and knickknacks along one wall. There was a modest entertainment center supporting a less-than-modest wide-screen television with VCR, DVD player and 6-disc CD changer in one corner. A wet bar, complete with mirror, glass shelves, mini fridge and six bar stools, took up another corner. Along the wall opposite was a sleeper sofa, a futon, and a pair of worn-looking bean bag chairs. A small doorway next to the bar led to an unfinished space which served both as laundry room and as a beer and wine cellar.

"I feel bad sticking you alone in the basement," Diane began.

"It's fine," I assured her. "Besides," I added with a twinkle, "who says I'll be alone?" Diane and Lori exchanged a quick glance and smiled back at me.

"Should we just move Brandy's things down here now?" Lori quipped, calling my bluff.

"Let's just see what develops," I demurred. Banter aside, I really wasn't looking to score with Brandy or anyone else for that matter -- in my heart I still wanted Wendy.

The tour was over. Diane took Lori upstairs to unpack her things. I dropped my gym bag in a corner and checked out the pool table. I'm no connoisseur, but I've played on enough pool tables in my time to recognize a good one. This one had nice felt, no sign of joints in the slate, and good woodwork on the visible surfaces. I found the balls in a box behind the bar, grabbed a cue and spent the next hour and some knocking balls around. I was pretty rusty -- it had been too many months since I'd held a cue in my hand, and my eye was way off at first. After a while, though, my instincts started coming back. I was getting seriously into it when I heard a voice right behind me.

"Brad?" It was Allison, still in the white bikini but with an oversized button-down shirt on top. "We're grilling steaks for dinner. Lori wants to know whether you'd like to do the honors or leave it to her."

That was a no-brainer. As good as Lori is in the kitchen, she is dangerous with a grill. She has a terrible habit of using too much heat, leaving the food charred on the outside and barely done on the inside. I set my cue down and followed Allison upstairs.

The grill was out back on the deck under a vinyl shroud. I hesitated a step before going out there, but the girls had persuaded Brandy to put on her bikini. It was a pretty tiny bikini, though, and I often found myself getting an eyeful as Brandy deliberately hovered around me on the pretext of helping with the cooking. My body responded the way any healthy heterosexual male's would. Fortunately, the "Kiss the Cook" apron Diane had loaned me provided some much-needed cover.

We ate well. Lori took care of the salad and sides, and Diane opened a delicious red wine to go with it all. The dinner conversation stayed light and casual, getting a bit looser toward the end as the wine kept flowing. The five of us made quick work of clearing up, but somehow our wine glasses never made it into the dishwasher. Instead they got topped off and we gravitated toward the living room.

The sun was setting on the west side, which left the east-facing living room in dim natural light. Diane flipped on a couple of floor lamps and we settled in. I dropped into a recliner by myself, which forced Brandy to share the couch with Allison. Lori and Diane pulled chairs in from the dining room to form a loose circle.

"Everybody feeling nice and mellow?" Diane asked as she set the wine bottle on the coffee table. It was a good three quarters full -- was that our second bottle, I wondered idly, or our third?

There was a general murmur of consent. Diane started things by raising her glass. "Now for our traditional round of toasts. To my brother, for letting us use his cottage."

"To Diane's brother," we repeated, and drank some wine.

"To friends and family," Lori proposed. That was also good for a drink.

Allison came next. "To SPF 50!" she offered, pulling back her cover-up to reveal a burn-free shoulder. We applauded and drank.

Brandy winked at me as she raised her glass. "To sun, sand ... and sex!" I needed a drink for that one.

Everyone looked at me expectantly. Thinking quickly, I raised my own glass. "To bizarre traditions!" What the hell, it made them laugh.

"If you think the toasts are strange," Brandy said, "wait'll you hear what comes next."

Lori groaned while the other women chortled. "You are under no obligation whatsoever, Brad," she assured me.

"Obligation to what?"

"Another of our little traditions when we get together like this," Diane explained, "is a few rounds of Truth or Dare."

"Like I said," Lori interjected. "You absolutely don't have to play. Nobody here will mind if you sit out."

Brandy looked as if she wanted to disagree, but it never came to that. "What the heck?" I replied. "I'm up for it. Besides, there's a question or two I wouldn't mind asking you."

"Me?" Lori said with exaggerated innocence. "I can't possibly imagine what you mean, my dear boy."

"Then we'll have to let him start, won't we?" Allison suggested. "I can't stand the suspense."

Everyone turned toward me. I had clearly been elected. "Okay," I said, sipping some more wine. "Lori, truth or dare?"

Her eyes narrowed as she looked back at me, weighing her options. "All right ... truth it is."

"Who else in this room have you told about my personal life?"

The unmistakable flush of guilt rose in Lori's cheeks. "Everyone," she confessed over the barely-contained howls of her friends. "I just wanted them to understand," she added sheepishly.

Brandy let her off the hook. "My turn," she asserted, and then to nobody's surprise challenged me.

I was still way too sober to consider taking a dare from Brandy. "Truth."

"Boxers or briefs?"

I let out a relieved sigh -- Brandy was being gentle with me. "Depends on the outfit," I answered truthfully. "Boxers whenever I can, otherwise briefs."

Brandy was shaking her head. "I meant right now," she said. "What are you wearing under those jeans, boxers or briefs?"

"Boxers."

Allison started to speak, but Brandy cut her off. "Wait a minute," she said. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

I chuckled and shook my head. "I should've known you had a plan," I retorted. "And I suppose there's no way you'll just take my word for it, is there?"

"Nope," she grinned back.

Grumbling good-naturedly, I stood up and undid my jeans, pulling them down just enough to show her my boxers. "Satisfied?"

"For now," she said with a wink.

Allison picked on Lori, who again opted for Truth. "Do you find Brad attractive?"

Lori swallowed some more wine to buy time. "We grew up together," she said, "so I don't tend to think of him in that way, but sure. He's got that boyish charm thing going for him."

"Gee, thanks ... I think," I kidded.

Lori turned things right back on Allison and, when she opted for Truth, asked her the same question.

"Yes I do," she answered immediately, looking me over with a smile. "Very attractive."

This was getting uncomfortable. It got even more so when Diane offered me the choice of Truth or Dare.

"What is this, Pick On The Guy Night?" I complained. "Truth."

"If Wendy were to call you right now saying she wants to get back together, would you do it?"

"Is that a professional question or a personal one?" I asked, stalling for time.

"Probably a little of both. If you'd rather not answer out loud, you don't have to."

I thought about it. "That's okay, I'll answer. If she were to call right now, I'd have to say no. She has to get her own life straight before I can let her back into mine." I knew the truth of it even as I spoke; I also knew that if Wendy really was on the phone, I might not have the strength to give her that answer.

My turn again, an opportunity to put someone else on the hot seat. "Brandy," I said, smiling fiendishly. "Truth or Dare?"

I was half expecting to hear Dare, but she surprised me by choosing Truth.

No problem. "You've been flirting with me all night, making suggestive comments left and right. You talk a good game, Brandy, but how many guys have you actually slept with?"

The other girls broke out into a chorus of guffaws. Allison elbowed Brandy in the ribs and cried, "Busted!" Brandy waited for things to quiet down, then answered the question. "Three.

There was a sincerity in her voice that short-circuited any thought of a smart-ass response. Thank you.

Brandy grinned and delivered the punch line: The rest of 'em didn't sleep a wink! That prompted a new round of rude laughter from the group. Brandy turned to Allison and said, My turn, Allie ... Truth or Dare?

The blonde's eye narrowed for a second as she considered. Her face took on a devil-may-care expression and she answered, Dare.

Lori and Diane applauded her bravado. All right, Brandy said. I dare you to let Diane hypnotize you.

Allison met her friend's gaze coolly. Sure, why not?

This was just too weird for me. I looked over at Allison, puzzled. She can do that?

Oh, yes, she replied. Diane's quite the Svengali. Licensed and bonded and all that stuff.

Not quite yet, Diane corrected. I'm still learning the finer points of hypnotherapy and accumulating supervised hours. A couple more months and I'll be certified.

There's nothing to worry about, Allison added. She's practiced on all of us before plenty of times. It's no big deal.

All of you? I asked, looking specifically at Lori. She nodded in agreement. Wow. I had some hypnotherapy experience of my own as a patient, so I could appreciate the trust they had to have in Diane in order to let her practice on them.

While I digested this new and fascinating piece of information, Diane prepared her subject. She dimmed the room lights a little and had Allison

rearrange herself for maximum comfort. Then she circled around behind her subject and started speaking softly and slowly.

Without tilting your head back, she began, Pick a spot as high on the ceiling as you can find and fix your eyes on it. Keep them focused on that spot, Allison -- don't let them wander, keep the image nice and sharp. ... Take a deep breath now, nice and deep and slow ... and let it out, nice and slow. That's fine. Now I want you to start counting backwards to yourself, starting at 500. Count at your own pace, silently, picturing each number in your mind as you think it. If you lose track of the numbers, just start over from any number you want. While you're busy counting I'll be talking to you, but you don't need to pay any particular attention to what I'm saying. You will hear me and understand me easily, even when I tell you that it's okay to stop counting. Begin counting now, please.

As Diane spoke her voice grew softer and smoother, taking on a melodic cadence that I had come to associate with my own therapist. Allison sat still, some strain already showing in her upturned eyes, as Diane wove her spell. She told Allison that her body was relaxing, becoming soft and smooth, sinking into the couch little by little; that her eyes were becoming tired, heavy and tired, needing to blink; that each blink would be longer than the one before, and with each blink Allison would find it harder and harder to open her eyes again.

I could tell it was getting to Allison: her eyes were tearing, the muscles around them quivering with the effort of keeping them open. She did start to blink, heavily and slowly, looking as though it was taking a lot of effort to open her eyes at the end of each blink. Her face took on that slack, dazed look that people get when they are asleep or on heavy narcotics. Her shoulders slumped, hands resting heavily in her lap, and she seemed to settle further and further into the couch with each slow, easy breath.

In the middle of it all, I was surprised to realize that this was really getting me turned on. I'd been in her position a number of times myself but in an office setting, with a guy doing the hypnotizing, there was nothing even remotely sexual about it. This was very different, more like watching a stage show -- they always seem to pick the hot women whenever they can.

Looking around, I saw that I wasn't the only one paying rapt attention to the goings on. Brandy was staring openmouthed at Allison, and from the stillness of her body it seemed as though she might be going under too.

Lori sat quietly in her dining room chair, legs crossed, watching with interest.

"Eyes growing sleepier and sleepier," Diane continued. "Heavier and heavier ... so tired ... time to rest ... You can stop counting now, Allison. In a moment, I'm going to touch you on the forehead. When I do, your eyes will close down. Your whole body will simply rest, let go, and sink a hundred times deeper into relaxation." She timed it beautifully, waiting for a heavy blink at the top of a breath. When she touched Allison's forehead, the girl just collapsed like a deflating balloon. Her whole body slumped down and started to fall sideways. Diane skillfully caught her and eased her into position against the side of the couch, her head supported by a pillow.

Brandy hadn't moved a muscle. Noticing her glassy gaze, Diane reached over and touched Brandy on the forehead. The result was equally dramatic as Brandy's eyes slammed shut and her head dropped. Unlike Allison, though, Brandy's body wasn't well supported; her weight shifted as she relaxed and she slid off the edge of the couch. One knee struck the coffee table with a loud bump and jarred her awake.

"Jesus, Diane!" she protested, shaking her head to clear it.

"Serves you right," the hypnotist retorted. Allison slept on, apparently completely unaware of the disturbance. Nodding toward her subject, Diane asked, "Did you have any particular suggestions in mind?"

Brandy pulled Diane closer and whispered into her ear.

"That's wicked," Diane said. "But I like it." She resumed her hypnotist's voice and addressed her subject again. "Allison, I'm going to give you some suggestions now to show everyone how good you are at following them. Your conscious mind will remember nothing of these suggestions until the morning, but your subconscious will remember and follow them for the rest of the night. Will you do that?"

"Okay," came the sleepy reply.

"Very good. Allison, please answer this question for me: who is the sexiest, most irresistible-looking man you've ever seen?"

"Martin."

"And who is Martin?"

"One of the trainers at the gym," she replied dreamily. "He's got a delicious-looking body ... but he's married."

"I'm sorry," Diane commiserated. "But tonight, Allison, we have a very special man with us. Someone who is so attractive, you'll find that he is easily ten times as sexy and desirable as Martin. The more you see him, the more you'll realize that he is the sexiest man you have ever seen. Can you guess who that is, Allison?"

"Brad?" she guessed. I started to laugh, but to my shock Diane smiled.

"That's right," she confirmed smoothly, "it is Brad. Brad is ten times sexier than Martin, ten times sexier than any other man you can think of. When you wake up in a few minutes you will realize this, and it will not seem at all abnormal to you. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said. "Brad is the sexiest man alive."

"Very good, Allison. Being in the same room with such an incredibly sexy man, it is natural that you might find yourself having sexual thoughts about him. I'm sure that as you notice how incredibly, irresistibly sexy Brad is a wide variety of wild, sexy, erotic thoughts will go through your mind. When one does, Allison, when you have a sexual thought of any kind about Brad, you will clear your throat. Your conscious mind will not notice that you have cleared your throat, and if anyone remarks on it you will ignore them, but your subconscious will make sure that you do clear your throat every time you have a sexual thought involving Brad. Is that okay?"

"Sure," she agreed.

"I'm glad," Diane said. "This will show everyone what a very good hypnotic subject you are. In a few moments I'm going to count from one to five. When I reach the count of five, you will awaken feeling refreshed and happy, as if you've just had a nice nap. Your conscious mind will not remember any of your suggestions until tomorrow morning, but your subconscious will remember and follow them all. If someone tells you what your suggestions are before you can remember them, you will hear something other than what they are actually saying; your subconscious will provide words that won't give away the secret. Are you ready?"

"Ready."

Diane counted up to five, and Allison's eyes fluttered open. Her gaze fell on me almost immediately and I could almost see her pupils opening up as she looked at me. She stretched lazily, arching her back and letting the open shirt fall away from her bikini-covered breasts in a sensuous way, clearing her throat more than once in the process. I felt a sudden urge to crawl underneath the recliner and hide.

"That was wonderful," Allison said, her voice dropping half an octave from where it had been most of the night. "What did I do?"

"Oh, nothing," Brandy replied quickly. "Nothing at all."

"Yeah, right," Allison came back. "And I'm a supermodel. Truth or Dare, Diane?"

Diane was just settling down in her chair again. "Truth, please."

"What suggestions did you give me while I was hypnotized?"

I watched Allison closely as Diane answered. "I told you that Brad is the sexiest man you've ever seen, and that every time you have a sexual thought about him you will clear your throat without realizing you've done it. I also told you that you won't remember any of this until tomorrow morning."

Allison looked confused. "That's it, no posthypnotic triggers?" Diane just shrugged. "Well," Allison said looking at me, "I hope I made a sexy-sounding chicken." She cleared her throat again, which sent Brandy into spasms of barely-suppressed laughter.

Lori got an evil look on her face. "Truth or Dare, Allie?"

There was no hesitation. "Truth."

"Who do you think is sexier: Tom Cruise, Harrison Ford, or my cousin Brad?"

Allison cleared her throat again at the mention of my name, which sent Brandy into another fit of mirth. "Do you need something to drink, Allie?" she chortled.

"No," Allison answered warily. "Why do you ask?"

Brandy doubled over in hysterics. "Don't mind her," Lori said, "she's been hitting the wine pretty hard. What about my question?"

Brandy had to run to the powder room as Allison cleared her throat several more times. Finally, looking from me to Lori, she answered. "Honestly, I think Brad. With that curly blonde hair of his, and those puppy-dog eyes, I think he could be a movie star, too. No kidding."

I hid my reddening face in my hands. Diane let me recover for a minute, then challenged me to Truth or Dare. "Truth -- definitely truth."

"A while ago you asked Brandy this question, so I'll ask you: how many women have you had sex with, Brad?"

Coming from Diane, knowing what I now did, it didn't seem like a teasing question. I had the feeling I was going to get some therapy this weekend whether I wanted it or not. "Just the one," I confessed. "I dated others before Wendy, and during the couple of months when we were apart the first time, but I didn't sleep with them." Was that why I couldn't seem to get her out of my system? Why I kept remembering her smile, her scent, and her taste?

"Your turn, Brad," Lori prompted me. Half my mind was back in Wendy's arms, and all of a sudden I had no more interest in this game.

"Can I pass?" I asked. Diane nodded sympathetically, as if she could read my thoughts -- more likely she was reading my body language. Whatever; I got up and headed for the powder room myself.

I didn't need to pee all that much, but I took the opportunity anyway. I also splashed some cold water on my face and then sat down on the throne, letting the slight wine buzz die down a little. After a few minutes I heard female chanting from the other room: "Bradley ... Bradley ... Bradley ... Bradley ... " It was cute enough to get me to chuckle and come back to the living room. A chorus of cheers (and throat clearings from Allison) welcomed me back. Brandy offered me the wine bottle, and just for the hell of it I took a long pull straight from the bottle and gave it back to her. She did the same and passed it to Allison, and the chain reaction continued all the way to Diane.

"Truth or Dare, Brad?" It was Lori's turn, apparently.

I'd had enough truth, and figured I was reasonably safe with Lori, so I chose Dare. Lori pounced right away with her challenge. "I dare you to let Diane hypnotize you."

Allison burst into a fit of throat clearing. Diane came over to me and put a hand on my shoulder. "Is it okay with you, Brad? Or would you rather not?"

She was giving me an out, if I wanted to take it. I shrugged. "I did pick Dare," I said resignedly. "Besides, I have a feeling this is according to someone's plan." I looked pointedly at Lori, but she wouldn't make eye contact.

Diane's voice was reassuring. "Lori tells me that you've been in hypnotherapy before, so you know that nothing can happen here unless you're willing to let it happen."

"I know." Thanks to Allison, I also had a pretty good clue as to the kind of suggestions I'd be getting. I did think seriously about taking the out, but in the end curiosity got me -- I wanted to know what it was like to be put under by a woman. Would it be as seductive as watching Allison, or as boring and clinical as my therapy? I had to find out. "Let's do it."

First we went through the ritual of settling in, getting as comfortable as possible. I put up the footrest on the recliner and tilted it back a bit, kicked off my shoes, and pronounced myself ready.

Diane was behind me already. "Okay, Brad," she began. "Let's start with your eyes closed, please. Take a deep breath and relax. ... Now take another long, deep, slow breath ... and let it out, relaxing as you feel the air escaping. ... Now I want you to concentrate all of your attention on your right hand. Feel the temperature of the air around your right hand, the texture of the fabric beneath it, the weight of it as it rests on the arm of the chair. ... Be very aware of every sensation you can about your right hand."

I fixed my attention firmly on the sensations in and around my hand, as instructed. I felt warmth of the still air on my skin, the coolness of the leather armrest under my palm, the slight bump of the watch band around my wrist. As I noted all these things to myself, I realized Diane's voice had gone on to another instruction.

"Good, Brad. Now, while you continue to be aware of everything about your right hand, I wonder if you can expand your awareness to include your right arm and shoulder. Notice everything you can about your arm and shoulder, while still remaining aware of all the sensations in your right hand."

It took some work, but I did it. I felt my shoulder muscles loosening, noted the texture of my shirt against the shoulder and arm, and the spot where my elbow rested on the arm rest.

"And now, as you continue to be aware of your hand, arm, and shoulder, notice how your breathing becomes slower and easier, how each breath relaxes you more and more. More and more relaxed with each slow, easy breath."

It was hard to concentrate on all this with the sound of Allison clearing her throat almost continuously in the background, but I noticed that my breathing was indeed slowing down. Then Diane had me expand my awareness again to the feelings in my legs, then my back, then my stomach. Each step took me further and further into myself, and soon I felt the heaviness, the weird sense of detachment that I recognized as a pretty deep trance coming on. Diane's voice grew faint and distant, hovering just outside my awareness, but I knew it wasn't important to try to make out the words. After a while another voice joined her, one with a very familiar tone. My voice? It wasn't important, and anyway I felt too good to worry about it. I was in a beautiful, peaceful, safe place.

"...three, four, five. Eyes open, and wide awake."

I took a quick inventory of my senses. Everything seemed okay; other than the slightly detached, just-had-a-nice-nap feeling that I usually have after a hypnosis session I didn't feel any different. Remembering Allison's treatment, I let my eyes pass over the women and checked for any kind of weird reaction. None of them suddenly seemed like a sex goddess to me.

Allison was still thinking about me, apparently, because she cleared her throat again several times. It was a soft, sexy sound and I was starting to like it -- if only all women came with a signal like that.

"Are you okay, Brad?" Lori was looking mildly concerned.

"Fine. Never better. Your turn, Diane."

She considered for a moment, then said, "I'll pass this round." I couldn't think of anything offhand either, so I passed as well.

"That makes it my turn," Brandy said. "I haven't picked on you yet, Diane -- what do you say? Truth or Dare?"

"Truth, please."

Brandy shot me a sideways glance before asking the question. "Did hypnotizing Brad get you hot?"

Diane looked down at her lap for a minute, then she made eye contact with Brandy. "Hypnosis is about trust. In some ways it's the most intimate thing one person can do with another."

"So the answer is?"

"Yes," Diane confirmed. "I got aroused working with Brad." She looked over at me and I just grinned and shrugged at her. That seemed to be the right response, because she smiled back with a wink.

Allison cleared her throat again -- that sound was starting to get me hot -- before turning to face Brandy. "How about it, Brandy? Are you up for a dare?"

"Go ahead," Brandy said, "dare me."

"I dare you to switch seats with Brad for the rest of the game."

Brandy seemed none too pleased. Grumbling, she stood up switched seats with me, brushing herself closely against me as we went by. The red bikini stayed in place somehow. I settled down on what had been Brandy's end of the couch. Allison was on my left and scooted over to close most of the gap, crossing her lovely legs in my direction. That wonderful throat-clearing sound seemed almost like an excited purr at this range.

Lori took her turn, asking Diane a question. I didn't pay attention; my senses were still a little overwhelmed by the closeness of Allison's body and that soft, sensuous sound she kept making.

The next thing I noticed was Allison accepting a dare from Diane. "I dare you to give Brad your best, most passionate kiss."

"You're on!" Before I could open my mouth to comment, Allison had snaked under my left arm and climbed on top of me, settling on my lap in a way that put steady pressure on my crotch. Her arms whipped around my neck and drew my face to hers.

Our lips met. Hers were soft and yielding. I felt her tongue teasing at my closed, tense lips and took the hint, easing up and letting her through. A muffled groan tried to escape from me as I felt her body pressing harder against mine, and things got decidedly crowded in the front of my pants. She sensed the obvious changes down below and moved a little bit, which put my bulging denim right up into the white triangle of her bikini area.

From somewhere behind Allison I heard Brandy's voice. "Let him breathe a little, Allie," she said.

Allison broke off the embrace and backed up, a look of great satisfaction on her face as she resumed her seat. I crossed my legs in a transparent attempt to hide the serious hard-on that had formed during the kiss. I also tried to put my hands in my lap, but for some reason I could only manage it with my right. My left arm seemed to be stuck, pointing straight out and slightly up. I was trying to figure out what to do about it when Brandy asked me to choose Truth or Dare.

"Truth," I answered, my mind still mostly occupied by the mystery of my left arm.

"Is your cock hard right now?"

"Hell, yes!" I told her. "Not only that, but my left arm seems to have a raging hard-on too."

Brandy almost fell out of the recliner from laughing. Diane and Lori were also having a good time, and Allison was snickering in between throat clearings.

"Funny you should say that," Allison said to me. "How does this feel?" With a lecherous gleam in her eye, Allison gently raked her fingernails from wrist to elbow on my frozen arm. For a split second there was just the slight pressure of her nails on my arm, then I felt it -- a pair of fingers running not only down my arm, but down the length of my cock!

I let out an involuntary gasp as I felt the bizarre dual sensation. Allison changed direction, sweeping back up toward my wrist, and the phantom sensation in my cock changed direction with her. "Jesus!" I exclaimed. "This is unbelievable!"

"Oh really?" she teased. "How about this?" She leaned forward and put two of my fingers into her mouth. Instantly I felt a warm pair of lips closing

down on the very tip of my cock. Allison worked the fingers in and out of her mouth and I felt it on the head of my rod. All I could do was sit there and groan while Allison gazed wickedly into my eyes. "It's your turn, you know," she reminded me. "You need to give someone a question or a dare. Can you think of a dare for me, Brad?"

Putting together a sentence was getting difficult, but I managed it. "I dare you to come downstairs with me and finish this in private."

The teasing on my hand stopped. Instead, Allison took a firm grip on my left hand and pulled me off the couch. "I thought you'd never ask." The sensation of being yanked out of my seat by the end of my cock was the strangest thing I've ever felt. A close second was the feeling of being led by the extended cock past Lori, who was laughing and grinning, and down the stairs to my temporary quarters.

My left arm still didn't want to do anything but mimic my cock, which made it difficult to do much about my clothes. In the end Allison did a lot of the work, pulling the shirt off over my head (leading to another strange sensation like a cloth condom being pulled off of me) and the boxers down to my ankles without wasting any time at all. I stood and watched, arm and cock extended, while she slipped out of her cover-up and bikini.

Allison's body may not be built for traditional gymnastics, but I could tell immediately that it was ideal for the kind of sport we were engaged in then. She had perfect natural breasts, a generous handful each with beautiful nipples already standing firm. Her hips and thighs looked strong and sensuous, and a neat arrowhead of corn silk thatch pointed the way to heaven.

We didn't even bother unfolding the sofa bed first; I just plopped onto it on my back, letting my arm and my cock stick straight up. Allison grabbed my left hand, planted it firmly between her breasts and squeezed them around it, causing my jaw to drop as I felt ripe breasts pressing against the end of my rod. "This is going to be over in about ten seconds if you keep that up," I warned her.

"Oh really?" She climbed up on top of me and dropped herself down over my rigid cock. A contented sigh escaped her lips as she wiggled around a little, taking me in all the way. "Very nice," she said, and then took my left hand and started licking it.

The double sensation of being inside Allison and getting head at the same time blew me away. Thinking ten seconds might have been overly

optimistic, I put my working hand to use and found her nub. I fingered that three or four times, which caused Allison to really go nuts. She put three of my fingers in her mouth and sucked hard, and that was it for me. With a loud grunt I felt my body clench and then release the first hot jet into her. Allison kept sucking hard, as if to draw everything out through my fingertips. One more brush against the button did the trick for her; she let my hand go, threw her head back and cried out repeatedly as she squeezed herself around me.

With the waning of my orgasm, I found my left arm responding to my own will again. I put it to good use, giving Allison's breast a nice fondle while she was still in the throes of her own climax. When she was through we decoupled gently and she lay down on top of me to cuddle for a while.

Lying there on the couch with Allison on top of me, luxuriating in the skin to skin contact and listening to the soft creaking of the main stairs as the others made their way to bed, I remembered what post coital bliss was like. Between the coke's effects on Wendy and the discord from our arguing about it, a lot of the fun had already drained out of that relationship long ago. Why hadn't I noticed that before?

After a while Allison stirred. We shared a soft, extended kiss and then she climbed off me. "Bathroom break," she explained as she started toward the stairs. "I'll be right back."

"Do you want a shirt or something?"

She gave me a wink and a shrug. "Why bother?"

"Good point."

While she was upstairs I got up and unfolded the couch into a nice-sized bed. The mattress already had a fitted sheet, so I simply threw on a top sheet and tucked it in quickly at the bottom.

Allison came back down as I was finishing up. "Domestic men are so sexy," she remarked.

"But will you still think so in the morning?" It was meant to be a joke, but then I remembered the terms of Diane's hypnotic suggestions. What *would* Allison think in the morning?

"You're getting that sad look again," she said. "Whatever you're thinking, stop it."

"I was just thinking how nice it would be to go to bed and hold you," I lied.

"Oh -- in that case, quit thinking and just do it."

We got into bed and cuddled like spoons. I put an arm around her and held her, slowly stroking her stomach with my palm. I noticed a new scent -- she had put on some perfume while she was upstairs.

As her body settled into mine and our breathing synchronized and slowed, I found my hand moving in ever widening circles. Without thinking about it, I brushed against the bottoms of her breasts. Allison responded by wiggling her bottom, which started a rebound reaction in my cock. My hand wandered up a little higher and cupped a breast, squeezing gently and toying with the nipple, feeling it stand up and swell.

Allison purred and shifted a little to give me a better angle, which also gave her a chance to slip a hand between us and find my expanding cock. I let that go until I was nice and hard, then shifted down a little myself so I could get her nipple in my mouth. She put a gentle hand on the back of my head and moaned appreciatively as I suckled her. My hand wandered down her body and found the moist, warm spot between her legs. She spread her thighs for me, and I slipped two fingers into her slit. She was already wet. I spread her juices around, feeling along her lips and probing the space in between. Every time she made a noise I made a mental note of the place and movement and practiced it. After a while I had her panting and guiding my hand with her own.

"Get inside me now, please," she breathed. I was happy to oblige, thought not in the way she probably meant -- I reached in and slipped my middle finger into her canal as far as it would go, hooking it to press on the upper side. Wendy had a spot there that would drive her nuts if I touched it just right ... did Allison have the same thing?

Yep. At the very end of my reach I felt a warm, smooth bump in the top wall of her tunnel. As soon as my finger touched it Allison gasped and cried out in pleasure. I pressed my advantage, brushing that spot again and again until Allison came hard. While she was riding the top of the wave, I got up on top of her and slid my cock inside. She reacted by hooking her legs around my hips and pulling me in closer. We rocked together, establishing a rhythm, finding exactly the right position to get me locked and loaded inside her, and triggered another climax for her. The feeling of her walls tightening around my shaft was enough to finish me off

as well. We moaned through the end of our orgasms together, slowing down as one and finally drifting off to sleep.

I've always heard that morning-afters are awkward. Imagine waking up in the morning in a strange bed, with a good friend of your closest relative, and then in a rush remembering that she'd been hypnotized into thinking you were the sexiest guy in the world.

The pleasant afterglow from our night faded quickly and a sickening, cold dread took its place. When Allison woke up her mind would be clear, I realized. Would she consider our night together as consensual adult sex, or as date rape?

I stared up at the ceiling as the questions circled around my mind. Would Allison have slept with me if Diane hadn't made her think I was such a stud? Would I have slept with Allison if I hadn't gotten so aroused by the circumstances?

The circumstances ... what exactly were the circumstances? I still had no memory of the suggestions Diane had used on me, although the results were pretty obvious. I needed to know, though. I started to get up, to go find Diane and ask her.

A sleepy voice stopped me halfway out of the bed. "Brad? Where do you think you're going?"

"Morning," I said, still afraid to turn around and look at her. "I was going to go ... uh ... grab a shower or something."

"What's your hurry?" she asked. "It's still early, everybody else is probably still asleep."

"No hurry."

"Then come back here and talk to me," she said. "I need to know if you're okay with this."

"Huh?" Confusion overcame shame and I turned to look at her. "What about you? I feel like I took advantage of you ... aren't you upset?"

"Do I look upset?"

Allison was propped lazily up on one elbow looking at me. The bed sheet had slid down to her hips, revealing those tantalizing breasts to me. She toyed with one with her spare hand and looked straight at my face. "No," I answered, "you don't."

"That's because I'm not. I knew going into the game last night that something like this might happen, and I'm not sorry it did. Are you?"

"No," I said quickly. "Well ... I don't think ... I mean ... I've got so many questions still." I was getting flustered.

"Would it help if you could remember your hypnosis session last night?"

"I think so. That's really why I was getting up ... to find Diane and ask her about it."

"I've got a better idea. Come here."

I scooted back into bed next to her and she drew me in for a long, tender kiss. Our lips met and our tongues met, and then I heard Diane's voice in the back of my mind: *"The sound of Allison clearing her throat is a very sexy, sensuous sound. The more you hear that sound, the more you will find yourself becoming aroused by it because you know it means that Allison is thinking about you sexually. As you become more and more aroused, you will inevitably develop an erection. When you do, Brad, your left arm will also have an erection. As long as your penis is hard, your left arm will extend straight out too, and any time Allison touches your left arm or hand, you will feel the exact same touch on your penis at the same time. You will find this extremely arousing, Brad. Your left arm will continue to act this way until you have had an orgasm, then it will return to normal. ... Your conscious mind will not remember any of these suggestions until Allison kisses you in the morning, but your subconscious will ensure that your body obeys them."*

I drew back quickly, my mind overloaded with the memory. "Whoa," I murmured. "I don't know what to think."

"Then don't think," she said. "Don't worry about last night. Just be in the moment. What is your body telling you right now?"

That was an easy one. My nipples were getting tight as they responded to the sensation of her fingers playing with the short hairs on my chest, and I had a hard-on. "Right now," I replied, "my body is telling me that you're very close, and very naked, and nobody else is awake yet."

"Then let's go with that." She enveloped me and kissed me again, and I let my body run on autopilot while I lost myself in her. She offered me a breast and I took it, suckling with increasing hunger as my hand found its favorite resting place between her thighs. I stroked and teased her until we were both ready, then she rolled me over and mounted me easily, riding me slowly until we both came. Then it was time for some more sleep.

When I woke again I was feeling much better about things. Diane's suggestions had increased our awareness of each other, certainly, but acting on it had been our own free choice. In fact, the whole situation had Lori's signature all over it: she and Diane had prepared the meal, so to speak, and left it to me to realize I was hungry. *Right again, Cuz, I thought to myself.*

Footsteps sounded on the stairs coming down. I pulled the sheet over us just in time as Brandy appeared. She was wrapped in a bath towel -- my intuition told me there was nothing else underneath it -- and was carrying two more. "Wake up, sleepyheads!," she sang, plopping the heavy towels onto the bed with us. "Breakfast in twenty minutes."

"I take it the shower is free?" Allison said, blinking the sleep from her eyes.

"Diane's in the upstairs one now," Brandy explained, "and Lori has dibs next. We thought you two might want to try the one outside." She winked broadly at us and added, "It's big enough to share."

The outdoor shower turned out to be a booth built into the near end of the deck behind the kitchen. The back wall of the house formed part of the stall and was the source of the plumbing; there was also a short partition on the right side and back that came up to my chest. It had clearly been meant for rinsing off after a swim, but it was enclosed enough to offer reasonable privacy as long as nobody else was on the deck. And, as Brandy had promised, it was just about wide enough for two. After a good look around for potential witnesses, we shucked off our clothes and got in.

It didn't take long for us to get used to the openness of the outdoor shower. We took turns soaping each other up and rinsing off, getting a bit frisky in the process. At one point I looked over and saw Brandy through

the kitchen window. Our eyes met and she winked at me, then pulled down the window shade with a guilty grin.

Something about an outdoor shower brings out the closet exhibitionist in people. Allison and I felt no burning need to go dress; instead we just strolled into the kitchen wrapped in our bath towels and started setting the table for breakfast. We weren't the only ones taking their time about getting dressed -- Diane and Lori came down in bathrobes. Ironically Brandy, who had slipped on an oversized nightshirt, was the most dressed of the group.

We had a nice breakfast of bacon and eggs, home fries, and plenty of fresh juice. Brandy did most of the cooking and everyone helped clean up afterwards. The talk turned to making plans for the day.

"I'm in the mood for a road trip," Diane announced. "Anyone up for the outlet mall?"

Allison perked up instantly. "Oooh, me!"

"Sounds like fun," Lori seconded. "Brad?"

"What do you think?" I asked sarcastically. With Lori, shopping is more of a social activity than anything else. I'm the stereotypical guy: I don't go near a store unless I know exactly what I want to buy and where to find it. She knows that, but she was busting my chops by asking.

"That would be a no," she translated, grinning. "Brandy?"

She thought it about it for a minute, then declined. "I think I'll stay here and work on my tan," she said. "Besides, somebody needs to keep an eye on Brad."

Now it was Allison's turn to grin. "Nice of you to make the sacrifice, Brandy." They winked broadly at each other, as if sharing an inside joke.

With the agenda set, the group disbursed to finally get dressed. I pulled on a pair of running shorts and an athletic shirt, figuring I'd take a walk along the beach for a while. Brandy changed into a rainbow striped bikini that was even tinier than the red one from the day before. The others dressed casually for a day at the mall. They were starting out the door to get into Diane's Camry when Allison pulled me aside.

"You realize, of course, that Brandy wants your body," she warned.

"Maybe," I said. "I think it's more likely she's just playing with me."

Allison disagreed. "No, she's serious. Give her half a chance and she'll jump your bones before lunch."

That didn't sound good. "What do you want me to do?"

Allison laughed softly and shook her head. "Lori warned me you might think that way," she said cryptically. "Look Brad -- you're a sweet guy, and I really like you. Last night, and this morning, were really great and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested in seeing you more."

"But ..." I prompted, knowing there had to be one coming, a part of me dreading it all the same.

"But," she continued, a gentle smile on her face, "we're not a couple. Not yet, anyway. You're still working through a pretty serious breakup; it's too soon for you to be hooking up exclusively with anyone. You need to get out of yourself a little." She took my face in her hands and kissed me softly. "When you're alone with Brandy, I want you to do what you did with me this morning -- turn off your mind and just stay in the moment. Do what your body wants to do, and don't think about it too much. Can you do that for yourself?"

"I can do that." My mind was awirl; what else could I say?

"Good," she said. "Have fun, and we can talk later if you want to." With that, she ran to the car and took off with Lori and Diane.

I made a long, solitary morning of it on the beach. Walking along the shore, nodding and smiling to the very few others I encountered on the way, gazing out at the waters of the Roanoke Sound, I spent most of the time lost in thought.

Wendy and I were over, that was a certainty. I found it surprisingly easy to say that and believe it -- much more so than a day or two before, when the thought of her was enough to send me scurrying for the Pringles and the remote control. A large part of the pain, I realized, was really the loss of intimacy. After the night with Allison, and with Brandy no doubt plotting my seduction at that very moment, things were looking pretty good in that area.

And what about Allison? It felt like there was something there, at least a possibility of something deep and lasting. Or was that just me looking to replace Wendy by latching onto the first available female? Allison was right -- the only way to know for sure was to date around for a while, see what feels right.

The sun was leaning toward the west when I sighted the beach house again. I'd been gone several hours; it was hard to be sure how long because I'd left my watch in the house. Brandy was out back on the deck. Just for fun I walked with my head down, looking up only with my eyes so she wouldn't think I'd seen her yet. As soon as she spotted me she jumped up, rearranged the lounge chair, and slipped off the striped bikini.

When I got back to the house, she was sitting on the deck rubbing sunscreen lotion on her naked chest. She pretended surprise at the sound of my first footfall on the wooden steps and quickly placed an arm across her breasts. "You're back," she observed in a flustered voice that sounded almost genuine.

"Sorry if I startled you," I said, looking away from her, playing the game.

"It's okay. Actually, you're just in time. I need someone to put sun block on my back. Would you mind?"

"Sure," I agreed. Brandy set the lounge chair to full recline and rolled over. "Where would you like me to put it?"

"Anywhere that looks dry," she said. Her entire back, shoulders, and bottom looked dry to me, so I decided to start at the top. I squeezed out a good amount of the lotion between her shoulder blades and spread it around with my fingertips. "You can use more pressure," she said. "It works better if it's rubbed in well." So I used a little more pressure, letting my palms get in on the action, working the lotion into her skin with circular motions. I felt the muscles in her shoulders relax under my touch. "You have a great touch," she purred contentedly.

I worked my way further down to the middle of her back, spreading the lotion out evenly and working it in, smoothing the skin over her muscles as I went. "You can spread out more," she advised. "Up and down the sides too." So I ran my oily hands up the sides of her body a few times, just letting my fingertips brush against the sides of her breasts. Then I moved to the small of her back, using thumbs along either side of her spine. "That's nice," she coached. "Lower, please."

Grinning with the knowledge of where this was leading, I teased her by lowering my hands about an inch and continuing to work upward. "Lower, please," she repeated. "It's okay, I won't hurt you."

I teased her a little more, then gave her what she wanted -- a full hand, thorough massaging of her bottom. "That's it," she said dreamily. "You're doing wonderful things for me, Brad."

It was doing things for me, too. Feeling her smooth skin in my hands, listening to her purr softly with contentment, smelling the growing scent of her arousal, was putting my own hormones on red alert. If Brandy were looking my way she couldn't fail to notice the serious lump in the front of my shorts, just as from my vantage point I couldn't fail to notice the non-sunscreen moisture collecting between the tops of her thighs.

Brandy's legs were pretty well covered already, but I was listening to my body and my body wanted to rub some lotion onto her thighs. I started low and worked upward, letting my thumbs slide up on the insides and just catch the end of her outer lips as they slid up and over her butt. "Oooh," she sighed appreciatively. "You can just do that for a while if you want." She parted her legs slightly, and I took full advantage on the next several passes, letting my thumbs play up and down along her slit several times while I cupped her buttocks in my hands. I was rewarded with several loud moans.

At this point Brandy was definitely ready and I was starting to get urgent messages from my swollen cock so I was ready to drop the pretense. I stepped back and quickly slipped off my shorts and shirt. "You stopped," she complained, trying to look back at me but I was too far behind her.

"You're getting a little pink," I ad-libbed. "Flip over and I'll do your front some."

Brandy turned over and saw me at her feet, naked and fully erect. A feline smile came over her face. "You're going to get a nasty sunburn like that," she remarked. "You'd better let me put something on it." She scooted down on the lounge and sat up. Reaching into her slit, she swabbed up some of the juices with her fingers and lathered it on my cock, working it in like the sunscreen.

Now it was my turn to start moaning. "Oh, he likes that," she remarked. "Would you like me to go lower?" She tickled my balls with her fingertips, and my head bobbed up and down on its own. Taking that for assent, Brandy moved one hand down to fondle my balls while the other

continued to massage my cock. Soon Brandy's fingers worked their way back along the sensitive skin behind my balls. My knees buckled and I went down slowly.

Brandy crawled back on the lounge and hooked one finger at me, giving me a classic "come hither" stare. There were no questions, no thoughts in my mind at all -- acting on pure animal lust, I crawled up onto the lounge and on top of Brandy and plunged myself into her. She curled an arm around my neck and brought me down to a breast while hooking me with her legs. Slowly at first, but with quickly increasing urgency we established a rhythm.

Brandy came first, her full-throated shouts of "oh, YES!" filling the air and probably carrying twenty miles out to sea. I held on as long as I could, giving her the best ride I could, until the pressure was too much and I burst. She held me in a powerful grip while my body turned to jelly, all its energy being focused on the act of ejaculation. Then we grew still.

She pulled a beach towel over us for sun cover and we held each other on the deck for a while, enjoying the glow in silence. Then we showered together in the outdoor stall, pulled on our clothes, and started working on dinner.

Dinner was simple but good: grilled chicken breasts with barbecue sauce, cole slaw, biscuits, mixed veggies, and plenty of cold Sam Adams to wash it all down. The shoppers entertained us with tales of the deals they got at the outlet mall and the characters they ran into.

Brandy was surprisingly discreet about how we passed the day. "Brad spent most of it on walkabout," she said when asked, "and I worked on getting rid of my tan lines." Allison looked a question at me when she heard that and I winked back at her in response.

We lingered over our meal longer than the night before; it was well past dusk when we finished the cleanup and adjourned to the living room.

"Any more interesting traditions I should know about?" I asked Diane.

Our hostess shook her head. "No, we got those out of the way last night. For tonight, Allison suggested a friendly pool tournament. I understand you play."

"I used to play a lot. I'm pretty rusty now, though."

"Spoken like a true shark," she said with a smile, and led the way downstairs to the rec room, which was also my bedroom for one more night.

Figuring out a reasonable playoff rotation for five people was a bit of a challenge, but we came up with a plan everybody seemed to like. We settled on nine-ball because it's simple and everyone knew the rules. To keep everyone involved, we decided on a "three and by" scheme: everyone plays each round until they win three games, then they sit by while the others continue; when all but one player has 3 wins, the remaining player is out and the rest start a new round. It's not an official tournament scheme, but it works well for friendly games.

It didn't take long to see who the real contenders were. Diane won her three very quickly, with me close behind. Lori took a little longer but was clearly a notch or two above Brandy and Allison on the skill ladder. When Allison pocketed the nine ball for the third time, Brandy conceded gracefully and appointed herself barmaid for the rest of the night.

The next round was more interesting. I won my three first. Diane came next without too much trouble, but Allison came on strong and gave Lori a battle for the last slot. They each had two wins, with only three balls left on the table, when Lori made a fatal mistake. She lined up a routine bank shot to pocket the seven ball but misjudged it, and ended up pocketing the seven and the cue ball. Lori's scratch gave Allison the cue ball in hand: she easily pocketed the eight, and followed it up with a tricky angled shot on the nine to win.

Brandy was the first to congratulate her on the upset. "Way to go, girl!"

Allison grinned back. "It's amazing what a little motivation can do."

My curiosity was aroused. "Motivation? What motivation?"

Allison and Brandy giggled softly and looked to Lori. "Nothing," Lori told me. "Just a little side bet."

Interesting... "Can I get in on it too?"

"You are, Bradley. Trust me." Lori gave me a sisterly kiss and excused herself for the night.

I almost didn't survive the next round. With pool it's important to keep cool, line things up carefully, and stay focused on the game. Once Lori was out of the picture, though, that last part started getting difficult. I'd start to line up a shot and one of the girls would cross my field of view with her skirt hiked up or her blouse coming open, or a soft feminine figure would brush against me. It was all in fun, of course, but it did play hell with my concentration. My timing was off, I started making mistakes, and I just barely beat Allison to advance to the last round.

While Diane racked up the balls, I cornered Allison at the bar. With my hands squarely on her rear cheeks I pulled her nice and close so she could feel the hard-on she and Brandy had conspired to induce. "That was highly unsporting of you two," I chided quietly.

She grinned wickedly back at me. "Feels like you enjoyed it, though."

"Would I have enjoyed it as much if I'd lost that last game?"

"You'll never know."

Diane cleared her throat discreetly. "Since there's only two of us left, shall we lag for break?"

"Sure, why not?"

As I approached the table, Brandy let out a snicker. "Watch it, Diane -- it looks like he's smuggling an extra cue in his pants."

"As long as it stays there, I don't mind," she replied.

I grabbed a spare cue ball from the box under the bar and spotted it behind the head string. Diane had hers in position already. We had Allison count three, then we each hit our cue ball straight forward, letting it bounce off the foot bumper and come back. Mine returned smoothly and came to rest about two inches from the head bumper; Diane's veered off course a little, hit the side, and barely limped across the head string. "You win," she observed. "Do you want the break?"

I picked up my extra cue ball and stepped back. "You can go ahead."

Diane spotted the cue ball in her favorite breaking place, about six inches left of center and just behind the head string. She executed a good, clean break; for a moment it looked as though she would pocket two

balls, but they spun in place near the pockets without dropping in. I let out a sympathetic "Ooch!" and started looking at my options.

It was a good break for me. I had an easy time with the one ball, and was able to sink the two and the five with my second shot. The three ball was in a bad place, but with a careful oblique shot I was able to get it to scoot sideways and push the six into a corner pocket. The three followed easily, giving me a clean path to put the four in a side pocket. When the cue ball came to rest after that shot, I had a choice: take an easy shot to pocket the seven ball by itself, or a harder carom shot to make the seven sink the nine, which would win the game. The girls were behaving, so I went for the quick win.

Almost got it, too. The cue ball struck the seven just right, and the seven obliged by bumping the nine, but the angle was a little off -- the nine ball hit the bumper just shy of the pocket and bounced clear.

"Nice try," Diane said. I'd left her in good position; she had no problem sinking the seven, eight, and nine on three shots.

I broke for the next game and got lucky, sinking three balls on the break. After two more simple shots, I had another outside chance for a quick win. I took a straight-on shot at the four ball and knocked it into the six; the six made a bee line for the right corner pocket while the four careened off into the left corner and sank the nine for me.

Diane was impressed. "Very tricky, Brad."

I shrugged modestly. "The six was the plan, the nine was luck."

While Diane racked up, Allison came over and whispered in my ear. "This is one game where a little less luck will yield you a lot more fun. Trust me."

She retreated behind the bar before I could ask her anything, and Diane was ready to break for the third game. My head was full of ideas, among them what the mysterious side bet might involve. I yawned and stretched, and made Diane a proposition. "It's getting late. Why don't we make this the deciding game?"

Diane seemed a little suspicious, but agreed. "In that case, should we lag for break again?"

"Sure."

I had no intention of throwing the game, but it did occur to me that it might be fun to take a more aggressive approach. With that in mind, when I won the lag I decided to break myself. I gave it a good stroke and pocketed the eight ball. The one ball was in an awkward spot, so I used it to knock in the five ball instead. That gave me a good position to sink the one so I did. The two followed, which set up another indirect shot with the three and seven. That worked, and left the three positioned for an easy tap into the side pocket.

Now I had an interesting position. The four, six, and nine balls were the only ones left on the table. I had a more or less straight shot at the four into the side pocket, but I could also do a bank shot on the four that could knock it into the nine and maybe win the game. My luck on those shots was running about even, so I went for the win.

Once again I came close but didn't quite get the bounce I needed. The four ball did its thing, but the nine stopped rolling about three inches short of the pocket. Diane took over and sank the remaining balls for the win.

Brandy and Allison stayed long enough to congratulate Diane, then suddenly seemed very sleepy. Brandy gave me a broad wink on her way up the stairs. Allison favored me with a hug and one more whisper -- "Remember, stay in the moment!" -- before following Brandy.

"Looks like it's just you and me," I said to Diane as I put the balls back in their box. "Do you want to tell me what you've won, or do I get to guess?"

"You can guess if you like," she said noncommittally.

"My guess is, the winner gets dibs on my body for the night."

Diane laughed softly. "Good guess. Are you okay with that?"

Her eyes sparkled at me, and in the back of my head I heard Allison's voice telling me to stay in the moment. "Sure," I said.

"Suppose I said I was more interested in your mind?"

"As in, you'd like to hypnotize me again?" She nodded, and I gave it a second's thought. "Okay." I felt completely safe with Diane, so why not?

She had me lie down on the futon with my head on a small pillow in her lap. As she spoke to me, telling me to relax and breathe deeply, let go, let it happen, she gently rubbed my temples with her fingertips. In just a

few moments that subtle, swimming sensation started to flow through me and I was out.

I have a hazy sort of memory of what happened while I was under her spell. We did a lot of talking: about me, about Wendy, about Allison and Brandy and Lori, about my feelings and fears. I think I cried a lot, and I remember her holding my head to her chest and rocking me gently when it got too hard, telling me to let it out, take care of the feeling, stay in the moment. At some point we got off the futon and moved to the bed. Diane unbuttoned the top of her dress, pulled my face to a breast, and told me to relax and sleep...

I woke up some time later, slightly spaced out, with my face resting comfortably between a pair of dark satin breasts. The fluorescent lights were off, but a halogen floor lamp still burned in a corner, and in the reflected light from that I could see that Diane was asleep. Her breathing was steady and slow, and she was snoring softly.

I didn't remember a lot about our talk, just hazy flashes here and there. I felt tired, turned inside out, but at the bottom I also felt relieved, as if a heavy load had been taken off my back. The talking, and being held and rocked and soothed by her, had helped. I wanted to thank Diane somehow. There in the semi-dark, with her body so close and warm, I could think of one excellent way to do it.

Diane was wearing a cream-colored sun dress with buttons down the entire front. She had undone the top several buttons herself earlier to give me access to her breasts; gently, slowly, so as not to wake her too soon, I opened the rest and pushed the cotton fabric aside. She wore only a pair of silky black string bikini panties underneath.

Moving carefully, I kissed my way down her belly toward the panties. She barely stirred as I pulled them down to her knees. I watched her face as I slowly stroked the insides of her thighs with my hands: her mouth moved a little, and her eyes seemed to be twitching madly behind closed lids -- Diane was dreaming. Still caressing the insides of her thighs, I also bent down and kissed her mound, then the areas around her mound, circling the area. Very soon the sweet, unmistakable aroma of feminine arousal began to rise from her. I buried my nose at its source and inhaled deeply, letting the scent fill my senses and put iron in my cock. Diane moaned in her sleep as I parted her thighs and filled the space in between with my face.

Moisture flowed all around me and I licked it up eagerly, spreading it around with the broad side of my tongue as I searched out her sensitive places. I found the magic button just above the tunnel entrance, and when I did I felt her whole body shudder. Muscle tone returned to Diane's legs and they parted a little further, giving me a better angle of attack. I took advantage quickly, teasing the canoe boat driver to attention and brushing him down. In the space of a few minutes Diane went from peacefully sleeping to shuddering and moaning, alternately squeezing my head between her legs and relaxing them. Whether it was one long orgasm or several short ones in series I couldn't tell, but she was definitely wide awake and going off the deep end.

After a while the fingers that had been running through my hair grabbed me and pulled me upwards in a fast, powerful yank. I tried to pause for a taste of breast but she kept pulling until we were nose to nose. Her eyes burned into mine and our lips met in a frenzied, passionate kiss. She was gasping for breath too much for a long kiss, so we did dozens of short, strong ones until her juices were all over both of our faces. When she recovered some breath, her hands softened their grip on my head and she started massaging my temples with her thumbs, making little circles the way she had before. "Relax, Brad," she whispered, "relax and focus on the moment. Be in the moment."

At the contact and the words my head started spinning, and my body suddenly became very heavy and slow. I was dropping into trance.

"That's it, Brad, keep focusing on the moment. Let your body tell you what it needs, what it wants. Feel all of your body's energies concentrating in one place, the place that will give you the most pleasure. Let it build, let it grow, until that part is the only part you feel. Let all of your awareness focus on that one part, getting harder and harder, more and more aware, more and more urgently in need of release."

As she spoke, I found myself becoming more and more aware of the burning energy in my cock. Everything else seemed to dim, to fall back, and all of my vitality became concentrated in that one place.

"Good, Brad," Diane's voice said from a mile away. "You are totally focused now on the energy, the sensations, in your penis. Now stay in the moment as your penis enters me, and let yourself be totally aware of every sensation as you slide in and out, becoming more and more aroused with every movement and every sensation."

I moved forward a little more and managed to guide my raging member home. As I slid in, I felt every bump and fold in her skin parting to receive me, every ridge inside her tunnel rubbing against my hard shaft. Her hips tilted and suddenly everything lined up perfectly -- my cock drove itself in the rest of the way and bottomed out. I would have been happy to stay that way, but at Diane's urging I felt myself flexing, pumping in and out, reveling in every sensation, growing harder and longer with each movement. Diane's smooth voice grew breathless and gasping again, but I was too focused on my own physical sensations to notice much. "Come now, Brad, come with me now," she said, and my cock sprung into action, jerking and firing with what felt like a cannon's force. I felt the energy rush through me and out into a cloud that enveloped us, lifted us, supported us.

Then, in a timeless few moments, it faded away, leaving us breathless and sweating in each other's arms. "Sleep now," Diane said, and I let the warmth and the darkness take me away.

I woke up in the morning to the smell of buttermilk pancakes and sausage. Brandy and Allison were both standing over me, gently shaking my shoulder. "Breakfast in ten minutes," they told me.

I rose groggily and headed for the stairs, forgetting until I was halfway up that I was buck naked. Allison threw me a towel, and I used the outdoor shower again to wake myself up.

Diane was our breakfast chef. The pancakes were heavenly, the sausage done just right, and there was plenty of fruit to round things out. Several of our companions complimented Diane on her radiant looks, but she just smiled and winked knowingly at me.

Once breakfast was cleaned up it was time for Lori and me to go. She had to be at work early Tuesday, and after moping around her place for a week I needed to get back to work too. We packed our things, traded hugs and kisses, and headed north.

At first we rode in silence, listening to the radio and letting the ocean breeze cool us as we made our way up towards the mainland. I felt a profound sense of peace that didn't fade away as the miles rolled by.

It wasn't until we were stopped for lunch in Fredericksburg that Lori asked me the Big Question: "How do you feel?"

"I feel good," I said honestly. "Better than I have in a long time, even before the breakup." I reached across the table and took her hand, adding, "Thank you for that. For everything you did."

"It wasn't all me," she said modestly. "Allie and Brandy and Diane had a lot to do with how things turned out."

"I know," I said, "and I'm grateful to them, too. But I never would have made the trip if it hadn't been for you. "

"I'm just happy to see you being yourself again."

I squeezed her hand again and looked her in the eye. "I hope you're still happy after I tell you this: while you were packing, I had a little talk with Allison. We're going out on a date this Friday that might stretch into Saturday. Nobody's going to rush anything, but I have a feeling we may be seeing each other on a steady basis. Can you deal with that?"

Lori seemed to be fighting back a tear. "Allie has always liked you, Brad. If you two want that, I think it's great for you both. I'll deal."

"Thanks."

The rest of the trip home was quiet and easy. We managed to get back to Alexandria ahead of most of the holiday weekend return traffic. By five o'clock I was unlocking the door to my own apartment, a week's worth of unopened mail under my arm, bracing myself for a flood of sad memories.

I was better prepared than I thought. The place had a melancholy feel to it, but I was at peace with myself and I could accept the memories without dwelling on them. I was learning to live in the moment.

-wg
6/17/00