

# ***Triad***

A hypnoerotic love story

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## **Dedication**

This story is dedicated to my dear friend and confidante, Rainbow Dreamfire. Real life issues have forced her to withdraw from the writing community, but she continues to be a source of warmth and love in an otherwise cold, anonymous world.

Please join me in wishing her the best.

-wg

**NOTICE:** *This story contains explicit descriptions of sexual activity between consenting adults. If you are not of legal age to read such material, or if you find it offensive, then stop reading now.*

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*I welcome all comments from readers ([wiseguy35@hotmail.com](mailto:wiseguy35@hotmail.com)).*

## **i: MP3**

I've always had a weakness for neat gadgets. I bought my first laser pointer when they cost \$100 each and filled your hand. My watch has both analog and digital display modes. My cell phone has video games built in. When I sit at home and relax in front of the TV, I flip through the channels with a universal remote shaped like a hand phaser from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. So naturally when the new generation of portable MP3 players came out, I got myself one.

It's a really cool little toy. Compact, lightweight, easy to clip onto the waistband. Immune to the vibration, bumping and jarring that are holy hell on a Discman, and way lighter than my old Walkman. The only problem, of course, is that you have to download the music into it first.

Almost all of my music collection is on CD's. That's not a major obstacle, there are plenty of programs on the net that can rip a song off a CD and convert it to MP3 format. It's just a matter of taking the time to do it.

I had already converted about eight albums when I got a piece of junk email inviting me to join something called e-mp3club.com. They didn't ask for a credit card number right away, so I went to their site to check it out.

As it turned out, e-mp3club.com was a new variation on the Napster phenomenon -- a place for members to exchange files and email, with public message boards for musical discussions and links to online music stores providing the sponsorship money that maintained the site. I looked at the pile of CD's waiting to be converted and decided that if I could download my favorite songs I'd save time.

The client software turned out to be a simple install. Once I accepted the lengthy license agreement, in which I promised not to violate any copyright laws, the software put a Login icon on my desktop and created two new folders on my hard drive called "Downloads" and "Shares". According to the help file the Downloads folder was where MP3's I downloaded from other users would go and the Shares folder was where I

could put MP3's I was willing to allow others to download from me. The club's servers would scan that directory every time I logged in and keep a master directory of available songs that all members could use to request music. That was it -- simple, manageable, and very friendly. I was impressed.

That first night I spent about 3 hours logged into the club's website. I went through my stack of favorite CD's and searched the index for the songs I liked most. It was amazing how many of them I found in the club's index for downloading.

When I left the house in the morning for my daily run, I had my new toy on my waistband loaded with some of my favorite running music. I started with some Bob Seger, moved quickly into a long block of Aerosmith to get my blood pumping, and then slid into Dire Straits for the last leg of the circuit. By the time "Walk of Life" gave way to "Heavy Fuel" I was home again, cooling down nicely, just needing a short breather before I hit the shower.

The song ended. I was about to take off the headphones when a female voice filled my ears. "Close your eyes and relax," the voice said. It was a striking voice: soft, gentle, youthful, and very feminine. It stopped me in my tracks.

"Relax," it continued, "and take a nice, long, slow, deep breath. Breathe in all the way, feel your chest filling with air, and hold it. Hold it, hold it, hold it ... and now let it go, feeling the tensions rush out of your body and your mind as the air rushes out of your lungs. Let all of your muscles go limp and relax as you exhale. And now, take another long, slow, deep breath, and as you do, clench all of your muscles as tightly as you can. Every muscle tight and tense as your lungs fill with fresh air. Hold it, hold it, hold it ... and now let it go, along with all of the tensions, so your entire body falls into deep, restful relaxation."

The voice intrigued me. It didn't command -- there was no force of authority behind it, only gentleness -- yet I found myself wanting to cooperate. When the voice told me to take a third long, slow, deep breath, I found myself doing it. I took in air until my chest felt ready to burst, clenching all of my muscles, holding it until she said to let it go, then blowing it all out and relaxing as I exhaled. It felt so incredibly good that I completely forgot to wonder what in hell I was listening to and flopped back onto the couch to listen some more.

"Very good," the voice continued. "You have begun to relax. Clear your mind now of all unnecessary thoughts, and turn your attention to your feet. Notice how warm they feel, how relaxed, how the muscles in them loosen, becoming smooth and soft. Feel it happening right now. And as you feel it happening, soon you notice that the same warm, relaxing feeling begins to spread upwards through your feet to your ankles, making them soft and loose and relaxed as well.

"As you continue to breathe easily, deeply and slowly, the warm and relaxing feeling in your feet and ankles continues to spread upward into your calves. Your calves relax and rest, becoming smooth and soft. Now the feeling spreads to your knees, and to your thighs. All the muscles in your knees and thighs become warm and tired, letting go, relaxing, letting your legs rest easily and completely..."

I knew what was happening now; the voice was taking me through a standard progressive relaxation, a very common and effective method for inducing hypnosis. I'd been down that road before, and it was very pleasant to lie back and let this unseen person take me there again. Following her prompts, I let the relaxation spread through my hips and butt, into my upper body, through my shoulders and arms. By the time she got to my face and head I was adrift in my own mind, the familiar buzz of hypnosis resonating through my head.

What followed was also something I recognized, the well-known staircase deepener. Hand in hand with my unseen guide, I walked down a grand stone staircase into the basement of my imagination. At the bottom I found a nice, comfortable mattress and let myself go completely, resting easily in its softness.

"Now you have achieved a very deep, satisfying level of hypnosis," the voice said. "You know that in this state you are safe and comfortable, able to imagine anything you desire. Your daily stresses and worries do not exist here; you can use this very special place as a sanctuary, a place to relax and take care of yourself for a short while, gathering the strength you will need to return to the conscious world with renewed energy and confidence in yourself. You can return to this place easily any time you wish, simply by closing your eyes and imagining my voice speaking to you again as I am now, telling you to relax and let go. Every time you practice going into hypnosis you will find it easier to achieve, and you will find yourself reaching deeper and more satisfying levels of trance. If something happens that requires your attention while you are in hypnosis, you will always be able to wake up and deal with it immediately.

"And now, it is time to return to your normal waking state. As I count to three, you will feel yourself slowly becoming more aware of your surroundings, waking up gradually. One, feeling the energy returning to your limbs; two, awareness increasing, your eyes opening; three, wide awake, feeling refreshed and at peace."

My eyes blinked open on cue. Every sense seemed a little sharper for me, as it always had before when I came out of trance. It had been quite a while -- at least five years, by my reckoning, but the feeling was every bit as delicious as I remembered.

Then I looked at the clock: 6:40. I'd been tuned out on the couch for about 15 minutes, now I needed to hustle to get ready for work. I switched off the MP3 player and dropped it onto the bed, hit the shower, and focused my full attention on getting my butt onto the highway.

Throughout the work day, my thoughts kept returning to the unknown voice. Who was she, and how had her recording ended up in my player? I knew I'd be investigating both when I got home.

The answer to the second part turned out to be disappointingly simple: a case of operator error. I'd been searching for the Dire Straits song "Industrial Disease" and found a file named **induct\_d.mp3** in the index. In my mass-production mode of the night before I'd misread the name and downloaded it, thinking it was my song.

I looked up the file in the club index. The member it came from was listed as sjs; I searched on the user name and found about a dozen MP3 files available from that account. She wasn't online, so I queued a request to download the others and left the computer logged in. (DSL service is great for things like that; I can leave the machine online as long as I want without tying up the phone line.) Meanwhile I grabbed my MP3 player, stretched out on the bed, and listened to the track again. Once again I found myself drifting slowly, gently down into a deeply satisfying hypnotic trance.

When the track was over I stayed put, closing my eyes, dropping back down a little bit. For the first time in months I thought about Dr. Isobel Burns, the hypnotist who had helped me put an end to a smoking habit that had lasted half my life. She was near 40 at the time, I'd guessed; a handsome woman with a rich, deep voice that worked magic on me from the first words I heard her speak. Everything stayed totally professional, mind you --

throughout our relationship she was Dr. Burns and I was Mr. Tate. She took me into trance and helped me break the hold that tobacco had over my mind and body, then shook my hand and wished me a good life.

Still, for months afterwards I fantasized about her. In my dreams she was Isobel; she wore slit skirts and low-cut blouses and called me Nick as she clouded my mind and seduced my body. I developed a yen for anything relating to hypnosis and sex. I collected books on hypnosis, read hypnoerotic stories off the Net, downloaded pictures of hypnotized women, and sampled the web pages of online dommes. Never quite got up the nerve to contact one, though. I also tried a couple of hypnosis tapes from the Self Help section of the book store, but somehow the generic presentation never worked very well for me.

Eventually the newness of it all wore off. I started indulging my new fascination less often as other parts of my life demanded attention. I still have the occasional vivid dream about Isobel, but for the most part I kept that part of me under wraps.

Until the sjs recording, anyway. Her voice reminded me of how very seductive hypnosis could be. I found myself wondering what she looked like, how old she was, where she lived.

Why not find out? I went back to the computer and looked up "sjs" in the member directory: there was no profile in the directory (no surprise there -- I hadn't done one either), but it did list an email address. I fired up the mail program.

Dear sjs,

I downloaded your induct\_d.mp3 file by mistake yesterday and listened to it. I was very pleasantly surprised -- you have a lovely voice and your induction technique left me wonderfully relaxed and stress-free. Are you a professional hypnotist? Have you done any other MP3's like the one I have? If so, I'd very much like to hear them; this experience has rekindled a strong fascination I've had with hypnosis.

Nick Tate  
Baltimore, MD

I wanted to ask a lot more, but thought my chances of getting any reply at all were nil if I came off sounding like a potential stalker. The reply came in late that night.

Nick,

Hi! It's always good to meet a fellow hypnophile. No, I don't have any other hypnosis MP3's, that one was an experiment. I'd forgotten it was still in my shares directory.

Thanks for the compliment, but I'm more often the subject than the hypnotist; my Mistress is a professional and has taught me what little I know.

Enjoy the MP3.

Sara Jane Smith

At the time I figured that was the end of it. I cancelled the download request, filed Sara Jane under 'interesting people I'll never get to know' and went back to my regularly scheduled life. I kept the MP3 and played it most days when I got home from work; it was a great way to decompress. And occasionally I'd catch myself daydreaming about a pretty young lady with a soft, sweet voice. Sometimes she was on her knees, staring vacantly ahead as a dark, shadowy figure loomed over her; other times she was talking to me, taking me into hypnosis and seducing my mind.

About two weeks later, I got a surprise email.

Dear Nick,

Remember me? I showed your email to my Mistress, and with her guidance and blessing I recorded the attached MP3 for you. I hope you'll enjoy it; it's much better than the old one you have.

Sara

The attachment was called **nick.mp3**. I downloaded it into my portable player, took it into the living room and plopped down in my easy chair to listen.

"Hello, Nick," the track began, Sara's voice as soft and tender as before. "This session is for you and you only. Get comfortable; either sit down in a comfortable chair that supports your whole body, or better yet lie down so you can really let go. You may want to loosen your belt, if you wear one, and take off your shoes. I'll wait a few seconds while you get settled." I was pretty well settled as I was, so I just waited for Sara Jane to continue.

As in the first track, she started me off with several long, deep, slow breaths, having me hold each one for a short time and then let it out quickly and completely. She segued easily into the progressive relaxation. This time she went through it more slowly, spending more time encouraging me to be aware of how each body part relaxed completely. She also had me tense each body part as much as I could before relaxing it. By the time she got to my head I was already adrift, floating freely on the gentle waves of her voice, as deep as I'd ever gone for her.

She finished the relaxation and went into a deepener. Under her suggestions, I imagined myself stepping into an elevator on the 25th floor and going down, one floor at a time, watching the indicator as the numbers counted down. By the time I got to 10 I could literally feel the elevator's movement and hear the electronic 'ding' as it passed each floor.

The elevator door opened and I found myself in a cavernous room flooded with soothing white light. The walls, the comfortable padded daybed and end tables, and everything else in the room was also white. "This," Sara's voice said, "is your zero room, Nick. Inside these walls, the outside world does not exist. You can say anything you want to, do anything you wish, and nobody will know or care except you and me. These walls cannot be breached by stress, or anger, or any of the frustrations of your waking life; in here you can examine these things dispassionately, understanding yourself and your world, and gaining the strength and confidence you need to handle all of your challenges."

I understood perfectly, of course. My zero room was my safe haven, a place where I could just relax and listen to Sara Jane's voice, floating and drifting. I knew that I would always be able to come here whenever I wished, and I would always feel refreshed, content and energized when I left it. I was happy that Sara had helped me to find my zero room. I drifted in there for a while, listening to more suggestions -- things I didn't have to remember if I didn't want to, so I didn't -- and enjoying the soothing atmosphere of my zero room.

After a while, though, Sara told me it was time to come back. I got into the elevator and rode it back up to the top floor. This time when the doors opened, so did my eyes. I was back in my living room, slouched deeply into my easy chair, wide awake and listening to silence.

I felt like a million bucks: stress-free, confident, totally in charge. My vision seemed sharper, my hearing more keen, as if I was truly awake for the first time in a long while. The greatest thing about it was that the feeling stayed with me. I got more done at work the next morning than I usually manage in a day, and the things that normally grind me down didn't seem to matter so much.

I listened to my new MP3 every evening after work, and by the end of the second week people were starting to comment on the changes. My concentration was better; I smiled more often and laughed easily; and instead of feeling drained at the end of the day, I had energy left over for those myriad things that I never seemed to get around to before like laundry, cooking, and minor household repairs. That weekend I broke out the golf clubs for the first time in about six months and hit the driving range for a while, with impressive (for me) results.

All the while Sara never strayed far from my inner thoughts. I owed her something for the help she and her Mistress had offered, but what? A gift in kind seemed like the best answer.

I spent a Sunday afternoon going through my collection of hypnosis books and tapes. Back when my hypnofetish was in full bloom I'd persuaded my then girlfriend to let me try an induction or two; the basic suggestions we'd tried had worked reasonably well. Perhaps I was flattering myself that I could do anything for Sara in that way, but I figured it was worth a try.

The biggest problem, I soon realized, was that I knew almost nothing about Sara. Her voice sounded young, but disembodied voices are tricky things - she could be anywhere from 16 to 40 and still sound 25 to me. I recognized the name "Sara Jane Smith" and the "zero room" concept from the TV series *Doctor Who*, suggesting that Sara was a fellow science fiction fan. She'd mentioned a Mistress, but no details of the relationship. Was she a submissive? An apprentice? Both?

In the end I pooled what I did know, and what I thought I could safely assume, and wrote a script similar to the one she'd given me: a no-frills induction followed by a more imaginative deepener, a few generic suggestions just to reinforce the pleasant experience, and a gentle wakeup. Sara had a professional Mistress to guide her but I didn't, so I

steered well clear of anything that might be construed as amateur therapy. I practiced reading the script until I could deliver it smoothly, in the measured pace that worked well for me. I bought a new condenser microphone for my PC, and after a few practice recordings I had one that sounded good. I converted it to MP3 format and sent it attached to a long-overdue email.

Dear Sara,

I can't thank you and your Mistress enough for the wonderful MP3 you made for me. I've been listening to it daily and it's made a tremendous difference in my concentration, stress levels, and enjoyment of life.

There's nothing I can offer you that would be of comparable value, but I did put together the attached MP3 for you. I'm nowhere near as experienced with this as you are, but I hope you will find it enjoyable.

Yours,

Nick

A few days later the reply came.

Dear Nick,

What a surprise! The MP3 you made is very good, it gives me a nice dreamy feeling to listen to it. Mistress listened to it as well and she is impressed ... she says you could be very good at this with the proper training.

Mistress and I made another MP3 for you. This one is meant to be an occasional treat; keep your regular one for every day. To get the best results you should use this one lying down and with stereo headphones. Also, make sure you are home alone and won't be disturbed for a while. I think you'll enjoy it.

Sara

The attachment was called **nick2.mp3** and was huge -- good thing my ISP doesn't limit the size of email attachments. It wouldn't fit in my portable player without erasing a lot of the tracks already in it first, so I tried something different. I keep the PC in the bedroom anyway, mostly because the living room is too full of other gear to make room for it, so I took the good headphones from my living room stereo and plugged them into the back of the PC. The extension cord gave me enough length to lie on the bed, my cordless mouse by my side. Moving the mouse over my leg, I pulled up WinAMP and started playing the new file.

Sara's voice filled my head immediately, a soft echo seeming to melt her words into the folds of my brain. "Take a deep breath, Nick, and relax. Close your eyes for me, and come back to your zero room ..." That did it; faster than you could say "posthypnotic suggestion" I was deeply relaxed and entering my zero room. The soft white light surrounded me and comforted me as it always had. Sara's voice was still with me, speaking ever so faintly in the background. I could understand her words but it wasn't important to pay close attention or to remember them.

I was just settling down onto the white leather sofa in my zero room when I suddenly heard Sara shout, "Awake!" With a start I opened my eyes and was back in my bedroom, a little shaken from the abrupt transition. I started to sit up, but she spoke to me again and everything slipped away, taking me back to my zero room. Sara's voice was waiting for me there, telling me I'd done well, coming deeper and faster each time. Then, before I could assimilate what she was saying, I was awake again on my bed. Again I started to sit up, only to hear Sara speak and find myself dropping again into the zero room. The drop was so fast I could feel it in my stomach, like when an elevator suddenly lurches down.

The cycle continued, with Sara waking me up quickly and then just as rapidly pulling me back down, until I completely lost track of what was going on. My eyes would open and I'd see the bedroom, but I don't think I was truly awake. All I knew was that each time Sara spoke to me I got pulled back into my zero room more rapidly than the time before, and each time I wanted less and less to leave it again. A word floated through my head -- "fractionation" -- but my analyzing mind was in no shape to process it.

Finally, after an eternity of up and down, I found myself stretched out on the couch of my zero room. It felt so good just to relax there and listen to Sara. Her voice came back to me, stronger than usual, reverberating through my fogged brain.

"You've done very well, Nick," she said. "You've reached a level of hypnosis so deep, so satisfying, that you can do anything your mind can imagine. You've worked very hard, and I have a reward for you. To your left, next to the sofa in your zero room, is a massage table. Take off your clothes and lie down on the table, Nick, and I will give you a wonderful, relaxing massage."

I looked to my left, and sure enough there was a massage table there, all set up and ready to go. My clothes fell away from me easily as I stood up and approached the massage table. At Sara's instruction I climbed onto the table face down and closed my eyes. I felt Sara's presence as she approached the table, then a pair of warm, caring, expert hands began massaging my neck and back. It never occurred to me to open my eyes, I just relaxed and relished the sensations of her touch.

She worked my neck and shoulders until they turned to rubber, then continued down my back using the perfect touch and just the right amount of pressure, her voice in the background the whole time whispering words my memory wouldn't hold onto. She stopped at the base of my spine and started on my feet, then worked her way up my legs. As she got to the thighs and I began to feel my genitals reacting to her sensuous touch; when she began kneading the flesh of my buttocks I moaned aloud with the pleasure she brought me.

"Turn over now."

I did it without a second thought, knowing full well that it would expose my fully erect cock to her view. That didn't matter; this was Sara, and she was taking care of me. I didn't even bother to open my eyes, I just let my head fall back as I felt her hands begin massaging my temples. My cock grew harder by the minute as her hands crept down my body, over the stomach, then up the legs.

Then, when I thought I couldn't take any more, I felt her oily hand close around my shaft. The feeling as she pumped it up and down was exquisite. Her voice told me that it was okay to come, that I would enjoy coming for her, so I did, letting my seed fly while she pumped me dry. I felt a tender kiss on my cheek and I drifted away.

Some time later I opened my eyes and found myself back in my bedroom, dazed and more than a little disoriented. When I realized I wasn't about to be called back to my zero room, I truly woke up and looked around.

It had been 45 minutes since I'd started the MP3. I was still on the bed, still wearing the sweats I had put on before checking my email, but my sweat pants had a dark, sticky patch in the front -- the massage may have been an illusion, but my reaction to it had been quite real.

Dear Sara,

I just listened to the new MP3 for the first time.

In the immortal words of Keanu Reeves: "Whoa!" That was an incredible experience. I had no idea a hypnotic fantasy could feel so completely real. There's no way I can come close to reciprocating, although I suspect I'll give it a try anyway because "Thank you" just doesn't cover it.

Yours,

Nick

I spent my evenings in study, going through my hypnosis texts looking for clues on how to induce the kind of vivid hallucinations I'd experienced while in Sara's thrall. The biggest challenge, I realized, was that with a recording there could be no feedback, no chance to adjust the pace or measure her depth of trance. In the end, my best source of information was the MP3 itself; by skipping the first half or so I was able to listen to Sara's suggestions without slipping into trance and repeating the experience. I noticed patterns in her speech: words and phrases repeated often, with almost identical tone and emphasis, that even in a waking state I found myself wanting to react to. Chances were she'd picked up those patterns from her Mistress, so if I could mimic those they would probably be very effective for Sara. I practiced saying those phrases into my voice recorder and playing them back, checking my inflection against Sara's, until it sounded just right. It was surprisingly easy; the correct phrasing and intonation came very naturally to me.

Next it was time to write the script. I put more effort into that script than any term paper or client proposal I've ever done, but it was worth it to me if I could achieve the desired result. Once I was happy with the text I practiced delivering it smoothly.

Finally, about a week after I'd started working on it, I was ready to record. I went through the apartment turning off everything that might make

background noise, even the air conditioning. I unplugged the house phones and switched off the cell phone and pager. For mood more than anything else I turned off the lights too, leaving only the glow of my flat-panel display illuminating the area. I set the condenser microphone close to me, pointed directly at my face, and read from the computer screen.

The session began with the usual preface: get comfortable, remove any tight or restrictive clothing, clear your mind, etc. Then I instructed Sara to pick a spot on the wall and focus her concentration on it, noticing everything there was to notice about that spot, and begin counting backwards from 500. Then I began a progressive relaxation, interrupting it every so often to mention how tired her eyes were becoming, how heavy the lids were, how often they felt the need to blink. As I read, I felt my own eyes becoming tired and I let myself relax, drifting into a light trance of my own as I read the script.

After the standard induction, which I'd largely cribbed from a hypnotherapist's web site, I went into a deepener I'd written myself. "And now," I said her, "as you lie there so deeply relaxed, I want you to imagine that you are taking a nice, soothing, comforting bubble bath. The water is just the way you like it: not too hot, not too cold, a wonderfully soothing, relaxing presence that surrounds you and supports your body. I'm going to count down from 10 now, and as I do you're going to notice that the your body becomes lighter and lighter as the water surrounds and supports you, lifting you, letting you float freely and safely in your tub. With each count your body becomes more weightless, more relaxed, more free, and as your body becomes even more deeply relaxed, you'll find that your mind becomes even more deeply relaxed. Ten ..."

I counted down slowly, reminding Sara between each count that her body was becoming lighter and more relaxed, and her mind doing the same. "More deeply relaxed" was one of the key phrases and I used it liberally, hopefully taking her gently into a very deep state.

"... One," I continued. "Your body floats freely in the bathtub, Sara, completely weightless, completely relaxed, with nothing in the world to think about or wonder about except how very much you enjoy this feeling.

"And now that you are so completely relaxed, you can let yourself experience the sensual pleasures that you know I want to bring you. Even now, as you float so freely in your tub with your eyes closed, you can sense me standing over you, admiring you, envious of how beautifully, deeply relaxed you are. And as you sense me standing over you, you also sense

the first stirrings of arousal in the private places of your body, but you are too deeply relaxed to do anything but enjoy the sensations."

I paused a few seconds before going on to the next step. "And now, Sara, it is time to come out of your bath tub. But you look so beautiful, so deeply relaxed, that I can't bring myself to wake you yet. Instead, I'm going to count to three and on the count of three, I'm going to lift your deeply relaxed, peaceful, light body out of the tub and carry you in my arms to your bed. You will know that you are safe and secure in my arms, that you can trust me completely to take care of you."

I did a slow three count. "And now, Sara, you can feel me lifting you out of the tub, your body so limp, so deeply relaxed, so safe and secure in my arms. You feel my arms under you, holding you, supporting you. You feel the slight sway as I walk you to your bed. You feel the skin of my bare chest against your side, my body warming yours. You feel the welcoming touch of a big, soft bath towel under you as I lay you down on your bed."

Here was the tricky part. Fingers crossed, I continued reading. "And as you lie there now on your bed, you become aware that we are not alone. Your Mistress is here with us, watching us, approving of what we are doing. She wants me to bring you pleasure, Sara. Listen to your Mistress now, hear her speak the words that send you into your deepest, most wonderful trance, so deep you can barely move, so deep you can barely speak, so deep you don't need to do anything but focus on the pleasure I am going to bring you." I was assuming a lot here, but it felt right. If it worked, then at this point in the listening Sara would much deeper than I'd be able to take her without direct feedback.

"As you lie there in such a beautiful, deep state of relaxation, Sara, I am going to dry your body. Feel me patting your skin gently with a nice, plush, soft towel. I start at your feet, lovingly patting them dry, kissing them. Then I move up your legs, to your knees, to your thighs ..." Almost like another progressive relaxation, I talked her through my drying her body with an imaginary towel. As I addressed each body part, I told her I was kissing it, caressing it, bringing it pleasure, and that the pleasure was making her body feel more and more aroused. I took my time, especially with her breasts and her center, telling her that she was so aroused and so sensitive that every touch would be ten times as pleasurable as anything before.

At last it was time for the grand finale. "As you lie there, Sara, your body tingling with the arousal that my touch has brought you, I find myself almost overcome with desire for you. You are so sexy, Sara, so very irresistible, that I must have you. At the count of three, I am going to crawl

up on the bed between your legs and pleasure you with my mouth and tongue. You will show me exactly where you like to be kissed, licked, caressed, and teased to bring you the maximum possible pleasure. I will touch all of your favorite places in exactly the right way, so that very soon you will have the most powerful, pleasurable, totally satisfying orgasm you have ever had. You will continue to come as often as you want; I won't get tired and I won't stop until you want me to. When you do want me to stop, just say 'Thank you, Nick'; you will orgasm one more time, and then you will fall into a peaceful, natural sleep. When you awaken from that sleep you will be back in your normal waking state, feeling completely satisfied and contented." I reinforced the suggestions several more times, then did a final slow three count. If I'd done it right, Sara's subconscious would take over from there and give her a hell of a ride.

The reply came late the next day:

Dear Nick,

In the immortal words of Meg Ryan: "Yes! ... Yes!! ... YES!!! ... YEESSSSS!!!!!" That MP3 was unbelievable! Mistress says I thrashed around on the bed for half an hour after the playback ended, squealing and moaning until I fainted.

She also says that you absolutely must come to visit us; she very much wants to see you, and after this experience I absolutely have to. We share a nice, big house just outside of Raleigh; you can fly down and I'll meet you at the airport. You won't need a hotel - - you won't even need clothes if I get my way. Please say you'll come.

Very definitely yours,

Sara

It was a very tempting invitation even without the clothing-optional clause. A quick check online told me that flights from Baltimore to Raleigh were cheap and frequent enough that an impulse trip was workable if I wanted to clear my schedule for a few days.

Still, there were complications. For one thing, I had myself pretty well booked for the next several weeks. Being an independent consultant, in

theory I can take time off whenever I want; but in practice if I want to hold onto my clients I need to be available when they want me.

Then there was the brains issue. If someone I knew came up to me and said, "Hey, Nick, I'm thinking about taking a plane to North Carolina to meet up with someone I know almost nothing about because we've exchanged some really hot MP3 files over the Internet," how would I respond? I'd tell him he's nuts, of course. I didn't even know Sara's real name, let alone anything that would allow me to make even the most rudimentary check on her. I'd be going completely on faith that the real Sara was something close to the mental image I had of her from her voice -- an image formed largely under the influence of hypnosis at that. As much as my libido wanted me to jump on a plane that night, my common sense said to wait, think this out, try to get to know her a little more before committing.

I spent an hour trying to put those thoughts into an email I could send Sara. About six drafts were written and then discarded before I gave up on it. I thought about Sara every day, especially after listening to my regular relaxation/concentration MP3, but I came no closer to making a decision or figuring out how to express my reservations to her.

That went on for over a week. Then came a Wednesday night, at about 11:15. I was in bed asleep, as usual -- he who gets up at 5:30 to run before work learns to go to bed by 10:30 -- when the phone rang. Half asleep, I groped for the phone, which was the base unit to my cordless. Of course I'd left the handset in the living room, so my fingers fell on the hands free button.

"Hello?" I mumbled.

There was a pause, and then an oddly familiar voice. "Hello ... Nick?"

"Yeah."

"This is Sara. Did I wake you?"

"Yeah." I'm a much better conversationalist when I'm awake, I swear.

"I'm sorry," she said sweetly. "I forgot about how early you get up."

I grunted something unintelligible.

"You sound distant, Nick. Are you on a speakerphone?"

"Yeah." I was starting to wake up. "Who did you say you were?"

"You were asleep, weren't you?" the voice said. "Listen to my voice, Nick. It's Sara Jane. Your MP3 penpal."

Finally, the spark plugs in my head began to fire and my brain sputtered grudgingly to life. "Of course," I said, recognizing the voice at last. "I'm sorry. I was dead asleep, and it never even occurred to me that you would be calling. ... Why are you calling, anyway?"

"You never answered my last email," she replied. "About coming to visit. Don't you want to meet, Nick?"

"Sure! ... I mean ... well ... "

"I think I understand," she said, her voice taking on that sweet, sleepy cadence that I'd heard in the MP3's. "Why don't you *come back to your zero room, Nick*, and we can talk about it there?"

Just like that my eyes slammed shut and I found myself zooming downward in my private elevator. Confusion was replaced by calm as the doors slid open and I stepped into my sanctuary. I was dimly aware of Sara's voice in the background guiding me deeper and deeper into trance.

I walked over to the white leather sofa and settled into it, lying down with my feet propped up on one arm and my head at the other, fully supported by pillows. I sensed Sara coming to sit behind me in a separate chair, but I couldn't see her without twisting around and I was too comfortable to do that.

"Now then, Nick," she said, her voice becoming loud enough for me to hear easily. "Here we are in your zero room, your sanctuary. Whatever comes into your mind, you can just go ahead and say it. There's no need to worry about hurting anyone's feelings or sounding like a bad person, because this is your special place. Is it okay with you if we talk in here, Nick?"

"Yes," I said, staring up at the smooth white ceiling.

"That's good. On the phone, it sounded as though you have doubts about coming to see me. Are you uncomfortable with something, Nick?"

The words came out of my lips unreviewed by my brain. "Yes," I replied. "I'm nervous because I don't know anything about you. You could be anybody. You might be somebody who wants to hurt me or use me badly."

Sara's voice was gentle and reassuring. "You're absolutely right to be cautious, Nick. Would you like me to tell you some things about myself now, so you can feel more confident about who I am?"

"Yes, please."

"My real name is Sara Jane Douglas," she said. "I'm 27 years old, and I live with my Mistress in her house outside Raleigh. I work from home as a freelance Web designer. I have a cat named Lovecraft whom I spoil shamelessly. I've been married and divorced once and had lovers of both sexes. I don't have any medical conditions that could harm you, and neither does Mistress. I think you're a fascinating man, Nick, and I very much want to meet you, to hold and be held by you, and to make love with you in person. Do you want that too?"

"I think so."

"Okay, then. Thank you for trusting me, Nick. It's time to come back up now, back to reality."

On cue, I rose from the couch and stepped into the elevator, leaving my zero room behind. My eyes opened and I was back in my bed.

"Feeling better?"

I'd forgotten about the phone, but Sara was still there. "Yes," I answered, thinking about it to be sure. "I wasn't sure how to tell you those things without hurting your feelings. So I guess the real question is, how are you?"

"I'm just fine," she said. "I understand completely, and I still want to meet you. I hope you'll come down when you can. For now, I think I'd better let you go back to sleep. Goodnight, Nick."

Before I could answer, there was a click and the phone went dead. I rolled over and the memory of a sweet voice rocked me back to sleep.

Waking up the next morning, my first thought was that I'd had a bizarre dream about a late night phone call from Sara. Out of curiosity I went to the kitchen and checked the Caller ID box: my last incoming call, at 11:17 the night before, had come from a number in the 919 area code.

I stole five minutes after my run to send off a quick email.

Dear Sara Jane,

I came *\*this close\** to calling you at 5:30 this morning when I got up -- turnabout is fair play, after all! (:

Instead, I just want to thank you for the personal tidbits; they do give me a much better feeling about meeting you and your Mistress. I have a couple of less-hectic-than-usual days coming early in the week. With a little shuffling, I can probably craft myself a long weekend. Is this weekend too soon?

Nick

During the day I checked the email almost compulsively. Sara's reply came in late in the morning.

Nick,

You can call me at 5:30 if you want to, but I don't promise to be coherent before 8:00. That's one of the hazards of working from home. ;)

This weekend is just great. Mistress is delighted, and I'm ... well, let's just say you're going to get a very warm welcome!

Sara

As soon as I read that I started rearranging my schedule. It didn't even occur to me until later to wonder how Sara had gotten my phone number in the first place. An online phone book? Perhaps. I'd have to ask her some time. The question got lost in the bustle of preparing for the trip.

## **ii: Decision**

Things never go completely as planned; my flight was delayed for over two hours getting into BWI. As a result, instead of landing at Raleigh-Durham International at a reasonable 8:00pm, it was almost 10:30 when we finally touched down. I was disappointed because the darkness kept me from seeing much of Raleigh from the air -- just lights, highways, and a few buildings that stood out from the pack. At least I had a chance to email Sara from BWI, so she wouldn't have been waiting all night for me.

My heart raced as I followed the thin crowd up the jetway to the terminal. When I'd sent Sara my flight information she'd replied that she would be waiting for me in the terminal. How would I know her? She said to have faith, I'd know when I saw her.

She was right. Almost as soon as I cleared the jetway, my eye fell on a young lady sitting off to one side. She was maybe a touch under average height, well-rounded in a Rubenesque way, with long black hair and wire-rimmed glasses. The giveaway was her clothing: a long denim skirt and a white T-shirt that featured a black and white hypno-swirl over each breast.

Grinning and chuckling to myself, I approached the girl. "You have to be Sara Jane," I said.

She stood up, grinned back, and hugged me. "I told you you'd know when you saw me," she replied.

I returned the hug with relish, savoring the physical contact for a few minutes, before suggesting we make our way to Baggage Claim.

Sara backed up and looked at me in mock rebuke. "You brought *clothes*?"

Grinning again, I shrugged. "A few. I thought we might want to go out once or twice."

"You didn't warn me that you were high maintenance," she quipped, then took my hand and led me to the baggage area. In due course my one suitcase put in an appearance; I grabbed it and followed Sara out of the terminal building. To my surprise, she led me to the taxi line. "It's hard to tell at night," she explained, "but they're building a new parking structure to go with the new terminal. When they're done it'll be nice, but until then it's an awful bear trying to park here and pick anyone up."

As the taxi wound its way out of the airport I could make out the steel framing of the new parking garage. There were enough orange cones and temporary concrete barriers around that I understood why Sara chose a cab instead of driving herself. I would have, too.

I had no idea where we were or what direction we were going. Again, Sara filled me in. "We live in an area called Coachman's Trail; it's on the north side, up past Six Forks Road. Nice houses, lots of space, neighbors who prefer to live and let live."

"Live and let live?" I joked. "But isn't this Jesse Helms territory?"

Sara frowned. "Not our neighborhood."

"Outstanding," I said with approval. That put the smile back on her face.

In a little while the taxi stopped. The house was plain but inviting: a 3-story structure clad in sage green siding with darker doors and trim, surrounded by a good lawn. There was an attached 2-car garage and a smooth blacktop driveway leaving up to it. A concrete path led from the edge of the driveway to the front porch. The porch lights were on, but the windows were dark.

After a short debate, I won the right to pay the cab fare. Sara grabbed my suitcase and led the way inside.

The foyer was modest, a hardwood-floored landing large enough to accommodate a coat rack and a small desk, which seemed to serve mostly as a place to stockpile old mail and newspapers. The sunken living room to the left was furnished in plush leather and cherry -- every seat in the room looked like something you could sink into and just sleep for days. Beyond the living room I could see the dining room jutting off to form the ubiquitous L shape. The kitchen looked to be just ahead, and beyond that a hallway ending in a closed door. Above the door a red light glowed.

"Rule number one," Sara explained in a low voice, pointing to the door with the light. "That light means Mistress is in her study and is not to be disturbed for any reason. She may have someone in there with her, or she may be making a recording or trying to do a phone session; whatever it is, never interrupt."

"Got it."

I followed Sara into the kitchen, where she removed a bottle of sangria from the refrigerator and poured two glasses. With a soft whoosh, we settled into the depths of the living room sofa where we sipped our wine and made small talk. Lovecraft, a medium-sized gray cat with white stripes across his back, came over to make my acquaintance. Sara showed me his favorite ways to be petted and scratched and I practiced dutifully until he got up, yawned, and slinked over to Sara's lap instead of mine.

I got the feeling Sara was waiting for something. When the wine glasses were empty, she took them back to the kitchen and returned by way of the front hall. Her expression seemed mildly anxious.

"Do Not Disturb sign still on?" I prompted.

Sara nodded. "Something unexpected must have come up; she said she really wanted to see you."

"Why don't you tell me about her?"

Sara's eyes took on a faraway look. "I first met her about three years ago. I had just finished up a messy divorce -- we married too young; I grew up and he didn't -- and was scrambling for rent money doing Web site design. Mistress was one of my first clients. When we met to discuss what she wanted in her web site, I looked into her eyes and listened to her voice and just drifted away. The next thing I knew it was two hours later, I was lying on a couch and Mistress was wiping tears from my face. She said I had a lot of sadness locked inside me that needed to come out. Over the following weeks she helped me to get through that, and I became hers. In the end, I made her two web sites: one for her regular practice, and one devoted to erotic hypnosis." An idea struck her and she brightened.

"Would you like to see it?"

"The web site? Sure."

"Come on." We scampered up the stairs to the second floor, which consisted mainly of a square landing with several doors around the perimeter. The stairs themselves continued up without us. "In here," Sara said, leading me by the hand through a door on the left.

It had originally been a bedroom, I suppose, but the room we entered had been set up as a comfortable home office. The desk was a built-in made from kitchen countertop stock and supported by pedestals every few feet. There were box shelves above the desk holding books and software and providing attachment points for a series of small under-cabinet lights that illuminated the working area. A generic mini-tower computer occupied the far corner, where the counter was deep enough to accommodate its 19-inch monitor. There was a high-backed ergonomic chair complete with head rest and adjustable everything, a second less elaborate chair, and a futon available for seating.

Sara motioned me into the big chair, taking the smaller one for herself. The machine was already on and ready to go; I put my hand over the thumb-operated trackball and brought up Netscape.

The screen darkened, and a pair of penetrating blue-gray eyes slowly faded into view near the top. Music began playing in the background, slow, tuneless music that seemed to flow through my mind as text message faded in and out of view like the opening credits in a movie.

*Mistress Althea welcomes you ...*

*... Relax ...*

*... All shall be well ...*

*... Let Mistress Althea soothe your mind and spirit ...*

I was about to ask if that was all there was when a line of oval buttons appeared at the bottom of the screen. With Sara watching closely over my shoulder, I explored her creation. There were no photos of Mistress Althea, not even samples of her voice, but I did learn that she was a professional hypnotherapist, licensed in several states and in private practice for 18 years. There were the usual pages offering recorded

hypnosis therapies, phone sessions, a series of pages with hypnosis-inducing graphics and text instructions to give people a chance to experience a light trance online -- in short, the usual site features for a hypno-domme.

What struck me most about the site, however, was its tone. I'd visited a number of such sites in my day, and nearly all of them had a similar sort of attitude -- the Mistress (or Goddess, or whatever title she preferred) was portrayed as an all-powerful being, enslaving the weak, willing males who longed to give themselves into Her control. It was that tone more than anything else that kept me from ever contacting a domme or ordering any recordings. But Mistress Althea's site felt different; it was about healing, about coming to the Mistress for help and for mutual pleasure.

"This is very good," I finally said, and heard Sara sigh contentedly. "She's different from most of the dommes on the 'net, isn't she?"

"Very much so," Sara concurred. "When you meet her, you'll understand even better."

"And when will that be?"

"It was supposed to be tonight," she said, a little frown forming on her lips, "but it looks as though she's gotten sidetracked. It may have to wait until morning."

"I can wait up a bit," I volunteered.

"Are you sure, Nick? You look like you may be getting tired." Sara's voice changed slightly with the question; it became slower, more rhythmic. It became the voice on the MP3's. "So tired. So ready to just close your eyes and relax ... "

A familiar, disconnected sort of feeling took hold of me as Sara spoke. My head sunk back against the headrest on the chair, and things began to grow distant. "Close your eyes now, and imagine my fingers slowly massaging your temples, drawing your thoughts away, relaxing you more and more, taking you to that sweet, dreamy state of hypnosis." My eyes dropped shut and within a few seconds I did feel gentle fingers drawing slow circles on my temples. I stopped thinking and just let myself go, spiraling downward into a warm, soft fuzz.

"Time for bed, Nick," Sara said. "Follow me."

My eyes opened. My body, as if on remote control, rose from the chair and allowed Sara to lead it across the landing to a bedroom. My clothes came off somehow, and gentle hands eased me down onto the bed. Neither awake nor asleep, I watched lazily as Sara removed her clothing. I felt my body responding to her, my cock growing hard and straight as more of her body was revealed to me. By the time she climbed on the bed next to me and started gently running her hands along my torso, I ached for her.

She lifted my head and pulled me to a breast. I kissed and suckled hungrily, getting nothing out of it of course but putting iron in my extended cock. My arm found the energy to start exploring, feeling the other breast, working down to the warm spot between her legs, parting her outer lips and probing. Sara moaned and shifted, giving me a better angle and allowing me to slip a finger inside her. Her free hand went to my cock and pumped it.

I was on the point of orgasm when she stopped and climbed on top of me. She aligned herself over my waiting shaft and slipped down over it, taking me all the way inside. She wiggled her hips a little and locked us together.

"Look at me, Nick," she said, back to her trance voice. "Look deeply into my eyes, and relax with me."

My eyes found hers and then nothing else existed but those wonderful green eyes.

"That's it," she continued, "just keep looking deeply into my eyes, relaxing with me, as I count down from ten, becoming more relaxed, going deeper and deeper with each count, and now ten ... nine ... eight ... eyes staring deeply into mine, deep into my eyes, going deeper and deeper. "

The urgency in my groin subsided as I relaxed further and further, my vision narrowing only to the soft green eyes hovering over me, drawing me in. As she reached the count of one my eyelids drooped, but I couldn't let them close or I'd lose sight of Sara's eyes.

"And now that I've counted down from ten, and we're so relaxed, I'm going to count up again. Now as I count up from one to ten, we feel the pleasure building and growing in the place where our bodies are joined. With each count that pleasure doubles, with each count we can let ourselves enjoy the doubling of our passion and our pleasure, until I reach ten and we both have our release. One ... two ... three ... feeling the

pleasure doubling, doubling with each count, until we reach orgasm together at the count of ten ... four ... five ... six ... feels so good now, the pleasure growing, filling our senses, building towards the ultimate release ... " As she got closer to ten, Sara's breathing picked up, and her voice took on an urgent, ragged undertone. "Eight ... *oh!* ... the pleasure ... uh ... growing, doubling again when I count nine ... *oooooooohhh* ... and finally ... *oh, boy* ... come with me now ... as I reach ... *ten!* ... "

Our bodies heaved as one with the force of our climax. We rocked back and forth, riding it out together, our moans slowing and then finally stopping. Sara slid off to the side and held me. We kissed for a few minutes, then she put a finger on my forehead and started tracing slow, lazy circles. I felt myself falling away again. "Sleep now, Nick," she told me, and sleep I did.

I woke up in the morning with Sara snoring softly by my side and Lovecraft staring at me from the doorway with a look of detached curiosity. It took me a few minutes to remember where I was and how I'd gotten there. I looked at the sleeping figure next to me, so peaceful. I kissed her gently on the forehead, the nose, the lips, then worked my way down from there. When I reached a breast and started nuzzling at the nipple, I felt her hand touch the back of my neck.

"Stop that," she said dreamily.

I looked into her sleepy eyes. "Do you really want me to?"

She let out a deep sigh. "No," she confessed. "But I think we should get up anyway. We can fix breakfast before you meet Mistress."

The shower was on the small side, so we took turns. When I came out Sara was wearing a soft terry robe. My things were still in my suitcase in the foyer, so I padded down the stairs wrapped in my bath towel and retrieved my suitcase, then pulled on a pair of sweats and an undershirt.

I put enough bacon for three on a tray in the oven while Sara fixed scrambled eggs. I was slicing bagels when I heard a rich, feminine voice.

"Good morning."

I dropped the bagel and the knife and wheeled around, knowing before I saw her what she would look like: tall and slim, with sharp features,

piercing blue-gray eyes, and long sandy-colored hair. Her hair was down today instead of tied back, and had a few streaks of silver in it. I'd never seen her in a white silk bathrobe before, but I had no problem recognizing her: Doctor Isobel Burns.

I stood there and gawked at her for what felt like ages, saying nothing. Meanwhile, puzzle pieces were dropping into place in my head. Sara knowing that I get up early and having my phone number, for instance. And why her MP3's were so effective for me while professionally-made tapes were not: she'd learned from Isobel, and picked up on a lot of Isobel's style; the same style that I'd found so easy to mimic back to her -- no wonder, since my own subconscious knew it well.

She came over and hugged me, a warm smile on her face. "It's good to see you again, Nick," she said, looking me over. "You look well."

"Thanks," I replied. "So do you."

Sara was beaming at me. "Surprised?"

I looked back and forth at the two of them. "Yes -- though if I had any brains I probably shouldn't be."

Mistress/Isobel/Dr. Burns -- I wasn't sure how to think of her yet -- gave me a sharp look. "If you didn't have brains, you wouldn't be here," she told me. "Sara and I are fairly choosy about the company we keep."

We settled around the kitchen table and had a nice, friendly breakfast. It was a little bit surreal sitting there like family eating and talking about airport construction and swapping horror stories about long-delayed flights. And all the while, despite my best efforts to control it, my eyes kept wandering to the slight gap in the white silk robe that opened up when its wearer sat down at the table. It embarrassed and confused me -- there I was, sitting next to a woman I thought I was falling in love with, but I couldn't stop trying to peek inside the bathrobe of someone else! Nobody said anything, but they had to have noticed. I ended up staring into my plate in an effort avoid making a complete chump of myself. Sara seemed mildly amused by this; she reached over and stroked my thigh for several minutes under the table.

Breakfast ended. I started to grab dishes off the table, but our hostess stopped me. "Sara, can you take care of the cleaning up? I think Nick and I need to talk in the study."

Sara winked at me and smiled. "Sure," she said. "I've got a few other things I need to take care of as well, so take your time." The two women exchanged a look that carried another, unspoken message between them; I had no idea what it was.

The older woman stood and led me back to the room with the red light. She threw an extra switch before motioning me to a chair, taking the one opposite for herself.

"So tell me, Nick," she said for openers, "How's life treating you?"

I suppressed a chuckle as an old favorite line from Cheers came to mind: *Like a baby treats a diaper*. It was funny, but it wasn't true. "Not too badly. I've got enough steady clients that I'm not hurting for work. I haven't touched a cigarette since the last time we saw each other. I still run most mornings to keep in shape. All in all, can't complain. You?"

She smiled and waved vaguely at the room. "Can't complain either," she said breezily. "I'm home again; Baltimore was nice for a year or two, but I've always been a Raleigh girl. My conventional practice is doing well, and my hypnoerotic work has brought me into contact with lots of fascinating people."

She let that sink in for a moment. I sensed she was waiting for me to say something, but I wasn't sure what. Finally, she gave me a little shove. "Why are you here, Nick?"

"Because you and Sara invited me," I replied quickly, but I knew I wouldn't get away with it.

Those penetrating eyes were locked on me, and I felt myself starting to disconnect a little bit -- we were definitely in therapy mode. "Why did you accept?" she asked, quietly and firmly.

"I wanted to meet Sara," I heard myself saying. "I might be falling in love with her."

"And why do you think that?"

"She makes me feel so good ... so dreamy. And she has a sweet voice."

"So you enjoy being hypnotized by her?"

"Yes."

Another pause. "Nick, does being hypnotized by a woman arouse you?"

"Yes," I answered automatically. "Anything relating to hypnosis is sexy to me. I'm getting aroused now, because I think I'm falling into a trance."

"You're not in a trance yet," she assured me. "Right now, you're operating under a posthypnotic suggestion that Sara placed in the recordings for you: to be totally open with me, to answer my questions without thinking and without worrying about how I might react. How long have you been interested in hypnosis, Nick?"

"Six years -- since the first day you put me under. It was so erotic for me, listening to your voice and drifting away, letting you open my mind and change it for me. I used to get hard-ons in your office when you put me in trance, and I'd have sexual fantasies about you in between sessions."

"I know that," she said. I wasn't surprised -- at this point, I'd exhausted my capacity to be surprised -- I just listened. "I knew it then, that you were getting aroused by the hypnosis. Many people find that hypnosis and sexuality are so strongly linked that they are difficult to separate; I feel that way myself, which is why I practice sexual hypnosis as Mistress Althea. I sensed that same feeling in you, back in Baltimore. But you were my patient, and were seeing someone at the time, so I never acted on it with you. Do you wish I had?"

"Very much."

"Did you try introducing hypnosis into your other relationships?"

"I tried ... Shannon let me hypnotize her a couple of times, but I couldn't get her very deep. She said it was nice, but she just wasn't into it. We broke up a little while after that, and I never tried it again until Sara."

"I see," she said. "How many relationships did you have in that time?"

"A few, maybe three. Nothing deep or lasting."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know."

"Think about it now. What does your heart tell you?"

I felt a slow churning, and something gurgled up from the depths of my mind. "It felt like something was missing. I wasn't being totally open with them, and I suppose they sensed that. Angie said I seemed disinterested, like I was waiting for something better to come along."

"And what does your heart tell you about Sara?"

"I don't know yet. It's not the same as the others; we've already opened our minds to each other, even before we actually met. There's an excitement with Sara that I haven't felt with anyone else ... except you."

"Are you still attracted to me, Nick?"

"Oh, yes, very much. All through breakfast I kept trying to look inside your robe, no matter how hard I tried to stop. And that bothers me, because I don't want to hurt Sara. My emotions want to be with Sara and love Sara, but my body keeps imagining what it might be like to be with you. "

She rose slowly from her chair, came towards me and perched on the arm of mine. She took my right hand and placed it in her lap, tantalizingly close to the opening in the robe. "Suppose I told you that you can have both," she said softly. "That you can love us both in whatever way your heart desires, and that we will both love you in return. What would you say to that, Nick?"

Her finger started tracing slow, lazy circles on my forehead. I felt myself starting to drift away. "Please," I replied, my own voice growing distant. "I'd say, please."

She took my hand from her lap and slipped it inside her robe, lifting it up until it cupped a soft, warm breast. A little shock ran through my body as I touched her, like a static jolt, and settled in my groin. I caressed her breast, exploring, getting to know at last what I'd fantasized about so many nights. And when I felt the nipple stand out, hard and proud, I let my hand wander in search of other pleasures. She spoke to me, softly, just at the edge of my awareness, and something changed: as I continued to explore, every place I touched her I felt a similar touch on my own body. I found the other breast, and an invisible hand played with the muscle on my own chest, teasing the nipple into erection. I slid down her smooth, firm stomach and the invisible hand followed. I sought out the warmth

and wetness of her center, found it, and felt the arousing touch of another hand on my own genitals.

Mistress whispered to me, and I rose from the chair. My clothes came off, and the silk robe joined them on the floor. Mistress reclined on a padded leather lounge and pulled me down with her in a deep, passionate kiss. Her hand reached down and guided my hard-on to the place it so desperately wanted to go. I took turns kissing her neck and shoulder and suckling at her breasts as my hips moved on their own, working in rhythm to her increasing tempo of moans and the guiding pressure of her hands on my back. She spoke to me some more, getting me so hard, so ready, holding me right on the edge, until with a series of short cries she came. In between cries she gave the command and my body complied, my own orgasm coming with a fury unmatched even with Sara the night before.

The glow didn't last very long. Mistress and I kissed one more time, and then some kind of dam burst inside me and a flood of confused, guilty feelings rushed forth. What the hell was I doing? What about Sara?

I started to pull away, but Mistress put a hand on the back of my neck and held me to her breast. She whispered soothing words in my ear, and I faded out.

When I came to I was alone on the therapy couch, in the classic pose of a psychoanalysis patient except I was still naked. Mistress, back in her white silk bathrobe, handed me a bottle of water from the small refrigerator under her desk and smiled as she opened one for herself. "How do you feel?"

I had to think about it for a minute. "Weird," I finally said. "Lost. Confused. Guilty."

"Why do you suppose that is?"

"Well, gee, let me think," I replied sarcastically. "I come all the way down from Baltimore to meet Sara because I think I'm falling for her. We have a really great night together, and then first thing after breakfast I thank her by screwing her roommate."

"And you feel that was wrong?"

"Of course it was wrong."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Because I was hypnotized," I began, but corrected myself immediately. "No, that's just an excuse; I did it because I wanted to. It's something I've been dreaming about off and on for the past six years, since the first time I saw you in Baltimore. So when you offered yourself to me, I jumped. I gave maybe half a thought to Sara, but I never even considered not doing it for her sake."

Her eyes never left my face. "Suppose I told you that Sara is completely aware of what we were doing in here, and that she wanted it to happen as much as you and I did. Would that make a difference in how you feel now?"

I could feel my brain stretching, trying to make sense of it all. "I guess," I finally replied. "This is very ... different ... from what I expected. Do you and Sara do this kind of thing often?"

"No, not often. From time to time we've invited others into our home and our beds, but you are the first person we've both felt so strongly about."

"So you and Sara are lovers?"

"Certainly. "

"But you also sleep with other people?"

"Sleep, eat, relate, converse, socialize ... sometimes we even make love with them. Sara and I believe that it is possible, and for some even natural, to have romantic feelings for more than just one other person. We also believe that it's healthy to explore and act on those feelings, knowing that our love for each other doesn't diminish just because we may also feel attracted to a third or even fourth person. In other words, we are polyamorous."

"Polyamorous," I repeated, letting the word sink in. "And bisexual?"

"Yes," she agreed, "but the emphasis is on love, not on sex. We can and do have romantic feelings for people of either sex. We both have deep feelings about you, Nick. If you don't mind, we intend to share you."

"I don't know," I said. "This all feels very strange."

"How is it strange, Nick? Half an hour ago you said yourself that you have strong feelings, for Sara and for me. Is it strange to allow you to exercise and enjoy all of those feelings, or does it make more sense to force you to deny one set of them because of an artificial constraint? Is it strange for the two of us to love you unconditionally, in tandem, or does it make more sense for one of us to deny that love? Think about it, Nick. Love is a great gift which grows the more it is shared. What better way to prove that?"

I was trying very hard to stay with it. "Intellectually, you make sense," I said. "It's not settling easily into the gut, though. This is not the way I was brought up to view relationships."

Mistress was nodding sympathetically. "I know," she assured me. "And I'd like to help you, but that truth is that I can't. Not everyone falls easily into this lifestyle; each of us needs to examine who we are, and what we need, and make our own decision. I can help you find information, and Sara and I can both answer any questions you have, but in the end you have to choose your own path."

I was starting to understand a little bit. "What are my options?"

Maybe not -- Mistress shook her head slowly. "It's best if you don't think of this as a multiple-choice test, Nick. I'll give you some information to read, to help you understand the lifestyle that Sara and I live. You tell us what you need and what you want, and we'll do the same with you. Several paths may be open at that point, or maybe just one; we won't know until we get there. The most important thing is that you keep talking to us. Open, honest communication is vital to any relationship, especially one like ours. Sara and I are both here for you, and we'll respect whatever feelings you have and whatever choice you make."

"Thank you," I said sincerely. "I'm not sure I really understand what that choice is yet, but I appreciate that you're being up front with me about it. There's just so much I don't know. I don't even know what to call you."

She smiled and handed me my clothes. "What have you been calling me in your fantasies?"

"Isobel."

"Then call me that, or anything else that feels right to you, when we are alone or with Sara. I do ask that you address me as Mistress in front of clients, though; it's important to maintain status with them."

"Thank you, Isobel."

She leaned over and kissed my forehead. "Thank you, Nick."

By the time I was dressed, Isobel had booted the PC on her desk and brought up Netscape. "I've bookmarked a number of sites with information on polyamory: essays, discussion groups, things like that. I also have some printed material if you prefer that, but the web sites are more current and have broader coverage."

"Will I find answers in them?" I asked, taking the chair at the desk.

Isobel shook her head. "No, just information. The answers will come from within yourself."

Isobel left me alone in her study, closing the door behind her as she left. I opened it again a crack, found the correct switch and turned off the Do Not Disturb light before sitting back down at the computer.

There were a lot of sites bookmarked; all of them had links to even more. Time passed without my awareness of it as I scanned essays and discussion boards, reading everything I could about polyamory and the people who practice it. At one point there was a soft knock on the door, and Sara peeked in. "Hungry?"

That broke the spell of the screen, and I realized that I was. "Yes, now that you mention it." I started to get up, but Sara came in with a plate already in hand.

"Don't get up," she said. "I made you a sandwich. Hope you like turkey."

It looked like a deli sandwich: thinly sliced turkey breast piled high on seven-grain bread with bacon, lettuce, tomato, and mayonnaise. There were even toothpicks holding the halves together. "It looks delicious," I said truthfully. "Thank you so much."

"My pleasure," she replied.

I picked up half of the sandwich and took a healthy bite, savoring the fresh taste of the ingredients. Sara walked around the desk and started massaging my shoulders. I hadn't noticed it yet myself, but they'd become stiff and slumped from spending hours fixated on the computer screen. Sara's touch loosened me up nicely.

"Anything else I can do for you?" she asked after the sandwich and the massage were both finished.

"Have a seat and talk a little?" I suggested.

"Sure." She pulled an extra chair around and sat next to me. As interesting as the web material was, I liked turning my back on the PC for a bit to talk with Sara.

"I've been doing a lot of reading about polyamory," I began. "One theme that seems to keep cropping up is that each relationship is different; that it all depends on what the people involved really want." Sara nodded, so I continued. "So ... what is it that you want? How do you hope this will end up?"

Sara took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Mistress said you might ask me that. In the broadest sense, I want all three of us to be in a relationship that we all feel good about."

"Do you see the three of us living together? Sleeping together?"

Sara answered slowly. "At this point, I really don't have any expectations for what form that relationship might take. It would very nice, of course, to have you with us all the time, but I can't demand that of you. As long as we can love each other, I suppose I'll be satisfied."

"What if I were to ask you -- just you -- to come back to Baltimore with me?"

She seemed prepared for that one, too. "I'd have to think about it," she said. "I can tell you that monogamy is not in my nature -- I tried it once, and it just wasn't me. I'm happy now with who I am and who I love. I'll be happier if you become part of that." She was watching my face closely. "Does that make sense?"

I nodded. "It does. Sorry if I put you on the spot."

"It's okay," she assured me. "As you can probably tell, I'd rehearsed that one a few times."

"No complaints. Thank you ... for the lunch, for the massage, and for letting me grill you."

Sara got up and kissed me. "Any time. I'm going to let you go back to reading now, but I'll come back for you at six. Mistress and I want to take you out for dinner and a little entertainment."

"Sounds like fun."

Sara left after another kiss, and I lost myself once again in the hyperlinked world. When she came back to get me at 6:00, I'd pretty much reached the limit of what I could assimilate in one sitting.

I went back upstairs, showered the kinks out of my back from a day of sitting, and dressed in a polo shirt and khakis. Isobel and Sara approved my wardrobe; it blended well with their casual summer dresses and flat shoes.

"So," I asked as we got underway in Isobel's Volvo station wagon, "where are we going?"

"The Raleighwood movie theater," Sara said. "We thought that after all that heavy research, you might enjoy putting your brain on standby for a little while."

"Sounds like an inspired notion," I agreed. "Dinner would be nice, too."

"Taken care of," Isobel assured me from the driver's seat. "The Raleighwood is not your typical movie theater."

Indeed, as I found out soon, it wasn't. The Raleighwood doesn't have the usual rows of seats in front of a huge screen; it has big, round tables and well-padded, swiveling chairs for the comfort of its patrons. We were seated by an attractive hostess and handed menus that reminded me of some of the high-class burger joints back home.

I ordered one of the house specialty burgers with fries and a tall glass of Killian's Red. It appeared in impressively short order and was mouth-watering.

We ate mostly in silence at first, all of us hungry. Eventually we slowed down and started talking.

"Tell me about your research, Nick," Isobel opened. "Any insights?"

"I'm still digesting most of it," I confessed. "But so far, the number one rule of polyamory seems to be that there are no hard and fast rules. Everything can be negotiated until all parties are satisfied."

Isobel and Sara both nodded agreement. "That's why communication is so important," Isobel explained. She seemed as though she was going to continue, but we were interrupted by the sudden arrival of two other women.

"Isobel! Sara!" said one of the newcomers. "It's so good to see you again!" Her voice was loud and slightly flat, like a bad actor on stage. With exaggerated movements, she touched cheeks with my companions. Then, as if noticing me for the first time, she added, "And who is *this* delectable-looking morsel?"

Isobel made the introductions. "This is Nick, a friend of ours from Baltimore. Nick, this is Roz and Kristin." She sounded friendly enough, but her eyes seemed less than thrilled.

Roz was the loud one; a gaunt, predatory-looking woman in a leather mini and tank top with a hair color that I'm positive cannot be found anywhere in nature -- sort of a rusty red/purple hue. It was distinctive, at least. Kristin I found much more appealing. She was short, round, and pretty in a mousy sort of way. I noticed that she stayed a step behind Roz and to the left, her glances alternating between us and the back of Roz's head, nodding a lot but saying nothing. I also noticed that she didn't seem entirely comfortable that way.

"So what brings you down here, Nicky?" Roz asked me. The way she said 'Nicky' put my teeth on edge.

"Just visiting," I said casually, returning her appraising gaze with a slightly bored one of my own.

"Well," she came back, primarily to Isobel, "do let me have a turn before you send him home, won't you?" The little hairs on the back of my neck stood up at that.

"That's entirely up to Nick," Isobel answered quietly. "But being as he's been in town less than a day, this is not a good time to have that discussion."

Roz winked broadly. "I understand, of course. Just save me a piece is all I ask." With one more leer in my direction, which I pointedly did not acknowledge, she led Kristin away to a distant table.

I did a slow 3-count before asking. "What the hell was that all about?"

Sara took my hand in hers. "This was not a good time for you to meet Roz," she said. "I'm really sorry about that."

"She's a friend of yours?"

"No way."

Isobel volunteered to explain. "Roz is not a friend of anyone's, at least not in the true sense of the word. What she is, Nick, is a sexual predator. She considers herself polyamorous because she regularly sleeps with a number of different people -- some know about it, some she deceives -- but I doubt she actually loves anyone. She's particularly good at spotting someone weak or hurting and exploiting them for her own gratification."

"Kristin is a friend of mine," Sara said, taking up the thread. "She's recently divorced and not handling it well. Roz has Kristin mostly convinced that she's really a lesbian and that only Roz truly loves her, although not exclusively of course."

"Kristin does not look particularly happy," I observed. "Can't you pry her out of the predator's claws?"

"We're trying, believe me. But Kristin has to want to get away, and right now she's clinging to Roz because she doesn't know who else she can trust. So we let her know in every way we can that we're here for her, and hope that she'll come to us when she's ready."

"And then?" I asked, unsettling pictures coming to my mind.

"And then we help her," Isobel answered. "I offer to treat her professionally, or help her find a therapist she can work with to get over the emotional scarring from Roz and her ex. Sara offers friendship and emotional support."

"But you wouldn't ... " I couldn't finish the question, but they knew what I was thinking.

Sara squeezed my hand and looked me in the eye. "Listen carefully, Nick: polyamory doesn't mean we're constantly on the make for new partners. We invited you down here because I'm falling in love with you; by coincidence, so is Mistress. That's a rare and special thing -- don't confuse

it with some kind of wanton lust, or the randy boredom that motivates Roz. I hope you can see how different we are from her."

I took the hand that was clenching mine and kissed it. "You're right, of course. I'm sorry. It's hard to break the mold of what I've been taught to think, I guess."

The house lights dimmed, and the movie started. I took advantage of the opportunity to put my brain in neutral, letting it puzzle things out while I lost myself in the movie.

It was a quiet trip home. My mind was occupied with questions I still couldn't answer. What was my role in this developing relationship? Why did it bother me so much when Roz made that remark about getting a turn? Was I ever going to understand Isobel and Sara? What bed would I be sleeping in that night? Sara and Isobel saw I wasn't in a mood for talking and let me be, chatting happily between themselves about the movie, Kristin, Roz, and life in general.

When we got to the house, the only conclusion I'd reached was that I was beat. "You look a little shell-shocked, Nick," Isobel observed as we walked inside.

I shrugged. "I've had a lot to think about. My head is pounding."

"Reached any conclusions?"

"I think I finally understand the question," I replied slowly. "Now I just need to figure out the answer."

"Understanding the question is an achievement in itself," she told me.

With no better plan in mind, I found myself following them into the living room and plopping down into an easy chair. Sara pulled up an ottoman and sat down in front of me, picking up one of my feet and setting it in her lap. "You don't have to do that," I told her as she pulled off my shoe.

"I know," she replied, and started massaging my foot.

My weary head fell back against the upper edge of the chair. Almost immediately I felt fingers begin to gently massage my temples. I cast my eyes upward and just caught sight of Isobel's smiling face above and behind me. "Relax, Nick," she told me. "Just pick a spot on the ceiling and watch it, and let us take care of you for a while."

I knew what was going to happen, but I either couldn't or wouldn't do anything to stop it. Very soon my eyes closed and I felt myself drifting, floating on the stream of their voices. I felt my cock hardening in anticipation, but my body was too heavy and relaxed to do anything with it.

After a while my eyes opened. As if in a dream, I saw myself getting out of the chair. Sara took me by the hand and led me up the stairs to her bedroom, with Mistress right behind me. Sara helped me out of my clothes, setting them neatly aside for me and having me sit on the edge of the bed. She started to say something, but then Mistress came up behind her and placed her fingers on Sara's temples. Sara's mouth stopped moving and her face relaxed into a sleepy, contented smile.

At Mistress's suggestion, I stood up to help Sara get undressed. I took the glasses from her face first, folding them carefully and setting them on the night stand. Then I walked around behind her, unzipped her dress, and let it fall off her shoulders to the floor. I paused a moment to put my arms around Sara and kiss her shoulder, then released the hooks on her bra and slipped it off. I cupped her breasts one in each hand, gently kneading them and kissing the nape of her neck while Sara sighed and moaned with each touch.

Mistress spoke again and I knew it was time to continue. I let my hands slip inside Sara's panties and slowly peeled them down. They were already pleasantly moist from my efforts and the scent of her arousal filled my head, making me dizzy and putting fire in my loins. I helped Sara to lie down on the bed, rolled her over onto her back and straddled her. Mistress laid a hand on my back and I dropped, supporting my weight on my elbows, and began suckling at Sara's delicious breasts. The tip of my cock teased her opening below while I moved from breast to breast, feeling the nipples tighten and stand out, kissing all over the breasts and in between. Mistress spoke to both of us, inflaming us with words we only partially heard, driving us into a passionate frenzy.

Finally Sara's legs parted and I thrust myself inside. She groaned and wrapped her legs around me, pulling me in tighter, rocking me in and out, making my every nerve tingle. I was ready to come, I should have come already, but my body was waiting ... waiting for the signal.

I stayed in the saddle, rocking in rhythm with Sara, both of us teetering on the brink, waiting, until every muscle and fiber in my body was screaming for release. Finally, Mistress touched us each on the shoulder and our

bodies exploded, gyrating together, holding on to each other as we came.

I rolled off of Sara, panting and heaving, at the end of my climax. My body felt heavy and spent; my mind was still in trance. I felt the bed compress slightly, then soothing fingers began softly caressing my chest. Mistress spoke to me, calming me, comforting me. Her hands relaxed me and quieted my pounding heart.

Then they began to have another effect. The stroking turned erotic. My eyes opened and I saw Mistress sitting beside me, naked. Her one hand continued to slide up and down my body while with the other she caressed herself. The sight of her nakedness rejuvenated my cock and it stood up, ready to serve her. My right hand found energy and used it to stroke her thigh, reaching up and in to find her sex. She shifted a little, giving me better access to please her, and I probed her slit with my fingers. Her lips were wet and slightly parted, enabling me to slip further in and feel through her folds for the pleasure points. Mistress grabbed my cock and stroked it, bringing intense pleasure even as I found her own sensitive spot.

We fingered each other, moaning and stroking, until Mistress was ready. She climbed atop me and plunged herself down over my eager cock. She paused for a moment, shivering slightly with the sensation, and then we began our own rhythmic rocking. Our eyes met and locked, an electricity flowing between them that energized my body to her service. We moved together in an ever-increasing tempo, Mistress moaning more and more loudly, until finally she climaxed. Her muscles squeezed down on my shaft and she leaned back, pushing down just a little tighter, and my cock responded by pumping into her.

We stayed that way until the pleasure waves receded. Mistress beamed down at me, satisfaction and love in her face. She leaned down toward me, stretching her body out on top of mine, and favored me with a deep, lasting kiss. Then her fingers went back to my temples, she spoke softly and I drifted into sleep.

My sleep was fitful, full of disturbing dreams. In one, I was making love with Sara in her bedroom. There were thin black strings attached to all of my joints, and those strings were controlling all of my movements. At one point I looked up and saw Isobel holding the other end of the strings, her eyes burning brightly at me. In another dream, Roz discovered my hypnotic trigger and used it to take me, then wrapped me tightly in gray silken cord like a fly in a spider's web.

The most disturbing, for me, was the one in which I entered the house to find Isobel, Sara, and two strangers -- one man, one woman -- engaged in a small-scale orgy in the living room. All four of them gave me a friendly greeting and told me to "Come on, join the fun," but I couldn't do it. Instead I tried to go to another room, but in the weird architecture of the dream every hallway and stairway led back to the living room, and to another friendly invitation to join the crowd. Although I continued to refuse to join the orgy, others kept coming into the house and diving right in until the living room was packed with naked, twisting, sweating bodies.

I woke up from that last one in a cold sweat. By the time I stopped panting, it was clear that I wouldn't be going back to sleep anytime soon. I looked at Sara, snoring softly next to me. I peeked out the window: the sky was still dark but with that soft, optimistic glow that said it would be dawn soon. I could use a little optimism, so I decided to go for a run.

Creeping around quietly so as not to disturb Sara, I pulled on some clothes and padded softly down the stairs. Lovecraft followed me, a look of mild annoyance on his feline face. "What are you looking at?" I whispered crossly. *Sara's not going to like this*, his expression seemed to say. I knew that already, so I just turned away from him and slipped out the back door.

I headed north, away from the center of town, letting my body take over and settle into its running rhythm. With no particular need to concentrate on my steps, I let myself fall into what I had come to think of as my runner's trance: eyes ahead, on the lookout for anything requiring immediate attention, while the rest of my mind receded into the comfortable rhythm of the activity.

I often do my best thinking while running. Topic A for that morning was my nightmares and what they meant to me.

The first one was easy: while I may have had fantasies -- okay, very strong fantasies -- about being hypnotized and seduced, that didn't mean I was ready to give up all initiative and become a bedroom puppet for Sara and Isobel's pleasure. I wasn't a submissive by nature; I just liked the idea of letting go once in a while. Would Sara and Isobel accept me as an equal rather than as a sub?

The Roz dream was also pretty easy to put to rest. She'd certainly made a strong impression on me, and an unpleasant one at that, but the bigger question was about someone other than Sara or Isobel trying to use the hypnotic triggers they'd placed in my head. From my own hypnosis

reading and experience, I was pretty sure that even if Roz did walk up behind me and start stroking my temples the way Isobel and Sara do, I wouldn't just drop into trance unless I'd decided I could trust her first. Still, I had been pretty quick to drop the night Sara phoned me out of the blue and hit me with the zero room trigger phrase. Why had my guard been so far down that night -- because I was half asleep already, or maybe because of other suggestions in the MP3's. There could easily be a lot of suggestions in my mind that I didn't consciously remember. A frank discussion with Isobel was definitely in order.

The orgy dream was easily the most ominous of the bunch, because I recognized quickly that it was really about me. Was I secure enough to enter into a relationship that didn't guarantee the exclusivity of my mates? If Sara fell in love with an additional guy -- or girl, for that matter -- could I accept that? Could I watch her hugging and snuggling (or more) with this new person, and not have to be constantly reassured that she didn't love me any less? In my reading about jealousy, it was said pretty clearly that if one partner needs constant reassurance, the relationship just won't work. In that regard, polyamory isn't much different from monogamy. Could I pass that test?

*Yes, you can, my inner voice told me. It all depends on what you really want.*

So what did I really want? I wasn't sure. All my life, I'd always assumed that at some point I'd find a nice woman, get married, have a family, the whole clichéd package. As much as I loved Sara and Isobel, this relationship clearly wouldn't lead in that direction.

*Excuse me, Nick, the voice interrupted. You're 36 years old; if having a conventional wife and family is that important to you, why haven't you done anything about it by now?*

I just haven't met the right woman yet ...

*Bullshit, pal. Shannon would've married you, if you'd asked her. Angie got sick of waiting and proposed to you, you dumb-ass, and what did you say? "The timing doesn't feel right." If monogamous domestic bliss was really what you wanted, you could've found it with either of them.*

So what did I really want?

I thought about Sara, peacefully sleeping back at the house. By conventional measures, probably too young for me -- but conventions

didn't apply in this case. I pictured her smiling face at the airport, remembered her soft voice in my ears the first time I'd heard it, recalled the sweetness of our lovemaking. I had told Isobel that I felt an excitement with Sara that I hadn't felt with anyone before. Did I love Sara? Absolutely.

I thought about Isobel, reentering my life years after inspiring so many sexual fantasies. The warmth, intelligence, and overall class that had drawn me to her six years before were still there, still powerful. The passion I felt around Isobel was different from what I had with Sara, but no less potent. Did I love Isobel? Absolutely.

So what did I really want?

I wanted to go home. My body turned smoothly and headed south, back toward the place where my lovers slept.

The house looked still when I got back to it and crept quietly in the rear door. Lovecraft met me on the stairs -- *You again?* his expression seemed to say -- and followed me back to the bedroom, where Sara lay still and quiet on the bed. I kissed her forehead gently, then took my sweaty body into the bathroom to shower.

When I came out, Sara was gone. I pulled on some casual clothes and went looking for her. I found her in the kitchen, sipping hot tea from an oversized mug with pictures of cats all over it. I came up behind her silently, put my arms around her from behind and kissed her neck. Sara sighed and relaxed against me. "I was worried about you," she reproved me quietly. "You just ran off without saying anything."

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I didn't sleep well; I had to run, and I had to think."

"Did it help?"

"Yes, it did," I replied. "It gave me a chance to decide what I really want."

I could feel her holding her breath. "And did you?"

"I think so." On an impulse, I put my fingers to her temples and began to draw slow, tight circles with them. "Close your eyes and relax," I said, adopting the cadence I'd come to think of as my hypnotist's voice. "Let yourself relax deeply for me, slipping easily into a deep trance, not

worrying about anything at all except how good it feels to be so deeply relaxed."

Sara let out a slow, quiet sigh. Her shoulders slumped, and her head rested more heavily on me as I stood behind her. With no plan in mind, I gave her deepening suggestions until she appeared on the verge of falling out of the chair.

*Okay, Svengali,* I thought to myself. *Now what?*

First things first, I decided. "Thank you, Sara, for going so easily into hypnosis for me. Knowing that you trust me this deeply means a lot to me. In the future, any time I ask you to go into hypnosis for me, you will only do so if you feel safe and comfortable about it. In the same way, you will always be able to disregard any suggestion I give you if it makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe."

At that point I could have started asking her questions, I suppose -- what triggers had she given me, how did she envision the relationship working, that sort of thing. In the end, though, I decided that to do that would be a violation of the trust Sara had shown by letting me take her into trance in the first place. I needed to trust her, and to show her that she could trust me.

I kissed her on the top of the head. "And now, Sara, I'm going to count to three. When I reach three, you will be fully awake again, and you will know that I love you and trust you and want to be with you. One, two, three."

Sara's eyes fluttered open and a big, broad smile formed on her face. "I love you, too," she said happily, then she stood up and joined me in a long, celebratory hug. That was when I noticed Isobel standing in the doorway watching us. She, too, had a satisfied look on her face.

"That was very nice," she said approvingly.

I felt a small flush of nerves. "How much did you see?"

"Most of it," she replied. "I heard you come in and thought I'd see how you were. Well, it seems."

"Better now," I agreed. "There are some things I need to discuss with you -- both of you, really -- but the bottom line is that I want to be part of your lives, and for the two of you to be part of mine."

Isobel smiled happily. "That's good news, Nick. Why don't we discuss the details over breakfast?"

In due course a waffle iron appeared from under the counter, and I was nominated chef for the morning. I mixed up a basic waffle batter from the recipe on the flour bag, then threw in a touch each of cinnamon and nutmeg to add some extra flavor. Sara browned sausage links while Isobel set the table and prepared some fresh strawberries.

Once breakfast had been eaten, cleared and duly praised, both women turned their attention to me. "We're all here," Isobel observed, "and in a pretty mellow frame of mind. What things would you like to discuss, Nick?"

"Hmmm," I said, thinking. "It's hard to know where to begin."

"Try the first thing that comes into your mind," she suggested.

"Okay, here goes. I guess the biggest thing on my mind while I was running was the question of roles. Isobel, you're clearly used to being the dominant partner; Sara calls you 'Mistress', and seems to defer to you on a lot of things; in our lovemaking especially, you have always been the one in control. I've certainly got no complaints about what we've done together this weekend, but I want to be more than just a puppet in bed."

"You'd rather take the dominant role?" Isobel asked.

"Not always. I want balance, Isobel. The things you and Sara can do with my mind, with my body, are amazing; I want to do those things for you, and I want you to teach me how."

Sara and Isobel exchanged a meaningful look. Both were smiling when they gazed back at me. "I think we can arrange that," Isobel said.

"You'll need lots of practice," Sara added, winking.

I chuckled and shook my head. "That was a lot easier than I thought," I remarked. "Isobel, you are an amazingly egalitarian domme."

Isobel grinned back. "A lot of dommes do seem to have a need to control people," she conceded, "even in the non-sexual parts of their lives. Personally, I've never been much for bowing and scraping. Mistress Althea is a role I play with clients, and often times in the bedroom. In everyday life, I'm content to be Isobel Burns."

Sara chimed in. "I call her Mistress because I like to," she explained, "not because I have to. It comes from respect and love."

I found myself nodding. "I understand."

"What else is on your mind?" Isobel prompted.

"My mind," I replied, thinking about Roz. "Please understand, I trust you and Sara completely; but I'm a little spooked at how many back doors I may now have open in my mind. Is there any chance that ... someone else ... could use one of them on me?"

"You mean someone like Roz," Sara noted.

"The thought did cross my mind, after what she said last night."

"There's nothing to worry about," Isobel assured me. "Hypnosis, in my opinion, is the most intimate act two people can do together. In order to work, it requires absolute trust. If someone you don't trust tries to use a hypnotic suggestion you were given by me or by Sara, your mind will reject it easily."

"Remember what you said to me before breakfast?" Sara asked. "About being able to ignore a suggestion if I felt unsafe or uncomfortable?"

"Yes."

"Do you realize where you learned that suggestion from?"

"Nowhere," I replied, puzzled. "I wanted you to know you could trust me, and I pulled that suggestion out of thin air."

"Not thin air, sweetie," she countered. "You pulled it out of your own subconscious. Those exact words are in the first MP3 I made for you."

As soon as she said it, I knew that it was true. So much for the Roz nightmare.

"Is there anything else?" Isobel asked.

I frowned a little, thinking about the orgy dream. "Nothing you can help with, I expect. The big unanswered question for me is, what's going to happen the first time one of you wants to bring someone else into our

circle? Will I be able to handle that, or will I go nuts? I think I'll be all right, but we won't know until it actually happens."

"You're right," Isobel agreed. "Any time something like that happens, we are all tested. Things may change, or they may not. If we remember how we all feel about each other and keep communicating, then we can overcome any hurt. In the meantime, we can enjoy what we have."

"I'll drink to that," I declared, raising my coffee mug for a toast.

It was too pretty a Sunday to stay inside, so Sara and Isobel took me on a daytime tour of Raleigh. We visited the Joel Lane museum house and rode a tour bus through the historic district. We had lunch at a comfortable café, then indulged in some window shopping at the outlet mall. Nothing remarkable happened, and nobody paid any particular attention to us; we were just three people doing the tourist thing on a sunny afternoon. It felt good to be out in public with Sara and Isobel, doing the normal things that friends and lovers do together. I think it helped me realize that the life I was choosing wasn't really all that different from anyone else's.

After a simple dinner at home, Isobel announced that she had a couple of phone sessions scheduled for the evening, so Sara and I would be on our own.

Sara grinned. "How ever will we fill the time?" she asked innocently, winking at me.

The answer, once Isobel retreated into her office and turned on the red 'Do Not Disturb' light, actually surprised me. Sara led me back to the living room and sat me on the couch, then opened a drawer in the end table nearest her end of the couch and handed me a velvet bag.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Open it and see."

With Sara squirming and grinning, I opened the velvet bag and dumped its contents into my hand: a small, shining glass pendant on a black string. I looked at Sara quizzically.

"Lesson one," she explained. "Inducing hypnosis by fixation object. Have you tried it before?"

"No ... the only times I've tried to hypnotize anyone I used progressive relaxation. Except for this morning, anyway."

Sara nodded. "Then this will be a good technique to learn, assuming you still want to. Do you?"

I looked at the pendant, then at Sara's expectant face. "Yes," I answered easily. "I'd like to learn how to use this."

Sara gave me a basic primer on how a fixation object works. I practiced holding the crystal at the right height, locating it so that it would catch the available light and create the right visual effect, keeping it moving so the subject would have to work to stay focused on it, while at the same time tiring out the eyes. At first I practiced on an imaginary subject in an empty chair. Lovecraft slinked in to see what we were about, so I tried to practice on him. When he left, unimpressed with my hypnotic prowess, Sara sat down in the practice chair and looked up at me expectantly. "My turn," she declared.

I held the pendant in front of her face, high enough that she would have to strain slightly to see it, and began to swing it slowly in a circle. "Relax, Sara," I said in my slow, easy, hypnotist voice. "Relax and stare at the shiny parts of the pendant. Fix your eyes on it, relax, and breathe in deeply, nice and deep, filling your lungs ... and now breathe out, letting your tensions go and your eyes focusing exclusively on the center of the pendant. And as you listen to the sound of my voice, breathing evenly and slowly, watching the pendant, concentrating on the pendant, you will find that your eyelids have a tendency to get heavy. Heavy, Sara ... so heavy, so tired, as if they had a heavy weight attached to them. And the longer you stare into the pendant, relaxing more and more, looking deeper and deeper, the more your eyelids get heavy, the more they need to blink."

"Wait a sec," Sara interrupted, "this isn't working."

I was crestfallen. "What's wrong?"

"I'm having a hard time following the pendant the way you're moving it," she said. "Try moving it more slowly, in a smaller circle. Just do that for a minute, without talking, and I'll let you know when it feels right."

I tried a number of different movements: slower, smaller circles; swinging the pendant back and forth; holding it closer to, or farther from, her face. Then I tried letting the pendant hang still, but just rolling the string between

my fingers. That put a slight spin on the teardrop-shaped glass, starting out slowly, speeding up, then slowing again as I reversed direction.

"Oooh," Sara cooed, "that's good. Keep doing that for a minute." Her eyes locked easily onto the swirling, spinning pendant. "Yes," she continued, her words coming more quietly and slowly. "That ... looks ... good ... "

"Good," I said, picking up the thread of my induction patter. "It looks very good, Sara. So pretty, so captivating, that you don't want to look away. You can't look away -- your eyes are captured, locked on, held to the pendant as if by gravity itself. Your eyelids become heavy, so tired and heavy, wanting so much to close, but even more to keep gazing into the pendant, deeper and deeper, as it relaxes you more and more. Getting drowsier and sleepier and heavier every minute, every second. And you have a feeling now as if your sleepy, heavy, drowsy eyelids are slowly closing, slowly closing, getting drowsier and more tired with each breath, blinking heavily, not wanting to open but needing to. And you know that soon, when they blink, they will be too tired, too sleepy and drowsy, to even think about opening again. And you can find yourself imagining how good that will feel, how wonderfully soothing and comfortable it will feel when your eyes close and you can relax and let yourself go into deep hypnosis. So good, so comfortable. Feel your eyes closing now, Sara, closing, closing tightly, closing heavily, and notice how very good, how comfortable, how relaxed you are now that your eyes have tightly and comfortably closed. It's a relief to finally have your eyes closed, your body relaxing all over, your head resting comfortably against the back of the chair."

I watched with a growing hard-on as Sara's eyes blinked heavily and closed. Her entire body melted into the chair and a huge, happy sigh escaped her lips.

We hadn't really discussed what would happen after the induction, but I had ideas of my own. I took Sara through the standard staircase deepener, then tried a couple of convincers. Her arms became light and lifted up to the ceiling at my suggestion that helium balloons were tied to her wrists, then dropped again as I cut the imaginary string and took her deeper into trance. I told her that as she went deeper into hypnosis, my words would seem to come more slowly; then I deliberately slowed down my speech, convincing her mind that she was going deeper (which in turn made it so).

What to do then? I knew we needed to take things upstairs to avoid disturbing Isobel, who was still doing her phone sessions. I thought about

trying somnambulism with Sara -- she was certainly an experienced subject, so I was sure she could do it -- but something more devious entered my mind.

"Sara," I said softly. "I'm going to count to three, and on the count of three you will wake up feeling relaxed and ready for bed. You will go upstairs to use the bathroom and get yourself ready. When you come out of the bathroom and see me waiting for you, you will come over and start to hypnotize me by rubbing my temples. When you do, though, you will find that it actually hypnotizes you instead of me. Each little circle you draw on my temples will bring you deeper and deeper into hypnosis, until you reach the state you are in right now. You will then be totally open to my suggestions. Is this okay with you?"

Sara's lips moved slowly, breathing a barely-audible "Yes." I gave her a slow three count and smiled as her eyes opened to meet mine.

"Nice job," she commended me. "I don't remember a thing after the staircase."

"You will," I assured her. "I didn't tell you not to."

Sara stretched lazily and yawned. "I'm ready for bed," she announced. "Are you coming?"

"After you."

I used the downstairs bathroom while Sara trudged upstairs. When she came out of the bathroom, wrapped in her terry robe, I was sitting on the bed in my briefs waiting for her. A lusty smile came over her as she approached me.

"You were very good downstairs," she said. "Now relax and let me do the work." Her hands reached up to my head and I felt fingers touching my temples. My body relaxed instinctively, but curiosity about my own suggestion gave me the ability to stay awake. The fingers at my temples slowed down with each circle, and Sara's eyes grew heavy and unfocused as she gazed at me. A small glimmer of realization passed across her face and she slumped forward.

I caught her and eased her onto the bed, then opened her robe and peeled off my briefs. I kissed her and fondled her and talked her into an orgasm, then climbed on top and slid myself inside her. We rocked together and I kept talking, this time to both of us, until our bodies

responded and we came together. I had just tucked Sara in and was going to join her when I heard movement downstairs.

Grabbing Sara's robe, I padded softly down the stairs. The study door was open and the red light was off; the bathroom door was closed, but showed light in the small gap underneath.

I knew what I would want if I'd just spent 3 hours on the phone, so I went to the kitchen and poured Isobel a tall glass of iced tea. I took it back to the study and set it down next to the desk.

"Is that you, Nick?" I heard her say as she returned to the study.

"In the flesh," I answered, grinning. I pointed toward the tea. "Thought you could use that."

Isobel shot me a grateful look, grabbed the glass, and took a long pull. "That was a wonderful thing to do," she said. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, Mistress."

Isobel took her glass and sat down on the therapy couch. "Where is Sara?"

"Upstairs, asleep."

"Ah," she said knowingly. "I take it you found some way to pass the time, then."

"Oh, yes," I said, hefting the velvet bag I'd retrieved from the living room. "Sara taught me a new technique."

Isobel smiled again and set down the glass. "Why don't you show me what you've learned?"

That was a surprise. "Are you sure?"

Her eyes met mine. I saw certainty, and a trace of lust, in them. "Practice makes perfect," she remarked, and waited expectantly.

So I practiced. I removed the pendant from the bag and held it up just above eye level, twirling it on the string in the way that had worked so well for Sara. It was just as effective on Isobel: the twirling crystal picked up light from her desk lamp and sparkled, capturing her gaze and pulling her in beautifully. I watched her eyes become heavy in response to my

suggestions, blinking sleepily, glazing over, then finally closing with a sigh. I used the same deepening techniques that I'd used with Sara, and in a few minutes Isobel was completely limp and loose on the couch.

"Tell me something, Isobel," I said softly. "Are you deep enough in hypnosis to get up and move around without disturbing your trance?"

"Somnambulism," she mumbled. "Yes, plenty deep enough."

"Good. Isobel, I want you to open your eyes now but remain in deep hypnosis." Her eyes opened slowly and stared straight ahead. "Now, I want you to get up and stand still for me while I remove your clothing. You'll find that your body will move as much as you need it to while still remaining deeply relaxed, and with every piece of clothing I remove from your body you will feel yourself growing even more deeply relaxed."

I watched with growing arousal as Isobel slowly stood up and faced me. She was wearing a button-down shirt, slacks, and comfortable shoes. I was able to undress her easily, giving her simple commands to step out of the pants and underwear after I pulled them down, until she stood nude in front of me.

I took a few minutes to admire her body, which was as elegantly beautiful naked as she was in clothes. I ran my hands over her, talking her into increasing arousal with each touch, memorizing her curves and smells and taste.

Taste ... I hadn't tasted her yet. *No time like the present*, I decided. I had her lie back on the therapy couch, legs apart, and adored her. She responded to my lips and tongue in a most satisfying way, moaning and squeezing my head between her thighs, her body begging for more as she climaxed several times. When she finally moaned, "Enough, please," I relented and allowed her to drift into a pleasant, refreshing sleep.

*I could get used to this*, I thought as I went up to bed.

### **iii: Coming Out**

"Here we go," I said, pointing out the window. "This is the really spooky part."

We were on final approach to BWI, less than a minute off the ground. Through the little round window I could make out the street lights and the moving headlights of cars on Dorsey Road. "In a few seconds," I continued, "we're going to swoop over that road so close that if it were daytime you'd almost be able to see the people in the cars."

Sara watched out the window and drew in a sharp breath as we passed over the moving traffic, then touched down almost immediately after. "That is close," she agreed. "It must be scary to be driving down there when a plane lands."

"It is," I assured her. "I've done it. There's even an observation lot where you can park and watch the planes land."

Most of our fellow passengers were fidgeting, anxious to get out of their seats; Sara and I just sat calmly together, hand in hand, content to wait while the plane rumbled across the tarmac toward the terminal. In due time the plane came to a stop and we joined the stream of passengers inching toward the exit.

We were met near the gate by Bob, a good friend of mine. "Hey, stranger!" he greeted me, his thick moustache curling up with his smile. His face became slightly puzzled when he noticed I was holding hands with someone he didn't know.

"Sara Jane," I said, "meet Bob. Bob, this is Sara, the lady I went to Raleigh to meet."

Bob recovered himself quickly and shook Sara's hand. "Nice to meet you. Old Nick didn't tell me he was bringing company back with him. "

"It was an impulse," she told him. "Thanks for coming to get us."

"Glad to do it," he assured her. "Let's join the mob at baggage claim before the stampede begins."

Bob stayed back as we jockeyed for position near the belt and claimed our bags, then led us out to the short term parking garage where his Bronco waited for us. We loaded our things and then Sara and I slipped into the back seat together for the trip back to my place. We made small talk on the way, just chatting pleasantly about Raleigh, the weather, the Ravens, the Panthers ... nothing weighty. Bob tried hard to be his usual jocular self, but I could see his eyes reflected in the rear-view mirror. His apprehensive glances back at Sara told me that he wasn't comfortable, but I wasn't ready to enlighten him just yet. Luckily he isn't the type to press.

It was approaching 10:00 when we pulled up to my apartment building. "You want to come up for a bit?" I asked Bob.

He shook his head. "No thanks, it's getting late. I'll catch up with you tomorrow, maybe."

"That works. Thanks for the transport."

"No problem." His eyes darted quickly toward Sara and back. "You take care, okay?"

"Relax," I told him. "She's good people."

"Okay," he said, wanting to be convinced.

"He's a good friend," Sara remarked as Bob pulled away.

"The best," I agreed.

"And he's worried about you," she added.

"Probably. Right about now, every psycho Internet stalker story he's ever heard is probably going through his mind. When I'm still alive tomorrow, he'll relax."

"Until you tell him you're moving in with us."

I shrugged. "He'll be okay with that, too, once he gets to know you."

"I hope so."

Sara's voice sounded uncertain. I stopped in front the apartment door, took her face in my hands, and looked into her eyes as I spoke. "My mind is made up," I declared. "I'm closing up shop here and moving down as soon as I can. There are going to be some friends up here who will think I'm nuts because they don't know you or Isobel, but they're not going to talk me out of it."

Sara smiled and hugged me tightly. "Thanks ... I'll try not to make you say that too often."

We went inside and I gave her the quick tour of my tiny abode. She was suitably awed by my collection of consumer electronics, including the Star Trek remote. I took our stuff back to the bedroom and acquainted Sara with the computer, which she would be using to keep up with her work while I was out doing mine. I set up a login for her and we verified that my CD-RW drive could read her disks, then I turned it over to her.

"We should touch base with Mistress," she suggested, then shot me a scolding look. "I can't believe someone with that amount of gadgetry in the living room doesn't have ICQ on his computer."

I hung my head in mock shame. "I never needed it before."

"You do now," she told me, and pulled up the browser. Ten minutes later I had an ICQ number and Sara was giving me a quick tutorial on how to use it. Soon we were in contact with Isobel.

<MistressA> You caught me just in time. I was about to go to bed.

<NickT> Sorry. Just wanted to let you know we made it here in one piece. I was going to use the phone, but ...

<MistressA> It's fine, Nick. I'm glad you called. Now go play. \*winks suggestively\*

<NickT> Yes, Mistress. (-:

Sara and I exchanged a lusty look as I shut down the computer. "Well," I said with a smile, "we have our orders."

Sara smiled back with a gleam in her eye. "Yes, we do."

"Would you like to do the honors?"

She thought about it for a second, then shook her head. "No thanks," she demurred. "I like being your practice subject."

"As you wish, my dear."

Sara settled herself comfortably in the chair and looked up at me expectantly. "Did you bring your pendant?"

I kicked myself mentally, realizing I'd left the pendant back in Raleigh. Then I thought about it for a second. Sara was an experienced and very susceptible subject; it gave me an idea. "We don't need the pendant," I declared with confidence. "Watch this." I made a great show of reaching into my shirt pocket with my right hand and pantomimed pulling out the pendant on its cord. Holding the imaginary cord between my thumb and finger, I lifted it up to the proper height and rolled my fingers. "Just imagine that I'm holding the pendant right above you, exactly where I always hold it, twirling and spinning before you. Picture your eyes being drawn to it, so pretty, so colorful. See it with your mind's eye, and you will feel it drawing you quickly, easily, comfortably, into deep hypnosis."

Sara followed the imaginary pendant with her eyes and her imagination did the rest. In mere seconds she was staring blankly at a spot about a foot below my extended hand, her face growing slack, her breathing slowing. Her eyes dropped shut on command and she sank easily into the chair.

Her body melted as I massaged her shoulders, coaxing her deeper and deeper into trance. I stood her up and eased her clothes off, telling her all the while how beautiful she was and how much I loved her. Then we made love, rocking together sweetly and slowly, and I used her trance to amplify the sensations for her. We both went to sleep happy.

My body groaned when the alarm went off at 5:30 in the morning. I smacked the snooze button swiftly, remembering Sara next to me, and grudgingly climbed out of bed for my run.

I needed the run -- although I'd gotten plenty of other kinds of physical activity in Raleigh, the only day I'd run was the Sunday morning when I'd made up my mind about the relationship. My legs and chest grumbled at

me for a few minutes before settling into the familiar rhythm, allowing my mind to detach and start gnawing on the problem of the day -- how to close up my Baltimore life quickly and get down to Raleigh.

The logistical issues were not that hard to figure out: I'd need to give my clients reasonable notice, recommend new people to take over the business when I could; settle on a firm moving date and either sublet the apartment or take my chances with the management company; decide what stuff was worth taking down with me and what wasn't. That was all pretty straightforward, albeit not easy.

The big issue was how to break the news. I had a lot of professional contacts and acquaintances who would wonder if I was having a midlife crisis or something when they heard I was packing up and moving south with someone 10 years my junior. That didn't bother me a whole lot, but there was a small cadre of close friends that I cared deeply about, whose friendship and esteem I was anxious to keep. Bob, of course; Sylvia, the engineering manager at my main client office; Gene and Mario, friends of mine from the company I'd worked at before going freelance. I wanted them to meet Sara, to get to know her a little, and to be happy for us. Most importantly, I wanted to break the news to them myself before they heard it through the grapevine. That would mean moving quickly and decisively.

Sara was still asleep when I got back. I showered quietly and dressed in the semi-light of the morning through shaded windows, then kissed her gently. She stirred slightly. "I have to go," I whispered. "My cell number is on a sticky note on the side of the computer screen; I'll see you after work." She mumbled something vaguely "okay"-like, and I kissed her one more time before leaving.

My only stop that day was G GK, the large insurance/financial services company that was my primary client. I had a regular cubicle there, just like the G GK employees, and spent most of my time helping them manage the growing fleet of Citrix Metaframe servers used by their field sales forces. Dale, the CTO for their Baltimore branch, reminded me periodically that I could have a full-time job there any time I wanted, but I preferred the flexibility of freelancing. It worked out well for both of us that way.

I wasn't too surprised to see Sylvia hovering around my cubicle when I got there. "You look great," she told me, giving me the once over. "Whatever you did this weekend, keep on doing it."

"Yes, ma'am," I grinned, then settled down into my chair.

"Well?" she prompted. "Aren't you going to tell me about your trip?"

"Not much to tell," I demurred. "I flew down to Raleigh, stayed with friends for a few days, and came home."

Sylvia perched on the edge of my desk and winked at me. "Okay," she replied, "then why don't you tell me about the girl you brought back with you?"

I dropped my head and laughed softly. "Been talking to Bob, I take it?"

"Maybe just a little."

I looked up at her and our eyes met. "Her name is Sara Jane Douglas. She's a freelance Web designer from Raleigh. She's 27, and I'm in love with her. When you meet her, I think you'll understand why."

"Does she have anything to do with the way you've been acting the past couple of weeks?"

"Everything," I answered truthfully.

"Then I think I understand already." With a maternal smile, she patted my shoulder and left.

One of my first priorities for that morning was to grab Dale for a few minutes. I found him in the kitchen and followed him back to his office, making small talk about the weather in Raleigh and such until I could close the door behind us.

Dale looked at the closed door and sensed a problem. "What's up, Nick?"

"This is top secret until I say otherwise, okay?"

He could see I was serious. "Okay, you got it."

I took a deep breath and plunged in. "I've decided to close up shop and move down to Raleigh. I'm not ready to make that public yet, but I know how hard it is to find good Citrix people so I wanted you to have as much advance notice as possible."

Dale let the news sink in for a minute. "I'm sorry to hear that, Nick," he said sincerely. "Do you have a timetable?"

"Not a firm one. I figure it'll take four to six weeks to either wrap up the projects I have going on now or hand them over to Sylvia's people. Getting out of my apartment lease will take just as long, I expect. Plus I need to hand off my other clients as well. I could be shuttling back and forth for as much as three months during the transition."

He nodded. "And how long do you expect to keep this quiet?"

I grinned. "The rest of the week, if I'm lucky."

"That may be difficult," he warned, "but I'll hold off on anything that would blow the lid before Monday. I don't suppose you could recommend anyone offhand to replace you?"

"I might know someone," I replied. "But I haven't approached him yet. Do you think you'll make this job a salaried position or keep it outsourced?"

"I've been holding a vacant slot in the org chart with your name on it for as long as I can remember," he said. "Salaried would be my first choice; but, as with you, I'm open to any options."

"Fair enough. You start the paperwork with HR, and I'll talk to my friend."

Dale stood up and shook my hand. "We're gonna miss the hell out of you, you know."

I nodded. "Thanks."

I ran into Sylvia again on the way back to my cube and had a nasty thought. The rumor mill in that office is strong and healthy; it was only a matter of time before she heard about my closed-door session with Dale. What would I say if she asked me about it? When I'd made my tentative plans, I hadn't fully appreciated how difficult it would be to start things in motion for the move while still keeping it a secret. I also hadn't realized how heavily the guilty knowledge would weigh on my own conscience. It made for a grueling day.

When I got back to the apartment, Sara was waiting for me in the living room. She took one look at my face and jumped up to take me in a bear hug. It was exactly what I needed right then.

We settled together on the sofa and Sara started stroking my temples. I felt myself relaxing as her fingers drew little circles on the sides of my head. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"I don't know if I can keep the secret," I said immediately. "I'm not used to holding out on everyone, and it's stressing me out."

"Then don't," she suggested. "It's not worth it, Nick. If they're that close to you, then they'll understand."

"I don't know ... you saw how Bob was last night."

"He was concerned," she countered. "But he accepted that you knew what you were doing. Why not give him credit for that?"

I had slouched down far enough that my head was resting on Sara's breast. I looked up at her and smiled weakly. "You're probably right," I agreed. "The thing is, I don't have any immediate relatives; just a couple of cousins in Jersey that I exchange cards with at Christmas. These people, Bob and Sylvia and Gene and Mario, *are* my family. I want them to approve of what we're doing and to be happy for us."

"They will," she assured me. "Maybe not right away, but eventually."

"I hope so," I sighed, and then let my eyes close. Sara spoke to me in her soft, measured voice, taking me deeply into myself. I felt the anxiety, the tension, drain from my limbs and upper body and concentrate in one place -- a place where a certain amount of tension can be quite pleasurable.

As Sara continued to speak softly to me the tension in that place continued to build until I was hard as iron. I felt my body rise from the sofa and head to the bedroom. My clothes seemed to fall away from me. I stretched out on the bed and closed my eyes again, letting Sara's voice take me deeper. The bed moved slightly and I felt Sara climb on top, straddling me at the hips while her hands massaged my chest and shoulders. I opened my eyes and met her gaze, letting her green eyes capture my awareness. She was speaking still, but the words went straight through me before I could interpret them consciously. I didn't care, though, because they made my body feel wonderful -- floating in

pleasure, my limbs growing lighter and lazier as my cock grew stiffer and longer.

I felt Sara envelop my extended member, easing down on it and settling in with a little wiggle. Her eyes turned upward and closed for a second, then locked onto mine again. We rocked back and forth, in and out, until the pleasure overtook us both and sent us soaring.

"Feeling any better?"

We were still on the bed, having a nice post-coital snuggle. I buried my face in her hair and took in a long, delicious breath before answering. "I think so. If nothing else, I'm a lot less stressed than when I walked in. Thank you for that."

"My pleasure, hon."

We stayed that way for a few more minutes, until the grumbling of our stomachs made it clear that other important needs were going unfulfilled. I peeked at the alarm clock. "Too late to start cooking," I opined. "We'd better eat out."

Sara groaned at my awful pun and smacked me with a pillow.

Twenty minutes later we were in my car, headed for Catonsville. I'd decided to take Sara to Jeeter's, a small steak house and pub that was a favorite hangout of mine. There was an excellent chance we'd run into other people I knew there, which was a large part of the reason we were going -- it was an opportunity to introduce Sara into what I was already thinking of as my old life; to let people see us together, so when the word of my leaving got out it would be less of a surprise.

I asked for and got my usual corner booth, big enough for six, in case anyone happened by. We had just enough time to get settled in before our waitress came by. Surprise registered on her face when she saw Sara, but she recovered quickly. "Hey, sweetie," she greeted me with a quick touch on the shoulder. "How've you been?"

I grinned back at her and squeezed Sara. "Never better, Kelly. This is Sara. Sara, this is Kelly, the woman who's been servicing me on a weekly basis for well over a year."

"That's right," Kelly agreed, rubbing my shoulder suggestively. "I know exactly what my Nick likes."

Sara grinned and played along. "And what is that?"

Kelly winked and lowered her voice to a seductive purr. "Prime rib, medium rare; French onion soup; garden salad with ranch dressing on the side; iced tea if he's driving, otherwise Sam Adams. But most of all, he likes to do it with a group."

"Oh, really?" Sara said, her eyebrow rising.

Kelly gave an exaggerated nod. "Really, hon. Some nights I've done this guy and five, six of his friends all at the same time. If you're taking him on, you'll have your hands full."

"I'll remember that," Sara replied in mock earnestness, and we all laughed at ourselves for a moment. With the bantering over, Kelly took our food and drink orders and slipped away. "She's interesting," Sara remarked as the waitress vanished into the kitchen.

"Oh, yes," I agreed. "She's like that with all the regular customers."

In short order my expectations were realized as Gene and Mario walked into the place. Kelly spotted them and pointed them toward me; they hesitated at first, seeing Sara, but when I waved them over they came. I stood up to greet them with hearty handshakes.

Gene was a big man, broad in the shoulders, with a booming but friendly voice. "Is this the mystery lady?" he asked, indicating Sara.

"This is Sara," I confirmed. "Sara, meet Gene and Mario." Handshakes were exchanged, and the men settled in with us. Kelly reappeared and fetched drinks for them. "So what brings you guys out?"

"App upgrade," Gene replied. "It wasn't quite as much of a clusterfuck as usual; that's worth celebrating all by itself."

"If you ran the whole thing on UNIX," Mario jibed, "we'd be on our third round by now."

"If we ran the whole thing on UNIX," Gene retorted, "we wouldn't get nearly as much overtime and we'd only need half the support staff. So you see?"

Windows NT is vital to this country's economy -- or at least to my personal economy."

We toasted Bill Gates for enhancing Gene's personal economy, then fell into a spirited discussion of the inadequacies in Microsoft operating systems -- admittedly a favorite subject, since Gene and I make much of our living by helping companies overcome those inadequacies. The arrival of our dinner slowed down the geek-speak but didn't entirely stop it.

By the time Sara and I finished eating, Gene and Mario were winding down as well. The conversation gave way to a companionable silence.

"So, Gene," I said, seizing the opportunity. "How are your Citrix skills these days?"

Gene shrugged. "A little stale, but not moldy yet. Why?"

"GGK is looking for a Citrix guy," I told him. "Full time, good benefits, free parking."

"Working with you?"

"Replacing me," I confessed. "You'd be working for Sylvia. I'd be there for a few weeks to get you started, then it's all yours."

"Why don't you take it?" he asked suspiciously. "You practically live there anyway."

I took a deep breath. Sara's hand squeezed mine under the table. "I'm closing up shop, guys. I'll be moving down to Raleigh as soon as I wind up business here."

Mario's East African eyes opened wide in surprise. Gene looked sharply at Sara, then back at me. "No shit?"

"No shit," I assured him. "I talked to Dale about it today. The rest of the group will find out as soon as I can get to them."

Gene let out a low whistle. "Jesus," he said.

"So are you interested in the job?"

"Yeah, I'm interested."

"Great," I said. "I'll give Dale your number and a recommendation; you might want to email him a resume."

"Will do."

"Changing strategy?" Sara inquired after we took our leave.

"Maybe a little," I granted. "I knew I'd probably have to tell Gene right away, since part of the plan was to offer him the job of replacing me. Mario could have waited, but I decided tonight that I'm not going to drive myself crazy trying to keep the lid on. If Sylvia or Bob figures it out before I'm ready to tell them, so be it. The likelihood of them running into Gene or Mario in the next couple of days is pretty slim, anyway."

It was a little after nine when we got back to the apartment, so Sara put in a call to Isobel. I flipped on the computer and did some aimless recreational surfing, half an ear on Sara's end of the conversation as she updated Isobel on our activities, including our encounter with Gene and Mario. After several minutes, she handed the cordless to me. "Your turn."

I put the phone up to my face. "Isobel?"

"Good evening, Nick. How are you doing?"

"Fine," I said.

"You're quite sure?" she pressed. "No second thoughts?"

"Positive," I assured her. "I've already started saying goodbye to the place."

"That's good to hear. I'm planning a party of sorts to welcome you into the fold. When do you think you'll be coming back down?"

I had to think a moment. "I haven't got it pinned down yet. I can probably come down to visit at the end of next week. By then I should also have a better handle on how much longer things will take up here."

"I've got a few things to arrange here as well," she said. "But it sounds as though there will be plenty of time. Come when you can."

I wished Isobel goodnight, then gave the phone back to Sara and went to bed. I half-remember her slipping in beside me some time later and snuggling close.

Thursday I spent most of the day working with the two junior administrators, Rhana and Victor, on testing an application upgrade. I welcomed the chance to wrap my mind around the technical issues, pushing the personal to the background for a while. In the process, I found myself taking the time to explain more thoroughly than usual the reasons behind each step and the problems I expected might come up in the field. Their curious looks warned that I might be tipping my hand a little, but they chose not to call me on it directly.

When I got back to my apartment, a white Accord in the parking lot caught my eye. It looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it. I shrugged it off and headed inside to be with Sara.

My life flashed before my eyes when I reached my living room. Sara was there on the couch, and opposite her in the recliner was an attractive woman my age with sandy hair, soft brown eyes, and (I remembered) a white Accord -- Shannon.

I think every guy has nightmares about ex-lovers getting together with the current one. There was nothing specific to dread in this case, but my brain vapor-locked for a few seconds anyway. Sara saw the deer-in-the-headlights look on my face and laughed. "Relax, Nick," she said with a grin. "We finished dissecting your personality twenty minutes ago."

That got me breathing again, so I dropped my things in the hall closet and sat down with them. "How are you doing, Shannon?"

"Okay, I suppose," she said, looking a little bewildered. "Sara was just about to explain to me why I can't seem to get out of this chair."

I looked back at Sara, who was chuckling to herself. "We were talking about hypnosis. Shannon was curious, so we did a little demonstration."

"I see," I said skeptically. "Shannon just happened to stop by, and you two just happened to start talking about hypnosis."

"It's my fault," Shannon volunteered. "I heard there was someone new in your life and I wanted to meet her, so I made up an excuse and came

over. I asked about how you two met, she told me about the MP3's, I mentioned that you and I had tried a little hypnosis but never really got anywhere with it. Sara started telling me about how easy it can be to relax and drift into trance, and the next thing I knew I was stuck in this chair." I could see her upper body trying to get up, but her legs and hips remained completely at rest.

"Wait a minute," I objected. "There have been other people in my life since you and I ended, but this is the first time you've come over to meet one. Did your brother put you up to this?"

Shannon tried to sink a little deeper into the recliner for cover. "Not directly," she said. "He did tell me that you had gone to Raleigh to visit someone you'd only met recently over the Internet, and that when he picked you up at the airport you'd brought her with you. I could tell Bob was pretty spooked -- let's face it, Nick, you are not known as an impulsive, romantic guy -- and that got my curiosity up. I know it's none of my business, but I wanted to meet the woman who'd had such an impact on you." She shook her head and chuckled lightly, nodding at her unmoving legs. "I'm beginning to understand why."

"Hypnosis is not mind control," I told her. "If you really needed to get out of that chair, you'd have no problem doing it. Just as, if Sara tried to get me to do something I really didn't want to do, I could easily ignore the suggestion."

Shannon nodded. "So what you're saying is, I'm stuck in this chair because some part of my mind likes the idea of giving up control?"

"Likes it," Sara agreed, "or at least has no objection to it. Or maybe part of you realizes that by allowing yourself to go into trance and follow a simple suggestion, you are actually exercising more control over your own body."

"This is weird," Shannon said, "but kind of hot. Can you teach me to do this with my fiancé?"

"I probably shouldn't," Sara demurred. "I'm not certified to teach. But Nick and I are both studying under a professional Mistress. I could ask her if she can recommend someone."

"I think I'd like that," Shannon agreed. "Can I have my legs back now?"

We all laughed. "Sure," Sara said. "I'll have to take you back under to do it, though." She stopped and looked at me; I could see the wheels turning in

her mind. "Actually, would you mind if Nick did the honors? I'd like to see how he does with someone who isn't used to going into trance for him."

Shannon regarded me curiously. "Okay," she said with a playful smile. "I'll play guinea pig one more time."

Taking my cue, I pulled an ottoman over by Shannon's side and sat down. "First off, let's have you sit back and relax, get nice and comfortable. Now, try to remember what it felt like when Sara took you into hypnosis a little while ago. Imagine yourself listening to her voice, concentrating on each word."

"Relaxing," Sara added softly from behind me. "Really relaxing and letting go, letting all of the tension drain from your muscles, letting that wonderful, soothing fog settle over your mind again. Remembering to imagine the warm rays of the sun beaming down on you as you lie back on your private beach, nothing to think about, nothing to worry about, just relaxing."

We tag-teamed Shannon, alternating back and forth, sometimes speaking at the same time, until Shannon's eyes closed and her head flopped back. We gave her deepening suggestions, taking her way down, until her breathing had slowed to a barely perceptible pace. Her skin became cool and slightly pale, suggesting a very deep trance state.

Toward the end I noticed that Sara had stopped taking her turn and was simply sitting still, staring at Shannon's sleeping face. Sara was pretty well under herself; I wondered if she realized it.

"Can you hear me?" I asked Shannon.

Her lips quivered slightly, but nothing resembling speech came out. Instead, I heard Sara answer, "Yes."

An impish idea struck me -- something I'd tried, and failed, with Shannon long ago, but I felt confident I could pull it off this time. "You are deep in hypnosis now," I said in my smooth, gentle voice. "Your conscious mind is asleep, resting comfortably, leaving your subconscious mind totally open to my suggestions. The suggestions I give you now will be for your own enjoyment, your own pleasure, and will never be used to embarrass or harm you, so you know you can safely accept them and follow them. Will you accept my suggestions now?"

Again, I heard a "Yes" from Sara and got a slight lip movement from Shannon.

"The subconscious mind has a very powerful memory," I continued. "It can remember every event, every sensation, you've ever experienced. It can remember exactly how it feels when your lover pleases you, giving you the most wonderful, loving, arousing oral sex you've ever had. In fact, your subconscious mind can cause you to feel those sensations again right now, or whenever you wish to. You will feel a lover's tongue gently caressing your most sensitive pleasure places, moving exactly the way you love it to, bringing you quickly and easily to the most intense, satisfying orgasm you've ever had. This will happen easily and naturally, bringing you to delicious orgasm, whenever I say the word 'replay' to you."

I reinforced the suggestion several times, seating it firmly in Shannon's subconscious. I told her she could tell any current or future lover the trigger word and her body would respond equally well to it. When she seemed ready, I turned to Sara.

"Sara, the suggestions you just heard me give to Shannon will affect you as well. When I say the word 'replay' to you, you will also experience the erotic feelings and the orgasm, just as I told Shannon that she will. When you awaken, you will not realize that you have been in hypnosis. You will remember everything I suggested to Shannon as if you had been fully awake and listening to it, but you will not remember that the suggestion will also work on you."

After a little reinforcement for Sara, I counted up to five and both women snapped awake. Shannon was a little slow to come up, shaking her head lightly to clear the cobwebs.

"How do you feel?" Sara asked her.

"Like I've just had a very long nap," she replied, stretching. She stood up, took a tentative step or two, then sat back down again. "Good as new," she declared.

"Are you up for one more little test?" I asked her.

Shannon eyed me suspiciously. "What did you do, Nick?"

I grinned sheepishly. "Just gave you a little souvenir of your walk on the wild side," I said. "Replay, Shannon."

I heard her gasp immediately as the first sensations hit her. The initial surprise quickly turned into impassioned moans, a pattern and sound resonating in my older memories. I held Sara and watched as Shannon resisted at first, then let go and let the pleasure consume her. Her hands wandered over her body, one moving from breast to breast, the other caressing her middle and a bit lower. Her blouse and skirt didn't lend themselves to easy access, so she caressed herself through the clothing and ground her legs together. Her moans turned into groans and then gasping cries as she felt the orgasm hit and hold, rocking her world, leaving her breathless a few moments later as it subsided.

"Sweet Jesus," she sighed, spent. "Who taught you to do that?"

I shrugged. "Sara, and our teacher. Did you enjoy it?"

"What do you think?" she retorted. "If only my fiancé could do that."

"Actually, he can," I told her. "All he has to do is say the trigger word to you, and you'll experience the whole ride again."

"The trigger word ... you mean 'replay'?"

"That's it."

"And when he sees how that word affects me, how do I explain it to him?"

I grinned wickedly. "That's up to you. Once he sees the results, though, he may be having too much fun to ask a lot of questions."

"You're all heart." Shannon took a few minutes more to compose herself, then rose from the chair. "Time to go home, I think," she announced.

I hugged her and grinned. "Will you be filing a report with Bob?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "I intend to tell him that you've been bewitched and bedazzled, and that you're now officially the luckiest guy I've ever known."

We hugged again, then Shannon left. Sara watched her car pull away and held me close on the couch. "You have excellent taste in women," she remarked.

"Thank you," I replied. "Oh, and Sara?"

"Yes, hon?"

"Replay..."

Although it turned out well, Shannon's visit served to put a greater sense of urgency into me. If I didn't hurry up and tell Sylvia and Bob what was going on they would draw their own conclusions. I owed them better than that.

Before I went on my run Friday morning, I sent an email to each of them asking if they were up for a lunch date, suggesting a favorite diner of ours just outside Towson. I also woke Sara briefly before heading to the office to let her know I'd be picking her up for lunch.

Bob's reply was waiting for me when I got to the office:

Nick,

Can't get away for lunch, sorry. How about a counter offer: come over to our place about 7:00 for dinner? Trish is dying to meet Sara anyway.

-b

That seemed like a good proposition, so I accepted for the both of us.

I was starting to wonder about Sylvia when, at about 10:30, she poked her head into my cube. "I'm in Meeting Hell this morning," she explained. "Just got out of one, and I'm late for another."

"Ouch," I commiserated. "Can you make lunch?"

She grimaced. "I really shouldn't," she said. "I've got a ton of work I need to do. Can we do it next week?"

I shrugged. "Sure," I said. "Sara and I can have lunch by ourselves."

Sylvia's eyebrows rose. "Sara, the new girlfriend?"

I nodded, smiling.

"Work can wait," Sylvia decided. "I have to meet this girl."

Sylvia's second meeting broke up around 12:15. I swung by the apartment to pick up Sara and headed out to the diner.

Sylvia was already there, having secured for us a nice corner table. She saw us come in and stood up to greet us.

"You must be Sara," she said, looking her over with frank interest. "It's so good to meet you, dear. Nick has told me almost nothing about you."

"All part of my diabolical plan to drive you insane," I joked. "Is it working?"

"After this morning," she countered, "any such plan is redundant. I've got 4 candidates to interview for the Web admin position and no idea how to tell if they really know anything about running a Web site because Janice is out sick today. Meanwhile, Dale tells me that a 'minor reorganization' is around the corner for my team, but won't give me any details until Monday. It's got me a little torqued up."

It took all my self control to suppress a gulp. The waitress saved me by coming over to take our drink orders: iced tea for me and Sara, diet Coke for Sylvia. The interruption served to turn our collective attention to the menu for a few minutes while we decided what to have for lunch. In due course our drinks arrived and we ordered.

"I'm sorry," Sylvia began as our waitress disappeared with the menus. "The last thing I want is to talk shop. Tell me about you two."

Sara and I exchanged a silent look, and I yielded the floor to her. "It's a pretty short story so far," she began. "Nick and I first met through an MP3 sharing service online. We have similar tastes in that way. We exchanged a couple of MP3's, which led to some emails, which led to a phone call or two, which led to last weekend."

I grinned inwardly at Sara's casual wording. Damn, she was clever.

"That's it?" Sylvia pressed. "You two only met last weekend?"

"Only met in person," Sara countered. "Our online relationship started several weeks ago. We were already close before Nick came to Raleigh; that was just the next step."

"It does explain some things," Sylva said thoughtfully.

"Oh?" I interjected. "Like what?"

"You, for one thing. You've been different lately, Nick. More energetic, more sure of yourself, taking things in stride that used to tick you off. I half suspected there might be someone new in your life, but I thought for sure you'd tell me if there was. Why didn't you?"

I shrugged apologetically. "An online relationship? I figured you'd think I was losing it."

Sylvia was looking over Sara again. "Maybe. Then again, online dating seems to have broadened your horizons." Seeing Sara's quizzical look, she winked at her and added in an aside, "Before you, Nick's taste in women was quite monotonous: tall, annoyingly skinny, and mostly blonde."

"Oh," Sara said, smiling back with a gleam in her eye. "We left her back home." She grinned at me wickedly as I squirmed in my seat.

Now it was Sylvia's turn to be confused. "Am I missing something?"

"An inside joke," I told her. "I'll explain it at some point, maybe." I resolved to leave a really big tip, as the waitress saved me again by bringing our food.

As we ate, Sara worked her magic on Sylvia as she had with Gene and Mario; by the end of the meal, Sylvia had stopped examining Sara and started relating to her as a new friend. They even went to the bathroom together, a sure sign of female bonding if ever there was one.

We lingered over coffee while I looked for an opening in the conversation. Sylvia provided one in her usual direct fashion. "So," she said, "what's next for you two?"

I took a deep breath and plunged in. "Well, Sara goes back home on Sunday. I'll be wrapping things up here over the next month or two, and then I'm moving down with her."

Sylvia went into suspended animation for about a five count. "That's the reason for the reorganization," she finally said. "You're leaving."

"That's it. Dale is going to offer Gene a full time position to replace me, reporting to you. He'll probably take it. I'll be around for a few weeks to help with the transition before I leave town for good."

Sylvia went quiet again, staring into the empty space between me and Sara. Sara reached across the table and took her hand. "Sylvia? Are you okay?"

My friend snapped out of it and focused back on us. "I'm sorry," she said weakly. "I'm a little shell-shocked. I shouldn't be, I guess -- anyone who sees you together can tell you have a serious relationship."

"We do," I confirmed, reaching over to join hands with her and Sara. "I'm glad you can see that, and I hope you can be happy with us."

"I can," Sylvia said, water glistening at the corner of her eye. "I will be, once the surprise wears off. Who else knows about this?"

"Dale, of course. Gene and Mario too. We're having dinner at Bob's house tonight; he and Trish will find out then. The rest of the office will start to figure it out when Dale posts the job opening on Monday."

At the words "job opening", Sylvia's face took on a pained look. "Shit," she muttered. "My first interview is in half an hour. How the hell am I going to do this?"

Sara cleared her throat. "I could help you," she said tentatively.

Sylvia looked at her sharply. "How?"

"I'm a webgie myself," she explained. "Design mostly, but I do maintain the website for my M-- ... for my main client, and another for a professional office. If all you need is someone to ask technical questions and tell you if the answers make sense, I can do that." I was very glad Sara had pulled back the word 'Mistress'; given Sylvia's reaction to the moving news, I'd decided not to hit her with the polyamory angle on top of it. That could come another time.

"How well do you know the innards of a Web server?"

Sara smiled reassuringly. "IIS, Apache, Sun, Netscape, or something else?"

"IIS, mostly. Some Apache on Linux."

"Pretty well, then. More than enough to tell an expert from a resume artist."

Sylvia squeezed our hands. "You're on. And thank you."

In one of those quirky turns that things take, I found myself driving back to the office alone while Sara rode with Sylva, using the time for a quick briefing on the network layout. I didn't see them again until the end of the afternoon, when I spotted them in the hallway talking with Dale. From their body language, it looked as though Sara had been welcomed into the fold.

"How did it go?" I asked, approaching the group.

Sylvia was beaming. "One legitimate prospect, two creative resume writers, and a full-blown bullshit artist. Percentage-wise, not a bad afternoon."

"Your better half here is a sharp interviewer," Dale offered. "One of those characters had me convinced he was for real until Sara started asking him questions."

"He wasn't that bad," Sara said. "He's just one of those professional test-takers. Lots of certifications and book knowledge, but not enough real world experience for the job he wants. He'd be fine starting out as a junior admin, where he can grow into things."

"Which would be okay in most cases," Dale agreed. "But for this job we need someone who can be plug and play. Janice and Sylvia don't have time to teach someone the differences between a production network and a training lab."

"We did get one good candidate," Sylvia pointed out. "And we've got more resumes in the pile to be vetted, too. We'll find someone."

Dale shook Sara's hand. "Thanks again, Sara. We owe you a lunch or something, if you'll come back to collect it."

She shrugged and smiled. "We'll see. It was a pleasure to help out."

Dale looked at me. "Nick, since you brought Sara in here can I conclude that the lid is now officially off?"

"As far as the office goes, sure. I still have a friend who'll be in the dark for a couple more hours."

"Good. I took a risk and put an ad in the papers starting Sunday. You understand I'll have to interview any good candidates that surface, but your recommendation will go a long way in your friend Gene's favor."

"That's fine," I assured him. "Nobody's asking for special treatment. Gene wouldn't want the job if he thought it was tainted that way."

"Fair enough."

Sara and I said our goodbyes and ducked out a little early. The rush hour was just getting started when we hit the road.

"How do you think it went?" Sara asked me once we were clear of the office.

"Here first reaction was about what I expected," I answered. "Or at least, as much as I realistically thought I could expect. You helping out with the interviews certainly went a long way toward winning her over. Dale, too."

"I guess it's lucky I was on hand."

"You don't know the half of it," I told her. "Sylvia's been looking for someone to back up Janice for four months. Nobody has passed muster so far. I'm surprised she didn't offer the job to you."

Sara grinned wryly at me. "She did. Right in front of Dale."

My heart almost stopped. "And you told her ..."

"That I have family in Raleigh that I can't leave. Which is true, if not in the exact way she took it."

I sighed. "Well spoken."

"We are going to tell her eventually, right?" she asked pointedly.

"Yes," I assured her. "I have to. She's a good friend."

"I'm glad. I'm starting to like her, too."

We had plenty of time before we were due at Bob's, so when we got back to the apartment I immediately kicked off my shoes and flopped onto the bed. Sara came in behind me holding the cordless handset. "We need to check the voice mail," she announced.

I reached out my left hand and turned on the speakerphone in the base, dialing the voice mail number and password by feel. In a few seconds, Isobel's rich voice poured out of the speaker. "Hello, Nick. Hello, Sara. Nothing urgent; just call home when you can, please. I miss you both."

Sara sat on the bed next to me and placed the call. Isobel picked up on the second ring. "Hello?"

"We're here, Mistress," Sara said.

"It's good to hear your voice," she replied. "How are your friends taking the news, Nick?"

"So far, so good. Sylvia was thrown a little, but she's warming to the idea. Bob is the one I'm most concerned about. He's a pretty conventional guy; this is going to be hard for him to swallow. "

"Our lifestyle is difficult for some to accept," Isobel agreed. "You struggled with it yourself, remember. Tell him that, and encourage him to talk through it."

"Communication," I echoed.

"Exactly. And be prepared for a less than enthusiastic reaction. Understanding needs to flow both ways."

After a little mundane small talk, we said our goodbyes and hung up the phone. We still had a little spare time before we needed to get ready for Bob's, so we spent it cuddling on the bed in a light trance.

The ride to Bob's started out silently. The butterflies were already churning in my stomach and I guess it showed. Sara took my hand in hers and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Nervous?"

"Yes." My mouth was so dry it came out in a gulp.

"Is there anything I need to know about Bob before we get there?"

Thinking was too hard; I just rambled. "Like I said, he's a pretty conventional guy. He's big on family and friends, and looking out for one another. "

"He sounds like a good person."

"He is."

"Then what are you worried about?"

I took a long, deep, steadying breath. "Bob is my best friend, Sara. I really want him to approve of what we're doing."

"And you think he might not?"

I shrugged. "I'm afraid so. Bob doesn't have an impulsive bone in his body, hon. He's the guy who taught me to plan ahead, measure the risks, be ready to adapt -- skills that make me damned good at what I do for a living. Me running off to Raleigh and moving in with someone 10 years younger than I am, and whom I just met last week, is not going to sit well with him."

Sara's voice became very quiet. "What will you do if he disapproves?"

Now it was my turn to offer reassurance. "Miss him," I replied.

Our reception at Bob's went a long way toward stilling my nerves. Trish greeted us at the door with a warm hug for me and a welcoming smile and handshake for Sara. We followed her back to the kitchen, where Bob was meticulously slicing a loaf of homemade bread into half-inch thick slices.

"Evening," he said with a friendly grin. "Glad you could come."

"Thanks," Sara replied. "What can we do to help?"

"I think we've got it," Bob answered. "Unless you want to pour wine, maybe." He nodded his head toward an open bottle of Chianti on the counter.

"I can do that." Sara took four wine glasses from the overhead rack and filled them while Trish and I arranged slices of bread on a foil-covered baking sheet. Trish brushed the slices with a mixture of melted butter and herbs from a small saucepan, and had me follow behind her adding shredded cheese. Then the three of us stepped back while Trish deftly swept the tray into the oven and pulled out the main course: a bubbling, golden dish of lasagna.

There was an appreciative chorus of oohs and aahs. "This will need a few minutes before we can serve it," Trish said. "Why don't we start on the salad?"

The round dining table was set for four. "Where's Brian?" I asked, referring to their 17-year-old son.

"At his girlfriend's," Trish answered. "When we told him we were having friends over for dinner, he grabbed his Blockbuster gift card and planned a private film festival."

"His loss," I remarked with a grin.

"Not from his perspective, I imagine," Sara retorted.

"Do you have experience with teens?" Trish asked.

Sara shrugged. "Not really; I just remember being one."

By the time our salads were done, I was feeling a lot more comfortable. Bob and Trish were treating Sara with the same warmth and friendliness that they did everyone else in our circle. The irrational fear that someone would suddenly whip out a rubber hose and start giving us the third degree pretty much disappeared.

The lasagna and bread were brought to the table, tasted and duly praised before the conversation turned personal. Trish opened things up with an innocent question: "Where do you work, Sara?"

Sara swallowed some food before answering nonchalantly. "At home, for the most part. This week I've been working from Nick's place, taking advantage of his DSL."

"Will you be staying long?" Another innocuous question, but it started a chill forming in the pit of my stomach.

"I go back home Sunday," Sara answered.

"I'm sorry," Trish commiserated. "Long distance relationships are so hard on everyone."

Sara and I looked at each other, and a decision was made. "It's only for a few weeks," I said, preparing myself for the jump over the cliff. "Once I've wound up things here, I'll be moving down to Raleigh with her."

With all the fretting I'd done up to that point, I thought I was prepared. I thought I'd anticipated every possible reaction.

I was wrong.

Bob's eyes narrowed and the corners of his mouth turned upward in a twisted smile. *I knew it*, his eyes seemed to say. *I fucking knew it*.

Trish, meanwhile, stood up and hugged us both in turn. "This is wonderful," she said tearfully. "I'm really happy for you both."

"When did you decide this?" Bob asked, his voice gentle and even.

"Last weekend," I answered truthfully. "I know it's sudden, and I know it sounds crazy because we only just met in person, but it doesn't feel crazy. It feels like what I've been wanting for a long time."

"You've been alone way too long, Nick," Trish said. "I think it's great. I do."

"Speaking of 'I do'," Bob added. "Any plans for marriage?"

*Hoo boy*, I thought to myself. *How far do I want to push this?*

Sara saved me. "Not right away," she said, smiling. "There are a lot of things we still need to learn about each other first." That got approving nods from Bob and from Trish.

The conversation veered into the details of what I was going to do with my various clients and obligations. I answered on autopilot, part of my mind focused on the conversation and part on watching for signs of my friends' true feelings about the bomb I'd dropped on them. Bob's manner didn't change at all from the wry, thoughtful look he'd taken on when I made my announcement. Trish projected the picture of sincere happiness. I started to think that maybe I'd underestimated them; maybe they really were happy for us.

Dinner concluded in a buzz of small talk. Trish got up to start clearing dishes; Sara and I rose to help her, but Bob put a hand on my shoulder. "We can handle this," Trish said indicating herself and Sara. "Why don't you

guys go warm up the sofa?" The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I followed Bob into the living room.

"Helluva curve you threw us," Bob remarked as we settled into adjacent easy chairs.

I smiled thinly. "You didn't seem overly surprised."

"Can't say that I am," he admitted. "Something about the way you two sat together in the Bronco. And, I talked to Sylvia a couple of hours ago. She wanted to make sure I wouldn't go apeshit when you broke the news."

"Would you have, if she hadn't warned you?"

"Maybe. You dated my sister for three years and wouldn't even move in with her; now it looks like you're ditching your whole life to chase some girl you met last week. It doesn't just seem crazy, Nick, it *is* a little crazy."

"Maybe it is," I said, "but I don't think so. You don't know Sara, Bob. She --"

"You're right," he interrupted, "I don't know her. I know Shannon likes her, and Sylvia likes her, and that's about it. But you don't know her either. All I'm saying is, you should get to know her before you do anything irreversible."

His argument was perfectly reasonable, of course, but there were facts he didn't know about. "It's not that simple," I said.

"Why not?" he challenged. "You're both self-employed, so your schedule is more or less your own. She can take her work with her when she travels, and so can you. Why not try the long distance thing for a while, getting together every couple of weeks in one place or the other? Why not have her come up here for a longer time? Why do you have to be the one to blow off his life and his friends?"

I sighed deeply. "Because there's more than just two people involved, Bob."

He nodded fiercely. "That's what I'm saying, pal. There's a lot more than just the two of you to think about here."

"No, Bob," I countered, shaking my head. "You don't understand. I mean, there is a third person in this relationship with me and Sara. We're not a couple, we're a triad."

This time I got the dumbfounded reaction I had been expecting at dinner. "Run that by me again?"

"It's a polyamorous relationship, Bob. Sara, me, and a woman named Isobel. I love them both; they love me and each other. They've invited me into their home and into their lives, and I've decided that I want that."

I could see Bob struggling with it. "Where is this Isobel, then?"

"Back in Raleigh," I explained. "She's a doctor, and she couldn't cancel a week's worth of patients to come up here right now. But she's no less a part of this relationship, and of my life, than Sara is."

Bob's shoulders dropped. "Sylvia did not tell me that," he said resignedly.

"Sylvia doesn't know. I stopped short of telling her because she seemed freaked out about the move. In fact, nobody up here knows about Isobel except you."

Our eyes met for a long second. "You're serious about all this, aren't you?"

"Totally," I confirmed.

"And you want, what? My blessing?"

"In a manner of speaking."

He paused a long time. "This I cannot do," he finally said. "I think you're making a massive mistake, and I can't pretend that I approve. All I can say is, I hope to God I'm wrong."

"Wrong about what?" Trish asked, her upbeat voice as she and Sara joined in stark contrast to the somber tones Bob and I had fallen into.

My eyes found Sara's and I let my disappointment show through them in silence. Understanding flowed back, with support and love.

"Never mind," Bob demurred.

The rest of the evening was gruesome. Bob and I played our parts, making happy small talk, pretending everything was okay. Trish and Sara conspired with us, ignoring the obvious tension, laughing a little too easily

and nervously. Eventually someone came out with an "Oh my, look at the time!" and Sara and I took our leave.

The misery hovered over us in the car like a thick, dark cloud. I drove in silence, imagining the scene behind us as Bob filled Trish in on our after-dinner discussion. Sara let me stew, holding my hand to let me know she'd be there when I was ready.

By the time we reached the apartment I felt twenty years older. I dropped my keys on the hall table and sank listlessly into the living room sofa. Sara sat next to me and folded my body into hers.

"Pretty bad, wasn't it?" she prompted gently.

I snuggled in closer. "You could say so. He says I'm making a massive mistake, that I'm blowing off my life and my friends ... shall I continue?"

"That's up to you," she replied. "Do you want to?"

"No," I said. "I want to go to my zero room."

"Okay," Sara agreed. "We'll go there together. Relax, Nick, and come back to your zero room with me ..."

My body melted into hers, and with a deep sigh I found myself riding the elevator down, Sara's hand in mine. A feeling of peace and safety grew stronger as the floors counted down. The elevator slowed and then stopped gently, the doors sliding open with a faint ding.

Sara and I strolled into the zero room together. It was exactly as I'd left it: the white leather daybed and end tables waiting, the soothing whiteness of it all acting as a salve for my soul. We curled up together on the daybed.

"Feeling better?" she asked me, her fingers lightly stroking my temples.

"Much better," I breathed. "I want to stay here."

Sara smiled. "For a while."

We drifted quietly for a while. At some point -- maybe a minute, maybe an hour -- my mouth opened and words started coming out. "I pretty much knew Bob would have trouble with this," I heard myself say, "but despite knowing, I still hoped. I wanted him to accept it, to be happy, to

tell me I was doing the right thing. At some level, I guess I was thinking that if even Bob agreed, I couldn't possibly be making a mistake."

"And now?"

"And now, there's a little voice in the back of my head saying that maybe Bob is right. He was right when he predicted that VHS would win out over Beta; he was right when he told me I'd be better off as my own boss than as a drone in an IT sweatshop; he was right when he suggested I see a hypnotist to help me quit smoking. What if he's right now, too?"

There was a long pause before Sara spoke. "I don't know," she said.

"Neither do I. But I do know that I won't find out by playing it safe."

I rose from the daybed with renewed energy and marched to the elevator. The floor rose up below me and my eyes opened. I wasn't overly surprised to find myself in the bedroom, in Sara's arms. We undressed each other slowly and silently, reluctant to break contact even for a moment. When all the clothing was gone, I put Sara on her back and looked deeply into her eyes.

"Relax, Sara," I told her in my smooth, rhythmic voice. "Close your eyes and relax, darling. Relax and let go for me. You took good care of me, now let me take care of you." Sara smiled and sighed as her eyes rolled up and closed. I kept talking to her, relaxing and deepening her, all the while slowly making my way down her body to the moist, warm center. I adored her, using everything I'd learned to bring her to climax after climax. When she seemed nearly spent I slipped inside her and we rocked each other into bliss one more time. I went to sleep with my arms around her, and dreamed.

In my dream, I was with Sara and Isobel on a hilltop overlooking the sea. We had a blanket spread out, and we were making love in the moonlight. I was going down on Isobel, listening to her moan with pleasure, while Sara rubbed my shoulders. When Isobel came, shuddering and gasping, I turned over and Sara mounted me, sitting straight up, her breasts begging to be squeezed and fondled. I obliged, and soon Sara was arching her back and quivering.

It was then that I noticed the orange glow that illuminated the three of us, and looked out to sea. There I saw three majestic ships afloat just off the shore, their masts and rigging clearly visible in the flickering light of the flames that engulfed their decks.

The ships were burning.

The image of the burning ships was still with me through my morning run the next day. My body ran on autopilot while my mind recalled the story of Hernan Cortez, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century explorer who conquered the Aztecs. According to numerous corporate speakers, Cortez ordered his ships burned shortly after landing – the idea being that with no way to turn back, his men would be highly motivated to succeed in battle.

Was that what I was doing?

It certainly looked that way. Once my plan was complete I'd have no source of income in Baltimore and no apartment to come back to. Still, I decided I was no Cortez. If I really wanted to come back to Baltimore, it wouldn't be that hard to find a new apartment and pick up new clients or win back old ones. I'd have a ready-made support network in Bob, Sylvia and company. I might be burning my ships, but there would be others available if I needed them.

I didn't expect to need them.

#### **iv: Coming Home**

I stared blankly out the window of my taxicab as it cruised along I-440 into Raleigh. It was well past 11:00 at night; very late for me, but I was holding up all right. Besides, I could assume I'd sleep very well once I got to the house.

Things had gone well in the week following our dinner with Bob. Sara and I took Sylvia out to our favorite bar that Saturday night, mellowed her out with a couple of drinks, and told her about Isobel; the news raised an eyebrow briefly, but Sylvia seemed to adjust right away. Dale's newspaper ad for a Citrix expert yielded no viable candidates, which was good news for Gene -- he interviewed with Sylvia on Wednesday and looked like a lock for the job once the mandatory 15-day minimum search period expired. Meanwhile, the office rumor mill had picked up the news of my coming departure and ground out a number of amusing versions, prompting Sylvia to hold a full department meeting just to set the record straight.

Things were proceeding well outside of work, too. Sara had gone home Sunday afternoon as planned, keeping in touch through email and ICQ. I got a chance to start cleaning out closets, looking to lighten the load before trying to move south. Bob even stopped by one evening with a six-pack just to shoot the breeze. "I still think you're jumping too quickly," he'd said, "but if you need anything, I'm here."

*What I need*, I reflected as the taxi rolled across Six Forks Road, *is a good night's sleep in a well-populated bed*. That would happen very soon.

The porch light was on when we reached the house, along with a faint incandescent glow leaking around the curtains in the living room window. The curtain swished a little as I was paying the driver. The front door opened as I approached it and I was greeted by the sight of Isobel

standing in the doorway. She wore white silk robe, a pair of slippers, and a loving smile that warmed the night air.

Her arms went around me the moment I reached the doorway. Her lips met mine and opened hungrily. She tasted faintly of bordeaux. I returned the kiss with equal fervor, feeling the beginnings of an erection stirring in my groin. The taxi was long gone before we came up for air.

"Welcome home, Nick," she said with a happy sigh. "We missed you."

"I missed you, too." Once inside with the door closed, we kissed again. My hands roamed over her silk-draped back and concluded that she wore nothing under the robe. "Where's Sara?"

"Asleep," Isobel explained. "She was pacing endlessly up and down the living room, so I put her to bed. I promised we'd wake her when you got home."

"Ah," I said, and started toward the stairs. I got about two steps before Isobel stopped me.

"Not yet," she admonished gently. "Come talk with me for a few minutes." She gestured toward the living room, where an open wine bottle and two glasses stood waiting on the coffee table. One of the glasses had a small amount sitting in the bottom; she refilled that one for herself and poured a fresh glass for me. She curled up next to me on the sofa, her body turned towards me in a relaxed but attentive posture. The robe opened slightly, showing me lots of leg and just enough cleavage to be distracting. Her eyes looked deeply into mine as she asked, "How are you?"

Coming from Isobel, this was never a casual question. "All things considered, I'm okay. I'm ahead of schedule on weaning the smaller clients off me. I've gone through a couple of closets and gotten rid of a bunch of crap I haven't looked at since I moved into that place."

She kept looking into me, listening all the while. "That's all very good," she remarked, "but it doesn't answer my question. How are you, Nick?"

I sighed. "Physically? A little tired, nothing more. Mentally? A little shaky, but I'm holding together."

Isobel nodded and sipped some wine. "Tell me about the shakiness."

I shrugged. "There's a lot going on," I said. "Arrangements to make with the apartment. Briefings to conduct. People wanting favors before I go. Me answering the same questions eight times a day as more people get the word for the first time."

"So you feel?"

"Stretched, I guess. Hassled. Tired."

"And underneath that?"

"I don't know."

She smiled. "Close your eyes for a few moments, Nick. Take a deep breath. Look deeply into your heart, and tell me what you find."

My eyes closed and I found myself focusing on my chest. I became aware of something lurking inside -- something cold and squishy, slithering around in the shadows. "Fear," I said. "Fear of losing my friends. Fear of making a mistake. Fear of the unknown, I guess." I opened my eyes and told her about my dream with the burning ships.

"Like Cortez," Isobel said. "You see yourself as burning your ships?"

"Sometimes. Then I remind myself that nothing I've done represents that big a commitment. There are other clients, other apartments, and even other friends if it came to that. Still, sometimes there's this little voice in my head that whines about my taking all the risks."

Isobel's eyebrows rose ever so slightly.

"I'm not talking about emotional risk," I hastened to explain. "I know we're all taking our chances there. I just meant the professional and financial risks: dropping my clients, moving to an unfamiliar area, starting over. I know I can do it, and I know that it's what I really want. But that doesn't mean it isn't scary."

"Especially when someone whose judgment you've always trusted tells you that you're making a mistake," Isobel observed.

"Exactly. Bob gave a little extra credibility to the nagging doubts I already had."

"Enough to prompt you to reconsider?"

"At first," I admitted. "But when I weigh the risks of starting over against the rewards of a life with you and Sara, it's pretty clear that I have a lot more to gain than I could possibly lose."

Isobel leaned over and hugged me. "I'm glad you feel that way. Shall we go wake up Sara now?"

I caressed Isobel's breast through the silken robe and was pleased to feel a hardened nipple. "Unless you'd like to start now, one on one."

I could almost feel her arousal building like static electricity. "That's very tempting," she said, "but I did make a promise." With a soft kiss, she stood up and collected our empty wine glasses. I closed the bottle and put it in the refrigerator while she rinsed the glasses, then I followed Isobel up the stairs.

We went all the way to the third floor, to Isobel's master suite. The double doors opened into a sitting area; we walked through there, past a walk-in closet, and around to the bedroom. Sara lay there, peacefully asleep, in the middle of a luxurious king-sized bed. Like Isobel, she was wearing a bathrobe. I stepped up to the side of the bed and stroked her hair gently.

"Wake up, precious," Isobel said softly from behind me.

Sara's eyes opened and found mine. A look of complete joy filled her face. "You're home!" she said. Moving quickly, she rose to her knees and took me in a bear hug. After a moment her hands began to wander over my back. She pulled my face down to hers for a long kiss, and I felt her fingers begin working at the buttons on my shirt. Another pair of hands touched my back, rubbed it gently, and then slid down and around to start undoing my pants.

They had the clothes off me in no time. I let Sara pull me down to the bed gently as the boxers slid down my legs. I landed on top of Sara, our mouths locked together, and felt Isobel's hands work their way up my back to my neck. She massaged my shoulders, then leaned in and whispered something into my ear. I felt my mind receding, leaving the body on autopilot, floating away on a raft of pure pleasure.

My memories of the rest of that night are jumbled. I remember feeling the soft, arousing touch of hands all over me, bringing me relaxation and pleasure together. My mouth alternated between lips and nipples, and at times it seemed as though I must be in bed with half a dozen eager, expert

lovers. I kissed and stroked and came repeatedly until my body ached,  
then the fog enveloped me and I slept.

It was good to be home.

-wg  
3/12/01