

Way Out There

Short Stories by DK Ward

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Title

Best Friends
The Sleep
Softly, The Rain Is Falling
The Wait
The Cat Burglar
The Call
A Shift In Time
Red
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Gay Friend On The Other End
The Princess And The Bum
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Best Friends ...

Prologue

"Check the kids, Sally," Margery Warren requested as she towed a large covered dish from the depths of the oven. Her mouth was dressed in a quirky little smile. It wouldn't be your typical turkey feast this year. No, for once Margery Warren decided to let loose her rigid concept of the standard Christmas dinner.

She baked a roast.

Sally Vorean drew the curtain aside and spied Adena and Tyler still puttering about on the porch. She smiled, as she always did watching them. Tyler, the taller of the two, wasn't of her own flesh and blood, but for the love Sally felt for the child, she may as well have been born of her own loins. Tyler had been a breech baby, Margery told her, and Sally quickly followed with, 'But the best things in life never do come easily'.

Tyler's eyes were of a cerulean blue, an unexpected contrast to her dark features and hair. She had an easy smile, but used it rarely. Sally had once overheard Adena ask Tyler why she didn't smile much. Tyler had simply replied, "my heart smiles all day so my mouth doesn't tire out." To her mother, she was an extraordinary child, a gift to the world, not much unlike her companion, Adena, who was about two inches shorter than her friend, with eyes a sparkling, emerald green, and hair that lustrous red-gold only begotten by endless days in the sun.

The girls were similar in their friendship and affection, with no perception of real love and its highs and lows, or of its coveted heartaches. But, they knew when they were together they were like two bodies with one soul. And though they had not one ounce of concept what a soul was either, to them, that was a minuscule fact.

Sally released a tiny breath of pleasure watching them; two lovely little girls who were going to be two beautiful women one day.

Herb strolled into the kitchen with an empty beer can, giving his wife a pat on the ass and a kiss on the cheek before making a toss at a nearby wastebasket. After missing the imagined three-pointer, Herb mumbled a perfunctory curse then headed straight to the fridge to grab a couple more "cold ones" for himself and Charlie. Margery looked after him as he passed, then at Sally to see if she caught the act. No, Sally was absorbed in what their children were doing.

She waited until Herb fulfilled his mission and returned to his own ritual of sitting in front of the television set with Charlie until the hypothetical dinner bell rang. "Sal?"

"Hmm? Oh." Sally smiled, letting the curtain fall as she looked at Margery. "They're fine, still playing, just like always."

"They'll be best friends forever, you'll see."

"Oh I know, Margery. I know. It's the look in their eyes when they're together."

Margery was nodding exuberantly. "Yes, I've seen it."

"Just like us, hm?"

"Just like us..." Margery beamed before going back to her dinner preparations.

* * *

"Did it hurt?" Adena asked, eyes transparent in the light of the sun. She was staring up at Tyler, who stood over her, needle poised, blood already dripping from her own thumb.

Tyler shook her head, black hair whipping in the wind. "Not at all. Here, gimme your hand."

Adena focused on the one drop of blood pooling at the tip of Tyler's thumb. She watched it grow in size until it was too bulbous to just sit there on that tiny digit. Finally it made its suicidal decent, plopping onto the weathered wood beneath their feet. She stared at the smear on the boards for a full minute, agonizing not only for her own pain to come, but also for the infinitesimal loss of life Tyler had undergone in the name of friendship. The only other time she could remember blood involved in her young life was when she and Tyler had been down at the beach and she'd stepped on a broken shell, cutting the tender skin between her first and second toes; that had hurt. Hesitantly, Adena offered Tyler her hand and turned her head, then squeezed her eyes shut as tight as she could, waiting for Tyler to prick her finger.

"Ok, scaredy-cat, you can look now. I'm all done."

Adena whisked her head around. Her eyes were wide open, the iris' green saucers as she stared at Tyler, then her finger. "Wow, it didn't hurt!"

"I told ya." Tyler mashed their fingers together. "Now we're friends forever, no matter what."

"Always?"

"Mm-hmm. No matter what."

Adena confirmed her agreement with a bob of her head. "No matter what," she echoed and stood, pulling Tyler into a clumsy eight-year-old hug. She then pressed her small lips to Tyler's, wiggling her tongue until it was inside Tyler's mouth as they'd seen their mothers do on occasion when they thought no one was looking.

"Forever," Tyler promised, staring into the clear green eyes of her friend.

"Forever," Adena repeated, staring back into the clear blue eyes of her friend.

Present Day

I

January passed, leaving bitter winds and ten-foot snow drifts in its wake. The small town where Tyler and Adena had been born, grew up, now worked and eventually planned on being laid to rest, was coated white from one end where the old broken down cemetery still stood, to the other, now a thriving one-story mall. February followed just as furiously and March came up fast behind nipping at winters' heels. In the middle of this frigid scene two women walked the deserted downtown streets, huddled close together for warmth.

"I'm going back tonight, Adena." Sari Bailey kept her eyes locked straight ahead, but managed to squeeze Adena's hand tightly as they made their way through the streets in the square. There was stillness about and around them. It was an odd tranquility, interrupted only by the crunching of their heels on the snowy pathways. The downtown shops were all closed for the night. A wide array of tempting goods lined the storefront windows taunting the occasional passerby with treasures unavailable to them-- at least until the next morning, when shopkeepers would slide up their metal doors, set their signs on the front walk and welcomed a new day.

The late night wanderers were good friends, though not as close as Tyler and Adena had been growing up. Sari knew no one was as close to Adena as Tyler Warren, but their friendship had a different intimacy; Sari and Adena could talk about and do nearly everything without "unrealistic emotions" always getting in the way.

Sari had moved out west at the age of 18 when the smothering affect of small town life grew too suffocating to bear. She came back every other year to visit friends and family. This was one such visit, but suddenly, the burden of sadness was weighing down her shoulders. This wasn't just any "until my next visit" stroll downtown; it was a goodbye.

"Why don't you come back with me this time?" Sari blurted out just as they passed Tristan Pharmacy, startling Adena as well as herself. "I could show you the time of your life, Dena." The slender brunette spoke with a lilt, in a conscience effort to conceal the air of desperation swirling within her previous question.

"I can't..." was Adena's simple, tempered reply.

"I knew you'd say that." Sari rested her head on Adena's shoulder, her amber eyes glazed in sadness.

"I would go back with you, Sari. I'd love that more than anything. But I can't just up and leave."

"Yes, I know; it would be unexpected of you." Sari chuckled and leaned them into making a right on Bartlett Street. "There's not one compulsive bone in your body."

"That is a bold face lie!" Adena vehemently objected.

"So... how is Tyler?" Sari didn't wish for another useless debate on the practicalities of Adena's lack of spontaneity.

Her feathers obviously ruffled, Adena pouted. "I don't know; I've been avoiding her."

Sari looked up at her, watching the light and shadows play on Adena's face. "You are single now, Dena. Maybe Ty-"

Adena wiggled her hand loose and hopped up onto the stonewall surrounding the park. She walked a few paces and then sat. Sari came and stood between her legs, giving her those pleading eyes that Adena could never seem to resist. "You stop that."

Smiling at her momentary triumph, Sari continued. "Ok, then you tell me what you're going to do now without Rory?"

"I'm going to continue on with life," Adena answered, curling a tuft of Sari's hair between her gloved fingers.

"Alone?" Sari asked, dubiously.

Adena nodded slowly. "I'm fine with that. You know I don't mind solitude, Sari." She wrapped her legs around the smaller woman and applied a gentle hug.

"And sex?" Sari's voice wavered slightly with Adena's sudden display of affection. "What are you going to do about that?"

Adena smiled wickedly, "Well, if you really cared..."

"That's not funny." Sari tried to look severe but failed miserably and joined Adena in a chuckle, then leaned against her, absorbing her warmth. "I know you want her, Dena."

"Sari." Adena warned firmly. "There's no need to go assuming. You want to know anything, just ask. I'll tell you the truth."

"I know." She leaned back and smiled sweetly up at Adena. "It's ok to deny it for my benefit, but you really shouldn't do it for your own."

"I'm not denying anything, Sari."

"No?"

"No. You just inferred I wanted her. You didn't ask me if I did, and I didn't say I did or didn't, therefore I fail to see any denial."

"So you're admitting it?"

"Admitting what?"

Sari slapped her arm, glowering at Adena's chuckle. "You really know how to mess with people's minds, don't you?"

"Yeah," Adena admitted readily.

Sari shook her head. "What are we going to do with you?"

"Well, for starters, you can forget about match-making. Okay?"

Sari pursed her lips and shook her head. "I will not agree to any such thing. I want you to be happy."

"I'm happy."

Sari rolled her eyes. "Oh yeah, that was convincing. No you're not. You want to sleep with Tyler, and you haven't, so obviously that's not happiness."

"Lovemaking isn't my only enjoyment in life."

"There, you just admitted it." Sari smirked.

"No I didn't." Adena argued.

"Did so." Sari countered.

"Did not." Adena re-countered.

"You baby." Sari gave her a poke. "Ok, Adena, do you want to sleep with Tyler?"

"Absolutely."

Sari pulled away. "So why haven't you?"

"Well, for starters, I don't know if she wants to sleep with me."

"How do you know what she wants if you keep ignoring her?"

Sari asked, sneaking in the barb.

"Things will work out a lot better if I ignore her." She jumped down off the wall and they continued strolling along. "Maybe then she'll stop taking all my girlfriends away."

"I think you're making a big mistake, Dena."

"Drive carefully tonight, Sari."

"You're so mean."

"No, I just don't want to talk about it anymore."

Sari walked through the entrance to the park, turned and goaded, "And I know you want to sleep with me, too." She squeaked and ran when Adena came after her. She didn't go far, the threat of anyone in pursuit of her always freaked her out causing her to stop dead in her tracks and roll up into a self-protective ball. Adena didn't see Sari's hedgehog maneuver coming and crashed squarely into and over her, somersaulting a few times and finally coming to rest on her back near a hill of plowed snow.

Sari giggled, walking over on her knees and she sat beside Adena, brushing snow off her head and shoulders. "I'm sorry."

"I should bury you in this mound of snow." Adena sat up, whipping a handful of freshly fallen snow into Sari's face. And that was enough to start a war.

* * *

Tyler Warren was lying along the sofa listening to the stereo when Adena came in. She opened her eyes at the sound of the key

and watched with a bemused expression as Adena strolled in covered with snow.

"How sweet, you brought the blizzard inside for me to see."

Adena, surprised Tyler was there, quickly masked her astonishment, gave her a clouded look and headed straight for the bathroom. She was changed and sitting in front of the computer not more than ten minutes later. Tyler stood in the doorway and emitted a sigh.

"What are you doing here, Tyler?"

"I came to beat you at chess again."

"Maybe later."

"Famous last words."

Adena smiled at the screen but did not turn. The intent to continue ignoring her friend was there, but the perseverance was rapidly faltering. She clicked with her mouse a few times and heard the front door open and shut. Cursing under her breath, Adena hopped up to go after her.

"Why is it every time *you* screw up, *I'm* the one who ends up apologizing?" she asked, catching up to Tyler's long-legged stride.

"There are instances of knowing it's far better to be friends than enemies, Adena. This is one of those instances."

The elderly woman in the next apartment to Adena's opened her door when she heard their voices in the hall.

"Evening, Mrs. Pendleton," Adena greeted, adding a smile for effect. "The hall's checked. You can feel safe in the knowledge that Ty and I are on the job." Adena took Tyler's arm and they walked back to the apartment door and shuffled inside containing their laughter until the door was closed.

II

Adena plopped down heavily on the sofa next to Tyler, her hand dropping onto Tyler's knee for a fleeting moment before she pointed out her newest girlfriend, grinning sheepishly.

"What do you think of Trudy, Ty? Is she something or what?"

Tyler's eyes had been following Trudy for a while as she'd been going from guest to guest, offering drinks. Trudy was aware of the attention.

Adena elbowed Tyler in the ribs. "Stop staring, girl, and tell me what you think." She looked at Tyler, and added, "Or is that your answer?" It wasn't the first time Tyler had been attracted to one of her girlfriends, and it wouldn't be the last.

"She's ok, I guess. I don't like blondes." She shrugged, and turned her head to look into Adena's eyes. "How do you feel about her?"

Adena noted the abrupt question, the sharp tone and drawl of Tyler's voice, and became immediately watchful. "Now what's the matter, Ty? If you're interested in her at least tell me this time."

"I've already said I didn't like blondes. You've known that for years, Adena."

"That hasn't stopped you yet." Adena had to forcefully pull her gaze from Tyler's, and once she had, she felt her breath releasing. Ok, time to ease up on the wine, she ordered herself. "Well, I swear, you aren't getting this one." She leaned her forearms on her thighs and glanced back at Tyler to see her reaction. When Tyler's eyes met hers, something inside Adena tightened. She quickly looked away from Tyler and back at Trudy, still making her way from guest to guest.

It was a large bash, where they each could introduce their new partner to one another's friends. Adena decided Trudy's friends were

pretty neat, and from Trudy's animated expression, Adena ascertained Trudy was pleased with Adena's clique.

"So, what's going on with you and Rory?" Adena asked, not looking back at Tyler.

Tyler's expression was that of surprise. "How did you know about Rory and I?"

"You think I don't keep tabs on you, buddy?" She took a quick look at Tyler, her gaze forced to remain and she leaned back, her shoulder touching Tyler's. Their thighs pressed one against the other, muscle to muscle. "I know every move you make." Her eyes dropped to Tyler's slightly parted lips and lingered. Suppressing a strong urge to kiss her in front of everyone, Adena looked back up into Tyler's eyes.

Not every move, Tyler thought with amusement, and her look intensified, drawing Adena in, making her sway closer. "Are we going to the beach Friday evening?"

"Friday?" Adena mentally went over all the excuses she could use on Trudy, whom she had promised to take to the Opera Friday. "I have a date with Trudy, Ty."

"So break it." Tyler shrugged. "It has been a tradition with us every year... The last day of march-"

"Damn it, Ty..."

"Elevenish?"

Adena sighed deeply. She didn't know why she hadn't just said yes in the first place; she always wound up bending to Tyler's will.

"Carpe diem, Adena."

Yes, Adena thought, 'make use of the present day'. The phrase reminded Adena of her college years when Tyler was rarely a part of her life, even if never far from her thoughts. But once she returned home, their friendship had resumed as if time itself had stopped, holding its breath until they were united again. So why was she feeling so guilty about not agreeing right away to go off with Tyler? And what about Tyler's attitude? This was a new twist. It was almost as if she didn't want Adena with Trudy, or was insulted that Adena could even think of considering Trudy's feelings first. Of course this

could all be a part of Adena's over active imagination, with a sprinkling of wishful thinking thrown in.

Even so, she smiled for Tyler's inquiring stare and gave her a definite, "Ok."

"Good." Tyler was pleased. "I like it better when you're single."

"I'm not single this time, Ty."

"Scis quod dicunt... hodie adsit, cras absit."

"You know I don't believe that 'here today, gone tomorrow' shit, Ty."

"Que sera, sera."

"Abeo!" Adena stood and made to go, but Tyler restrained her with a simple touch on the thigh, and Adena sank back into the couch, letting Tyler capture her eyes once more.

Face close to Adena's, Tyler whispered, "You're beautiful, Adena."

Flushing at the compliment, Adena managed to drop her gaze for one fleeting moment. Okay, so it wasn't wholly 'wishful thinking', there was definitely interest on Tyler's end too. But before she could comment, if she were going to, Trudy was there with platter in hand, knocking her knee into Adena's.

"Want something, Sweetie?"

Tyler released Adena's gaze and turned her head slowly, eyes lifting up to lock onto Trudy's. Trudy involuntarily shivered and glanced away, to Adena.

"Nah, I'm fine." Adena jumped up, took the tray from her with a kiss. Tyler closely scrutinized it with a frown.

Adena smiled at Trudy, offering, "Why don't you and Ty get acquainted and I'll make a few rounds, hm?" She turned and walked off with the tray without noticing the abject look of panic on Trudy's face; she was the embodiment of fear.

Tyler stared after her best friend, admiring her in her crisp white shirt and blue jeans. The black loafers she wore made her step quiet as she wound her way through the clogged bodies. Tyler already knew each and every lean line of the redhead's body but

looked anyway for the simple pleasure of the act. She watched her friend until she knew Trudy couldn't possibly take it any longer.

Adena's women were getting lovelier every time, although Tyler had indeed preferred Rory over all of them with her raven hair, and light hazel eyes that were always seeming to flare at everything. She'd been a challenge to Tyler, but Tyler had been confident, persistent and she'd conquered Rory just as she had all the rest--just like she knew she could have Trudy any time it pleased her. And she would have Trudy; there was no doubt in her mind about that.

Trudy felt it would be safer to go and join Adena, but she had to take one last glance at Tyler. It was the wrong choice. Tyler captured her within her sky blue stare and wouldn't release her, no matter how hard Trudy tried to get free. The blonde's pupils dilated, goose bumps lined her prickling flesh and she felt her legs begin to go weak. *Oh, God, I'm going to faint.* Trudy felt the room begin to spin and she fervently prayed that her legs would continue to hold her quaking body upright.

If anything, it was the blank expression in Tyler's eyes, on her face, that scared Trudy the most. Tyler was beautiful, incredibly beautiful, her face a deep mocha, intensifying the lightness of her eyes. Trudy had been curious when Adena said Tyler was a body builder, and she had felt *something* she couldn't name when they spotted one another that very first time. But, on this night, Trudy couldn't bear the vacant looks as those cobalt eyes searched her out, expressionless, yet somehow intense, growing more so throughout the night. And now--again--Trudy was a victim of Tyler's stare, and she knew it, just as she knew her body was reacting in a sexual way to Tyler's. And then, unexpectedly, she was free; suddenly released. Tyler had moved her gaze onto something else. Trudy stumbled backwards. Pressing a hand to her forehead, she closed her eyes to hopefully get back her balance and not heave her dinner right on Adena's new beige rug.

Tyler stood, all six foot two of her, towering over the smaller Trudy, who barely hit 5'3. She thrust a hand out onto Trudy's elbow to steady her. "Are you ok?"

Trudy snatched her arm away, brown eyes glaring at Tyler. She stood very, very still, as if waiting for the scattered pieces of her shaken mind to settle. "Don't even try it. I know what you were doing to me, and don't think you're going to get away with it either." Trudy spun around and hurried off, disappearing into the crowd. She found Adena and told her everything from the moment she had first caught Tyler staring, to what had just occurred.

"Maybe she likes looking at you? You are incredibly beautiful; who wouldn't stare at you?" Noticing heads turning their way, Adena presented a charming smile, but her eyes pleaded with Trudy, begging her not to make a scene and ruin the party.

The comment, and the sincere look in Adena's eyes, calmed her, but Trudy still wanted Tyler out. "I would like you to ask her to leave."

Adena frowned. "Leave? I can't ask her to leave. Ty's been my best friend for years. You can't expect me to throw her out of my home!"

"Then *I'll* go."

Adena gritted her teeth when Trudy slammed the front door in her face. She turned back to her party and sighed in relief noticing that no one seemed to care about Trudy's angry parting; no one except Tyler, of course. Adena met her stare as she made her way back to the couch, her focus never wavering to look at anyone or anything else. She stood before Tyler, heart slamming, hands sweating, and knees about to buckle, when Tyler patted the sofa next to her and Adena gratefully dropped onto it.

Once their visual connection was broken, Adena kept her gaze away from Tyler's, reminding herself to be more careful. Something strange was happening between them. It had been occurring over the last six months, and was coming to a head, whatever it was. More than anything, Adena was sure she was not ready to face it. So she quickly shifted her train of thought. "Where's Rory?"

"Home. Sick. She sends her regards." Tyler stared hollowly down at her entwined fingers.

"I'm not mad you stole her from me, you know; I just wish you would have forewarned me. I was starting to really like her."

"I know."

III

Trudy lightly traced a sleeping Tyler's jaw with her fingers until she opened those shocking blue eyes to the blonde's smile and slow kiss.

"What are you doing awake?" Tyler asked. "It's three in the morning."

Trudy lay back and pulled Tyler up and on top of her. "I want you again." Trudy laughed at her own lust, and her eyes burned with a need for Tyler's loving kisses. "Fuck me, Ty."

Trudy's climatic screams reverberated throughout the house until nearly dawn, when everything went quiet.

* * *

Adena stepped out of her jeans, her bathing suit on under her clothes, as usual. But she wasn't prepared for what Tyler apparently had planned.

"Strip," Tyler said, pulling her own jeans down strong, naked thighs while Adena stood captivated.

To Adena it sounded more like a command, but she found herself pulling her shirt off anyway, and then her suit, slowly revealing her own lithe body for Tyler, who was totally nude, her tall form playing a shadow across Adena's.

Tyler watched her with glowing eyes, trying not to appear too hungry for Adena, after all, the last time she'd seen her totally undressed was when they were fourteen.

"You're keeping yourself looking well," Tyler complimented.

Adena was sure she blushed down to her toes. She folded her arms over her stomach and stood there shivering, acutely conscious of

her nudity, and Tyler's silent appraisal of that nudity. "I didn't know you had skinny dipping on your mind, Ty. Maybe this isn't such a good idea; I'm freezing already."

"Nonsense. Come on, it'll be fun, Adena." She took Adena's hand, the back of her own lightly brushing against the smaller woman's nipple, and the thick thimble promptly responded. Adena was glad Tyler hadn't noticed, as she followed behind.

"Been keeping yourself looking well, too, I see."

Tyler stopped at the water's edge and turned, a smile waiting for Adena. She looked appreciatively at the woman she held in her grasp. "Do you realize it's been more than a decade since we've seen each other naked."

Adena blew out a breath from the side of her mouth then laughed. "I guess getting older kinda changes things."

"I want things back to the way they used to be, Adena. We see each other maybe once a week. We talk on the phone only twice a week; that's not the friendship we used to have."

"Yeah." Adena nodded. "Well, days are out for you, nights are out for me, so what's left? I'm sure you could play hooky once in awhile; I have for you. I'm here ready to freeze my ass off because of you. You could return the favor sometime."

"Let's not bicker. Let's swim before it gets too cold." She yanked on Adena's arm and sent her tipping forward into the chilly water.

After some play, with their bodies close, they waded into deeper water, just their heads poking out of the surface. Adena was growing ever more lost in Tyler's eyes.

Something brushed against Adena's thigh. She shrugged it off thinking it was floating seaweed, but when it happened again and the touch remained, Adena realized it was Tyler's fingers splayed out on her hip.

Tyler floated around to the back of Adena, her other hand coming to Adena's right hip. She pulled Adena through the water and up against her body.

"What are you doing, Ty?"

"Do you like it?"

Two hands came up to her breasts. Adena inadvertently moaned pleurably at the contact. Tyler held Adena like that; nipples between her fingers, applying just the slightest pressure.

"That's not pertinent, Ty." She shook off the feeling of wanting to remain in Tyler's embrace for eternity. "Why you're doing it is." She turned and came face to face with Tyler, immediately losing herself in two deep pools of cobalt.

Tyler's legs pumped hard in the water, keeping them both afloat as she gripped Adena's ass, maintaining her hold on those dashing greens. "Oh, I think it's pertinent, Adena. Everything in life is." She released Adena, swam away and turned back, eyes twinkling.

Frowning, Adena swam up to the sand and pulled herself out of the water. She walked with heavy legs to their towels. She had just sat when Tyler appeared, staring down at her, body dripping water. Adena couldn't help watching two drops that fell from Tyler's dark nipples, her eyes staying with them as they made their speedy descent to the sand below. Her eyes lifted, and she slowly followed the muscular lines of Tyler's long legs to her waist.

"What do you want, Adena?" Tyler asked. Maybe it was in fact time. She would see.

"I wanna know if you stole Trudy, too?"

Tyler's eyes told the truth. Then her mouth followed. She recanted the whole affair for Adena.

That was more than Adena wanted to know and the anger, hurt and guilt came at her without mercy. Without a word, she hurriedly dressed, snatched up her belongings, and headed for home.

The next morning didn't find her in a better frame of mind so she called her boss at work and said she was sick and would be in later if she felt up to it. She felt sick all right. She felt like a fool.

Tyler called the office for Adena and promptly went to her apartment when she learned Adena had stayed home for the day.

When she would not release the bell, ringing it for ten minutes to the sloppy tune of "jingle bells"-- the building's superintendent hadn't changed it since the past Christmas-- Adena flung open the

door and glared up at her. Tyler smiled in return and pushed her back in, kicking the door closed behind them.

Adena didn't know where to put her eyes, anything but the direct hit of Tyler's stare. She turned to find a pair of jeans to throw on. Her nightshirt was feeling far too flimsy for the argument she was almost certain would commence.

"I'm sorry for anything my actions put you through, Adena. I had hoped..." Tyler fell into memory – her last memory of Adena's hurt expression at the beach was impossibly clear.

"The time for excuses, or even of acceptance of those excuses is over, Ty. I'm trying to live my life, find a partner and be happy. Why do you keep interfering in that dream? Just because we were the best of friends," Tyler noted the were, "closer than most, doesn't give you the right to decide my fate, or even attempt to."

"And what about us Adena? Do you think, in that muddy little brain of yours, that what's been going on between *us* the past few months is nothing?" Tyler glowered at her.

"Nothing has been going on between us," Adena knowingly lied, "Besides, you seem awfully occupied these days, what with taking Rory and Trudy back-to-back."

"Well, dear heart, things change- become clearer over time. I never belonged with either of them- with any of them." Tyler's face seemed to puff up as she looked down at her hands, which were clasped tightly to the back of the chair she stood behind.

Adena watched Tyler struggle with too many emotions. She was fighting to keep her composure. Adena had seen Tyler like this before, biting back the pain. Adena felt herself soften. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

Tyler shrugged, feeling foolish, but answered anyway. "I'm just tired of feeling like women are doing me a required service. Like they've suddenly realized I was there and somebody had to love me."

Adena stroked her fingers through Tyler's hair, her own expression reflecting Tyler's pain.

Tyler took her hand and pressed it to her cheek. "Sharing each others hurt, just like we used to do..."

Adena let her hand fall to rest on Tyler's shoulder. She was beginning to tighten up. Tyler was getting closer to those emotions that she was still not yet ready to explore.

Tyler eyed her, getting a clear indication of what Adena feared. "There's nothing for you to be afraid of here, Adena. I don't believe this is a coincidence- you and I coming to be friends again even after the four years when you went away to college. We can have friendship, and more, if you allow it. Can you honestly say that you and I-"

Adena swallowed involuntarily, feeling like a cartoon character from the obvious noise her tight, dry throat made. "What's the difference does any of this make? If I can't trust you, how are we supposed to go anywhere from here? Do you think it's that easy for me to let go of the past? It's all very fresh and real to me. You don't realize what it's like to keep having your heart broken Ty, and by your best friend no less-" she broke off, having no desire to let Tyler see her cry, she moved across the room.

Tyler went to her, but did not touch her. She simply stood behind her, close enough to breathe in the subtle scent of her hair. "Then tell me what it's like. If you think I don't know, then tell me."

Adena turned and stared blankly at her. Then she stated flatly, "I need to get to work, I'm late." She tried to move toward her room.

"Liar, you called in sick." Tyler stood firmly in her path. "Don't ignore me, say something-- say anything. Just let me know you heard me."

"I heard you, Ty." Adena walked around Tyler and into her bedroom, closing the door between them. She stood at the edge of the bed, wanting to hurt Ty, wanting revenge. But she couldn't do it, not to Tyler, not this way, not any way. She came out and saw Tyler just stepping out of the front door.

"Wait!" she called with tired urgency. She went to her and guided Tyler back inside, closing the door. They each stood, staring at their feet, until Adena gathered herself.

"Look at me Adena," Tyler's soft whisper came like a sudden crash in their silence. She took Adena's hands in her own and held them.

Adena's eyes, full of hurt and confusion, met Tyler's.

"What do you see?" Tyler asked with a hint of reservation.

"You."

"Tell me what you *see*," Tyler demanded.

"Everything. I see – too much." It was in fact far too much for her to bear-- the raw passion on Tyler's otherwise blank face, in her eyes. It was all too confusing for Adena. She couldn't comprehend such emotion.

"Yes, *too* much. Now think about what you see when you look at other women and what's in them when they stare back. Don't you think you deserve to be with someone who feels just as much as you're seeing here now?"

Adena took her hands away and held them, looking at them, not able to hold their eyes in such honesty. There was something about Tyler, in her, that deep down in Adena's conscious she knew she was not able to handle.

"I need time, Ty."

"That's all I have Adena, is time." She lifted Adena's hands to her lips and placed a gentle kiss upon the supple skin there. "Were you as soft as this when we met?" Her words hung in the air between them.

Adena could but only smile.

"The spirit of heaven is naked when glimpsed in your smile," Tyler whispered close to her face. She abruptly dropped Adena's hands and left.

IV

"So, when are you going to get off your ass and make Adena yours, Baby?"

Tyler watched her mother sifting her hands through a thick pile of dirt, only to find a large stone, lift it out and toss it over her shoulder. Margery looked up at Tyler when she took too long to answer.

"Soon, Mom, soon." Tyler's eyes were on the joists just above her head, her nose filled with the musty odor around her and the fresh smell of new dirt. One bulb hung beside her, swinging gently from the bump of her shoulder as she passed by it. Shadows were gray and dark, floating in every available space. Tyler remembered her own boring basement. Well, what were basements supposed to look like? she mused.

"There, that should do it." Margery stood, brushing her hands off on her black jeans. Tiny veins of perspiration flowed down her long neck, then disappeared into the fabric of her black sweat-jacket. "Was Sally still upstairs?" She dropped an arm around Tyler's waist.

"Mm-hmm."

"So, how soon is soon?" Margery pulled the light cord above her head. They uneventfully made their way through the sudden blackness to the stairs.

"I'm working on her, Mom. I should have started years ago."

"Hey, you two!" Sally circled her arms around Margery and pulled her closer for a kiss. Tyler watched them, her gaze becoming detached, her mind traveling elsewhere.

"It's a damn mess down there, Sal; we really have to clean that place out."

Sally winked at Tyler's smirk. "I know, Marge, we will, soon as we clean out the attic, and finish planting the flowers in the yard, and trimming the hedges..."

"Okay. Okay. Don't remind me." Margery held her head, feeling a migraine coming on, thinking of all the work they still had to do on the old Victorian. After both their husbands had passed away years ago, it had taken them only a few months to realize they were free and to decide to sell their houses and jointly purchase the large dwelling. Restoration had been part of the deal, but wasn't that supposed to be the fun part?

"It's late, I gotta go."

"So soon? But you just got here, Honey." Margery complained, filling a kettle for tea. "At least stay and have tea with your mother. How long has it been since she was here, Sal?"

"Oh, about a month I'd say." Sally grinned up at Tyler and indicated a chair. "Sit."

Tyler turned the chair around and straddled it. "Are you happy now?" she asked them both.

"No, not until you and Adena are together."

"Sometimes things have to be taken slowly."

"You're *too* damn slow, Ty. Your mother and I made the decision to be together the very first night, and here we are, twenty some odd years later perfectly happy and content with each other, as you should be with Adena by now."

"I'm working on it. If I rush it'll be false, and I want her to truly want to be with me."

"Oh hosh-posh," Margery waved her hand at her daughter, using the other to pour the steaming water in the cups.

Sally giggled at her lover's reaction. "Yeah, hosh-posh!"

Margery gave Tyler a firm look. "You listen to me, girl, stop dragging your ass. You've let that girl nearly get away from you, so get with the program, kiddo."

"Yes, Mother."

V

Adena parked her Blazer in the empty parking lot and grabbed her duffel bag. In it were the running shoes she would slip into before hitting the track. Running after her shift ended at 2 a.m. was a release she looked forward to at least once a week. Upon cresting the hill overlooking the bleachers, the silhouette of a runner rounding a curve of the track below floated into view. Adena felt a flutter in her heart as she recognized the darkened figure. She sat on the top bleacher to pull on her shoes; mentally acknowledging the action was merely an excuse to just sit for a few minutes in admiration of the grace and athleticism of the runner. Tyler was the only person Adena knew, beside herself, who loved jogging at night.

Happily, but with a worried rippling growing in her stomach, Adena jogged down the steps between the bleachers and opened the gate. The spring action of the metal closed the opening behind her as she stepped onto the track, waiting for Tyler to catch up.

"Evenin', Adena," Tyler greeted when she fell into step beside her friend. "Don't you usually come jogging on Wednesdays?"

"Mm-hmm. I was restless, I guess." Adena remained silent as they ran around the track twice. With more urgency than intended, Adena asked, "Why haven't you come over?"

"You were angry at me." Ty answered without missing a beat.

"It's been three weeks, how's screwing Trudy going?"

Ty released an exasperated snort. "Don't be crude."

Adena laughed and shoved Tyler into an outside lane with a hearty push on the shoulder. "Crude? Who's being what, hm? It's not me that steals every girl you've ever dated, now is it?" She let Tyler fall back into stride beside her.

"You two wouldn't have made it anyway; she's a dog lover."

Adena just shook her head as she jogged onto the grassy field in the center of the track. Chest heaving, she fell onto her knees, then rolled down on her back, breathing out white clouds in the glare of the last spotlight the bored teenagers in town hadn't broken.

"Come over here," Tyler invited, dropping onto a darker spot of grass where the lamp's light didn't quite reach.

Adena obeyed, didn't even consider not to. She lay down beside Tyler, rolling onto her side to look at her profile: such a strong, chiseled face, taut jaw, straight nose, and steely blue eyes. Adena loved her friend's face, her body, the way she talked, how she sounded. She reached a hand up and touched Tyler's jaw a moment, then touched her bottom lip with a shaky thumb.

"What do you need, Adena?" Tyler asked, turning her head to meet Adena's desiring eyes.

"To kiss you."

"Like when we were eight?"

"No, like two adults." She leaned closer, half her body resting on Tyler's, and they kissed for the second time in their lives. It was much smoother than the first time, and it lasted a lot longer. At some point, Adena pulled her body onto Tyler's. She was now laying totally on Tyler, her legs intertwined in Tyler's. In a fevered whisper, Adena said, "Well, now I know how you keep them away from me, so why don't you tell me how you get them away from me?"

"Let's continue this first." Tyler had a hand cupped around Adena's neck, and she pulled Adena down, meeting her mouth with a searching caress. She rolled over onto Adena, chills wiggled up and down her chest as Adena let out a moan of pleasure. "Yes, Adena. It's good, right?"

"So good, Ty." She held both sides of Tyler's face in her hands, keeping her still as she moved her mouth over Tyler's, pulling deeply on it, sucking in Tyler's hot tongue.

Tyler pulled free, staring deeply into Adena's eyes, mesmerizing her with their cerulean glare. "Tell me you want me, Adena."

"I want you, Ty."

Tyler kissed her again, so passionately Adena came. When Tyler broke their connection, Adena lay there staring up into her eyes. Her stupor was obvious. "How did you do that?"

"I can do it again, Adena. I can do anything your heart desires if you want me to; all you have to do is say you'll be mine."

"But I don't understand, Ty. You just made me come with only a kiss; that's not possible."

Tyler smiled, brushing Adena's hair from her eyes as a subtle wind blew around their clasped bodies. "Anything's possible; just tell me you'll be mine, Adena."

Adena stared up at her, confused. "Why now? Why not a year ago, two years ago? Why not my first? Why not your first?"

"I wasn't ready then. I'm ready for you now, Adena, and you're finally ready for me."

"We'd ruin our friendship, Ty; remember, we vowed."

"Yes," Tyler agreed, nodding. "And it was also a pact that no matter what, we would stay friends."

"Sex breaks up friendships, Ty."

"Not this friendship, Adena, it's sealed in blood, in a kiss. You're mine, and I'm yours."

"Friends, you mean?"

Tyler's eyes darkened. "Not only friends, Adena, *lovers*, mates-- soul mates. You'll never be with anyone else; I won't let you."

Adena shifted, but couldn't move far, so she lay there staring up at Tyler. "Is that why you've been taking all of my girlfriends?"

"That's one reason, the main reason." She leaned on an elbow, fingers stroking Adena's lips, blue eyes gently caressing green. "I love you, Adena..."

Adena fell into her, and a smile caressed her lips as she watched Tyler's mouth coming closer for another kiss. "Let's go to my place, Ty. I want to be more intimate with you."

"We will, Baby, we will. Just tell me you want to be mine and you'll have me, and I'll give you your every desire."

"I want to be yours, Tyler."

Tyler's lips came down on Adena's softly. She kissed her chin, her lips, grazed her mouth over Adena's eyelids, until finally she buried her mouth in the crook of Adena's neck and shoulder.

Epilogue

"Are they playing nicely?" Sally asked, looking over her shoulder at Margery.

Margery chuckled, pulled the curtain aside and watched their daughters sitting on the porch steps kissing.

"They're fine, still kissing up a storm. Just like always."

"I'm so glad they'll be partners forever," Sally swooned, idly spinning a spoon through the soup.

"Yes, just like us."

"Just like us."

* * *

"You ready yet?" Tyler asked, pulling back.

Adena was trembling. "Will it hurt?"

"Not at all, I've done it dozens of times. Here, cock your head, let me see your neck."

Adena tilted her head, exposing the fine cords to her friend. She squeezed her eyes shut, waiting.

"Beautiful... So beautiful, Adena," Tyler whispered, closing in on Adena's neck. She smoothed her tongue over the warm flesh, licking upward, ending with a kiss behind Adena's ear.

Adena's stomach surged with excitement, and she leaned into Tyler's caress as Tyler stroked her cheek softly, a calming gesture she never used with anyone else, not even Rory when she took her.

Tyler dragged her lips over Adena's smooth skin, reveling in its feel, impassioned in the act alone. She felt her canines sharpen as she bore down on Adena's flesh gently, just scratching the surface.

Adena was calmed by Tyler's breathing; deep, raspy, uneven, and she knew of Tyler's passion for it was of the same breed as her own: pure want.

Abruptly Tyler stood and held out her hand. "Come on, come with me."

Adena didn't ask where, she just went, smiling when they reached Adena's bedroom and not the coffins below in the basement. Maybe Tyler still wasn't going to do it, maybe they were just going to make love again. Adena hoped for both, her body missed Tyler's passionate ravaging.

Tyler lay with her in bed, body half on Adena's, as she brushed the hair away from her neck. "I wasn't comfortable downstairs," she explained as she tilted Adena's head for her, leaning forward, breath becoming hotter as she drew nearer to the sinewy cords pinpointed in her vision.

Tyler ripped Adena's shirt open, circling her hands around the voluptuous breasts, bending to take a nipple between her teeth, teasing it with her tongue, taunting it with the tip of one canine directly in the center.

Just knowing how badly Tyler wanted her made Adena's chest ache, and she shivered as Tyler bit down a little harder, yet there still wasn't any pain, only the impression of a very sharp point. She watched Tyler sucking her nipple, and that was enough to cause a surge between her thighs--thighs that Tyler's long fingers were gripping as she came up for a kiss. Adena opened her mouth wider under Tyler's, felt her strong tongue coil around her own, a jolt of desire burned through her. She could feel the canines, but as of yet had not seen them. She tried to pull back to see them, but Tyler held the nape of her neck, locking their mouths together. Adena gave up on the urge and offered herself to Tyler's avid kiss.

Their eyes locked as Tyler slowly moved her tongue in and out of Adena's mouth. She held Adena's wrists to the bed on either side of her head, her hips moving discreetly from side to side, her want obvious, and her intention clear.

But first... She brought her lips again to Adena's neck, smoothing her long teeth over the prickling skin, letting Adena get used to their feel.

Adena closed her eyes again, having already prepared herself for this moment two months ago, but still Tyler had hesitated. Adena knew she was worried. She'd done her best to assure Tyler that she, Adena Vorean, wanted to be with her forever, wanted Tyler's kiss of everlasting life. As she reflected, Tyler's teeth sank into her flesh, her warm blood spouting into Tyler's mouth as she drank of her best friend, draining her of her life.

* * *

"You can open your eyes now."

Adena smiled inwardly at the memory of her expression as a wide-eyed 8-year-old little girl, 'Wow, it didn't hurt!' And of the response from her best friend, 'I told ya.'

Adena opened her eyes, lifting them to rest on Tyler's mouth and the smear of blood on her ruby red lips. The tips of the canines made tiny indentations in the fuller bottom lip. A while before, Tyler's pallor had reminded Adena of what she really was, but now, after having taken in Adena's nourishing blood, her face glowed with health. She was the most beautiful woman Adena had ever seen.

"No regrets?" Tyler asked.

"No regrets."

"Ad infinitum, Adena."

"To infinity, Tyler..."

The Sleep...

*My sleep for that unnatural nightmare
Drain my dream*

*Cloak twilight with these tears
My souvenir—
a dream*

*My sleep for that unnatural nightmare
I sleep...
bludgeoned in a dream.*

I

Sunrise is to daybreak what sunset is to darkness. Dreams were to Alex Dagny what Alex Dagny was to dreams.

All the world was, indeed, a stage to Alex, but only when she was asleep. In the Playbill of her mind it would read, "Alex Dagny, This Is Your Life." But it wasn't; it was just imaginings. Nevertheless, she'd take her place in the one seat auditorium, and munch her hypothetical popcorn, and wait to see what her dreams would play out for her this time.

Alex's eyes fluttered; the REM's had been going on for ten minutes. Most often as soon as her head touched the pillow, she was out of this world and into the bizarre, and sometimes aching, events of her unconscious mind. It wasn't that she lived an additional life in her dreams; no it was more of an identification of that life she had never lived.

She had gone through her adolescence twice, once awake in the real world, and once in dreams, recalling things otherwise left in the far reaches of her mind when she was wide awake. She could recall the birthday party her mother (then still alive, having parted this earth on her 16th birthday) had thrown for her when she was a year old. The cake was a single layer, with chocolate frosting and one big candle in the center. She dreamed the color of the candle, pink, and saw the flame whipping and snapping sideways when her mother carried it from the kitchen into the dimly lit dining room, and then set it down in front of her.

She was seated in a highchair. She could plainly see herself, and surrounding her was her immediate family. There was Uncle Chester, and George (his lover at the time. George had died of AIDS in another of her dreams when she was much older). Beside them were her cousins, Phil and Denise, the only set of twins in the family. And on the opposite side of the twins were her father and older brother, Tom.

Her sister hadn't been born yet, and in another revelation in the world of dreams, would die of cancer at age three.

The atmosphere was brimming with love and laughter. Everyone, including Alex herself, blew the single candle out. The room resounded with applause afterwards, and in her glee, Alex clapped her own chubby little hands, then preceded to reach out and grab a fistful of cake. Everyone erupted with laughter.

Alex woke up with a smile on her face. She liked when the dreams were enjoyable. She didn't much care for the ones in which she lost her dream family, or when she broke up with someone for whom she cared dearly. No, those hurt too much. She knew it was silly to get so emotionally attached to people in her dreams; after all, they were figments of her imagination. None of her family resembled anyone in the dreams.

She once considered she may be living a past life through dreams, but since it was in dreams that these adventures took place, she set that idea on the wayside and left it alone. She considered outside influences. Hadn't she seen "Passion Of Mind," a psychological romantic thriller where fantasy and reality become indistinguishable for a woman leading a double life in her dreams? Alex clearly remembered the tag line, "What if you had two lives at once? What if you knew that one life took place only in your dreams? What if you didn't know which life was real?" She scoffed at the very idea. This was, in fact, the 21st Century; this wasn't a movie. So what, maybe she was impressionable, but (and she'd stake her life on the 'but') didn't the dreams start before she'd seen the movie? And hadn't she rented the movie because of the dreams?

And her situation was far more different than the movie. She wasn't torn between lovers, nor did she question her reality. She knew to which world she belonged. So, psychologically, she was fine--a sane woman having some fun in dreams. She couldn't explain why the dreams started with the same characters, most often with an on-screen cameo in her mind's eye of a new lover here or there. Nor could she explain the way in which she dreamed these characters.

Of course, there could have been other movies that preyed on her subconscious mind, but none she was aware of having seen.

Her body was stiff; usually it always was when she woke from one of those "other lifetime" dreams. Her legs felt as if they'd been inactive for years, and her arms tingled when she started moving them to get the circulation going again. She'd wake with neck pains, and her throat would be dry as a bone. She had trouble opening her eyes, but after a time, and much rubbing, the lids lifted to reveal a startling set of blue eyes, which she considered her best feature.

Her lover, Cally, was nowhere to be found, and Alex thought that was just as well. Cally Taylor was a bit jealous of Alex's dreams, especially the ones in which she had romantic involvements. She wanted to be supportive, yet found herself uneasy when Alex would, in detail, describe her nightly passage into that other world.

She presumed her will was much stronger than Cally's and that she had her priorities straight. It was her creed, and she wasn't particularly surprised that she didn't get jealous when she caught Cally's eye wander to a slim body at the gym, or when it would rove over a model during a station break as they watched tennis. Those things didn't carry any weight in her world, her real world. There were too many other problems in the world to worry about than her lover's appreciative, if wandering, eye.

It was with incredible detail she remembered the tail end of some of the dreams, but as the day progressed, the images slowly shifted from her mind until they were a minute flicker at the back of her brain.

But wasn't that just as well? She couldn't live her current life walking around in a dream--albeit a tasty temptation. Her real life was fine. She had a lover, and they had a child. She was financially well off, and Cally's writing career was flourishing. She couldn't have asked for more, nor did she want more.

Dreams were dreams were dreams. And that's the way she wanted it to remain.

Her day advanced quickly. She hardly noticed time passing while she penned the famous cartoon strip "Amy;" the idea similar to

the "Cathy" strip, but fashioned somewhat after her own life. Hers was a lesbian version of "Cathy," and she wouldn't have had it any other way.

In her dream life, she was a boring tax attorney. This is what told her they really were only dreams and not any past lives coming back to haunt her, or that she was (by any degree) insane. She couldn't imagine living anything as mundane as the life of a lawyer, especially a tax lawyer. She attempted to change that aspect of the dreams, maybe serving as a lawyer to the rich and famous, or working for internal affairs, anything but a lowly tax attorney, but no matter how much she tried, and wished it to be, a tax attorney is what she was and would always be in that other world.

She heard Gail crashing into the house and looked up just in time to see the long yellow bus pulling away from the curb. The scraped face of her watch told her it was quarter after three.

The child was seven, and looked exactly like Cally. A watered down version of Cally, but Cally nonetheless. She had been the birth mother after all, so it was only natural she resemble her. With the one exception, Alex's biting blue eyes, the youngster had the same flawless golden tresses, the same set mouth when she was serious, the same dry humor her mother graciously splurged on Alex from time to time. She was short for her seven years, which told Alex she'd mostly make it to around five two if she were lucky. Alex stood a full foot over Cally. When standing side by side, the smaller woman's golden head would just make it to Alex's shoulder. No more, no less.

They had gone through so many files on donors to get someone who looked a little like Alex--tall, six foot one, dark skinned, long dark hair, smart, funny--but in the end, they found a guy who had only one of the remarkable features Alex possessed, her blue eyes.

"Mom?" was yelled from across the house, and Alex yelled back, "In here, Squirt!"

The child followed the strings of Debussy filtering from the second floor. Alex heard the sound of running Nike's on the stairs, and a thud, and imagined the book bag being dumped

unceremoniously onto the hall floor, and could only smile. The child had also gotten her piggish habits from Cally.

"You'll pick up your things on the way back upstairs, young lady," she chastised when the child finally made an appearance at her studio door, a bit out of breath, cheeks red, hair blown out of its tight knot she'd tied herself that very morning.

"Yes, Mom," Gail promised. She received her hug and a kiss on the tip of her nose and moved from Alex's overabundant embrace to see what she'd drawn that day. "Oh cool, she did get the dog!" She was bubbling with excitement.

Alex eyed the girl suspiciously. "That doesn't mean we're getting one, too."

"But... The strip is about you, us; so if Amy gets a dog, we get one!"

"Amy's daughter also got the mumps. Would you like a case of the mumps?"

The girl shook her head adamantly. "No thanks!"

"Sometimes I add a little fabrication, otherwise it would be a tad uneventful."

"Our lives are eventful," Gail disagreed.

"Perhaps. To a seven year old, going to bed is an adventure in itself."

Gail rolled her eyes and headed for the door. "Call you at six?" she asked over her shoulder.

"And have that homework done. I'll look it over while I make dinner." Then she remembered, "Are you hungry? Want a snack?"

"I ate some chips on the bus," Gail called from deep within the house.

Content, Alex settled back to her work. She was a good kid; she behaved and seldom gave either she or Cally any flack. Face it; you've raised a model kid. Happy with the thought, she resumed her drawing.

II

Graduation day, a year after her mother had departed the earth. Tears were in Alex's eyes, for accomplishing something her mother and she had strived long and hard for--one of her children graduating and going on to college, and for the fact her mother was cold in her grave and wouldn't get to see their dream come alive. But her mother knew; Alex believed it was so.

Her dad was there, as was her brother, Tom. He was near the podium pretending to have dropped something so he could chance a glimpse under one of the girls' robes. Little pervert, Alex thought and gave her father a look that said, "Stop him, or strangle him, either is just fine."

Regardless of her brother's antics, the day couldn't have gotten any better. She spotted her Uncle George, partnerless, and stricken with the virus that had taken his beloved. In the other world, her real world, Alex knew she would mourn the loss of her dream uncle.

After graduation, she was to hurry home, get changed, and go out with the girls for one last foray into misbehavior before she got serious and started thinking about college.

The night would end on a blissful note; it would be the night Alex first kissed a girl.

As the evening wore on, jubilation had settled, and the girls were mildly drunk, except for Liz Widrow, their designated driver that evening. She sat beside Alex and counted the beer bottles the girl had emptied. Current total stood at four. The bar door opened, letting in the street noises along with a group of other graduates laughing and shoving at one another.

Alex's eyes fell on the last to arrive. She was the small girl, who had sat next to her all semester in Biology. Alex had had a crush

on her forever, and it was with red cheeks that she watched as Liz called the group over to sit with them. Alex wondered, if she slid down under the table, would anyone notice? Now there's a butch attribute if she ever saw one.

She skirted eye contact with the beauty for as long as she could stand, which was five minutes in " I simply adore you" time according to her defaced watch, and Alex's eyes finally fell on her. It was with great surprise she found her looking back.

Was it common to have two gay people in the same family? she wondered. Or was she simply intrigued by the unknown? Nah, that wasn't it. The first time Billy Peterson had kissed her, she knew something was missing, and quickly, though secretly, found herself admiring the other girls in the locker room when changing clothes between gym class and her other classes.

It came as a total surprise when she saw the girl motioning her to the back door. Alex set her pack of cigarettes on the table (another indication she was dreaming, being asthmatic and unable to smoke in real life) grabbed her Heineken, and sauntered towards the back of the club. The fresh air felt good on her face, and she was taking in great gulps of it when she heard music, as the door opened behind her. And then she knew she wasn't alone; Tina had come outside and was standing right behind her.

The door closed out the noise from inside, and it was just the two of them, and the stars, and the night noises, and the moon engulfing them.

Small talk dominated the conversation at first, but once they got to know one another outside of Biology, and discovered each had a sense of humor the other admired, the ice broke--smashed actually. They were at the beach no less than three hours later, strolling along, holding hands, and laughing appropriately here and there as they shared stories of their lives growing up.

They knew it was the start of something, and at the end of the evening, neither wanted to go home, but go home they must. After all, it was four in the morning. Alex pictured her family calling all the

hospitals looking for her, and from the tale Tina spun, hers would be just as worried.

They ended the evening with an embrace, and then the kiss.

The alarm buzzed. Cally groaned, rolled over and slapped an arm around Alex's midriff. Alex oofed in her sleep, and then groaned. She tried to clasp onto the last remaining wisps of the dream, but it was gone. Her lips had just touched Tina's, and here she was, in her bed, beside Cally. She could feel the heat from her body, and the warmth of the sheets beneath her. Her legs hurt, and her arms were surely asleep. She would not move yet, she would let her limbs wake on their own. In the meantime, she tried to open her eyes; they were filled with sleep, and dried tears. Had she been crying in her sleep? It wouldn't have been the first time. When her little sister had died in one of the dreams, Alex had woken to a soaked pillow, sore throat, and a raspy voice that lasted until she had her first cup of java.

She suspected the same this time. But however her outward appearance seemed, she was buoyant within, not for just having had her first kiss in that other world, but of the pride she had felt in herself. That came rarely these days. She was proud of the daughter they'd raised, and of the home they'd made, but of herself... She mentally made a checklist of her accomplishments, and then became angry (the first time) at the dreams. Why should they make her feel less of herself? That wasn't reality, this was. She was a fine artist, cartoonist, and woman. She had a lot to be proud of in herself.

She'd graduated from high school, too, and went to college. Her life in reality and in the other world up until her twenties was nearly the same, or at least her accomplishments were. Straight 'A' student, graduating with honors, proud family by her side. So she had nothing of which to feel envious. There was not one scrap of evidence she was less a woman in this life than she was in the one in her dreams. End of subject.

"You look a bit pale." Cally greeted, smothering Alex's aching limbs with her womanly frame. She smoothed a kiss across Alex's accepting lips and after, leaned on an elbow to stare down at her. "The dream again?"

Alex nodded, eyes closed.

Cally got the hint; Alex wouldn't reveal the contents just yet. That was fine by her. She rolled off Alex and stood next to the bed stretching. It felt good to get all the kinks out. Yawning, she took herself to the bathroom to begin her day.

* * *

Alex conversed with her partner through a mouthful of toothpaste. She didn't see Cally's fleeting smile at her back as she leaned down to spit a glob of the substance into the sink.

"Today you have to pick up Gail. It's only a half day, and she needs to be at soccer practice early."

"Will do," Alex promised and spat out the remaining toothpaste. She grinned at herself in the mirror, inspecting her handiwork. Still white, except for a coffee stain she'd missed. She squeezed another load of toothpaste onto the brush and went to work on the guilty tooth.

"You keep that up and you'll brush the white off," Cally teased and whipped her with the towel she'd been using to dry her hair. "Come on, fancy pants, come down to the mortal plane with the rest of us."

Alex arched a brow at her in the mirror. "I'll remind you of that tomorrow when I'm waiting a half hour to get in here while you primp and pamper yourself."

* * *

There wouldn't be a visit to the bathroom that next day, nor for many days following. It had been quick, and unexpected. The minivan had slammed into the side of Alex's Toyota on a green light.

The impact had crushed the vehicle and the woman inside. The world went white and then black. Alex wondered if this was death, and if it were, shouldn't it have remained white? She didn't suppose

she was in hell; hell was for those who defied the Lord and tax attorney's.

Funny thing death was. The senses were more acute. She could hear sounds far off that in the normal world would never have reached her. She felt unbelievable pain in her body, and wondered if it was her heightened senses, or was she really in that much pain. Was there pain after death? How was she to know, she'd never died before. Well, if this was death, she wanted her money back. Lord, I'll take the next train to death, now boarding at gate 2045.

She saw herself as a character drawn in her comic strip--a one-dimensional colorized figure floating to heaven on a cloud. She'd not sprouted a halo or wings yet. That would come later once she was initiated into heaven. Initiated? Was Heaven now a country club?

Regardless of her mind losing its faculties, she was very aware that death was upon her, and Heaven at its heels. There were sirens, and people poked at her and prodded as if she was a new crop of tomatoes. She giggled, picturing people bending over and sniffing her. She bled like a tomato, the concrete filling with the red substance. Her lungs felt as if a car was sitting atop her chest, her limbs burned as if they'd been consumed by fire.

She tried to speak and felt one of her teeth come loose. All she could do was wait until it fell from her bottom lip onto her chest. Good, it was that stubborn coffee stained tooth. Don't have to worry about brushing that one anymore.

Her mind wandered to Cally, and she began to pray. Dearest Cally, you come to me when I'm alone, setting my heart on fire, you speak to me--velvet voice splitting my senses with every sound. Where you are, therefore am I, inside and out, I feel you. And touching you inside is where I love you most. I'm sorry I didn't tell you I loved you before I left this morning, Honey, but I know you can hear the dead speak. Hear me now my Love. I love you dearly.

As the last words left her mind, floating on a thought to her beloved, Alex Dagny died.

III

There was a bright light. This! This is that light I'd been waiting for, Alex's disembodied mind thought. I haven't gone to hell after all. Dear Jesus, you've heard my prayers.

Blinding light, eclipsed. She could see images behind the light and wondered, was it lost family members come to take her home? Wouldn't that be nice if it was like "Ghost," and they took her to their loving bosoms? Oh, look, there was Uncle Charlie, and his lover. Oh, and wasn't that her baby sister? Three-years old, and she was racing around as if she were five.

But wait, these aren't my relations, she recalled. These are the dream people. The dream. Could it be? Was she just dreaming again? Oh thank heaven! And that bright light? Was that mere sunlight come to kiss her awake to a new day?

"Alex?" Someone was intruding in her blissful journey. She frowned, not wanting any part of it.

"Alex, can you hear me?" There it was again. Alex wouldn't have any of it. No, if she came to that voice, then wouldn't she forego the dream to reality? She wasn't ready yet; there was so much more to dream about. She wasn't done. She didn't want to be alive.

* * *

After what must have been decades, but had in actual fact been a week, Alex's eyes opened. Not much, but just a bit that she could manage once she got the sleep out of them.

There was an unfamiliar woman in white standing beside her. Alex surveyed the room leisurely. There were machines surrounding her and white walls in every direction. She could see her feet, and the metal contraptions encasing her legs. Were those metal pins like they

use for victims of smashed bones? She wondered. And my arms! What's wrong with my arms? She tried to lift them and experienced the same sensation as if she was waking from one of her other world dreams. Just asleep, that's all. I'll give them a few minutes and they'll be right as rain. Her brain would not acknowledge the truth--the simple fact that had taken root in her reality.

Her neck hurt like a bitch, and forgetting about her arms, tried to lift her hand to massage her neck. The pain was intense, and she bit down on her bottom lip. It was her bottom lip wasn't it? It felt like someone had attached an extra pound of flesh to it. She tried to run her tongue across it, but she had no spittle.

"Water," she croaked. Was that my voice? What in the world has happened?"

Leaning down over her body, the nurse had buzzed the attendant's station for the doctor the moment she acknowledged Alex's awareness. She'd finished checking the pupils with her penlight and had slipped the object back into her pocket. She reached to the bedside table and brought a plastic cup to Alex's parched lips. It had a straw, and she inserted it in between. Her hand was cool on Alex's and she registered the touch. At least she had feeling in her extremities.

Alex greedily gulped down the cool liquid, and then swallowed some air afterwards. Now she was feeling a bit better. Her throat at least felt more open than it had moments before.

"Where am I?" she asked the obligatory question.

She received the obligatory answer; she was in a hospital, she'd had an accident, and just rest now, the doctor would be there any moment to speak with her.

As promised, a tall man in green scrubs came striding through the doorway. He was balding, but he must have figured if he combed all the hair from the right side of his head over to the left, no one would notice that tiny fact. His eyes were kind, and she realized she liked him. He was honest.

"Well now, you're awake. Good. How do you feel Ms. Dagny?"

"How do I look?"

He smiled wider and accepted the metal clipboard the nurse was handing him.

"Where's Cally?" Alex asked, wondering where her partner could have been other than by her side during this tumultuous event.

"Pardon?" The doctor glanced up at her from his reading and note making.

"Cally Taylor, my friend. Has anyone notified her?"

The doctor looked at the nurse and she gave him an uncommitted look while busying herself with monitoring the monitors monitoring Alex.

"I don't believe so. Someone can notify her. Your father has been phoned and is on his way from California. We had a devil of a time reaching him. Then there were some very bad rainstorms; his flight was delayed twice already. However, your cousins are here. They've been here since you were brought in."

Cousins? She wasn't aware of any cousins living in New York or the surrounding area who could have come so quickly to be at her side. Cally, she had to get them to call Cally.

"Please, if you could, ring her up. I know she'd want to be here. And Gail must be out of her mind with worry."

"Gail?" He looked further perplexed.

"My daughter."

He pursed his lips a moment and laid a hand on Alex's arm. "I'm sorry, Ms Dagny, but we weren't informed there was a child." He shuffled through the charts and papers on the clipboard looking to make sure there wasn't a note somewhere he'd missed.

Alex was becoming agitated quickly. Something didn't feel right, and it wasn't the feeling of her many broken bones. "If you'd just call Cally." She whispered the number, and the nurse quickly scampered away to do her bidding.

With that taken care of, the doctor went down the list of her injuries. She'd been in a coma from the moment she'd been pulled from the wreckage. Her vital signs had been unstable and warranted her placement in the ICU. Listed as in critical condition, he told her

she had given them quite a good scare that she wouldn't make it. However, he had faith in her, and here she was, awake and talking, exceptionally more than he hoped for seven days after the incident.

The nurse returned, face glum. She took the doctor aside a moment and they spoke in whispers. He then turned to Alex, an apologetic smile pasted to his features. "I'm afraid that number you gave the nurse wasn't in service, Ms. Dagny. Are you sure you. . ."

"I've had that phone number for eight years." Alex turned her head away from him and stared at the window. "Call the paper then. Talk to my boss. He'll contact Cally." She felt renewed excitement.

"Paper?"

"Yes, the Daily Advisor. I draw a cartoon strip." She was a bit affronted that he wasn't aware of who she was. What must my face resemble anyhow?

"In what city would that be?"

"What city?" Alex looked at him dumbfounded. "This city. It's a local paper. Don't read much?"

"I don't believe I've ever heard of it, but just to be sure," he nodded to the nurse and she disappeared again.

While the frazzled nurse was gone on her new task, he set the tablet down and began to inspect Alex's injuries. "You're making an astounding recovery, Ms. Dagny. Far faster than I had thought you would." He was delighted and prideful of the quick actions he had taken in the ER that he believed had gotten her prepped and into surgery to fix her broken body.

Alex let the sound of his voice lull her back into oblivion. She just wanted to sleep, and to dream.

IV

The next time Alex opened her eyes, there were people in the room. These weren't hospital employees; they were the people of her dream. It was becoming clear to Alex she was still dreaming of that other world. But what an awfully long dream this time -- and different. She was still in the hospital, and her pain was all too real. She'd never experienced something so true in any of the other dreams.

Her other world father noticed her awareness immediately, and he, along with her twin cousins and brother, Tom, descended on the bed quickly, their pain and worry masked by smiles of greeting and relief.

"Alex!" Her father couldn't help crying out with jubilation. He laid his big paw of a hand atop hers and gently applied pressure. "I'm so sorry, Baby; I wanted to get here as soon as possible..." He let his words flounder when he noticed the single tear that had fallen over the lip of her left eye. "Honey, don't cry."

So it was just a dream after all. She could let it run its course; let it relay whatever message it was after, and then she could return to her normal life. She tried to place her hand upon his, but the pain she felt shooting up her arm halted any further attempt.

"Don't try to move so soon, Alex," her brother was leaning over the other side of her bed peering down at her. Over the years he'd lost his boyish prankster personality and had grown into a man of whom his father was exceptionally proud. He had his own family now, a wife and three children. He was a gentle man in every sense of the word. To look at him and his life now, she couldn't believe he'd been such a devil's spawn growing up. She tried a small smile for his benefit.

The cousins, who had played a major role in her formative years in this other world, began to crowd around the bed.

"You're a miracle, Alex," the man said, the twin woman at his side nodding in agreement. "The doc says you may have some memory loss, and you'll need therapy to relearn some things that may have been lost to you, but from your rapid recovery skills, we think you'll be up in no time, continuing your former life as if this accident hadn't happened at all. So don't you go getting down on yourself. This is just a minor setback."

She was glad for his words, albeit useless in this dream world. A minor setback. And how!

* * *

The time seemed to crawl for Alex in that hospital bed. She had nothing to do but think and to play mind games with her intellect on the chalkboard of her brain. She couldn't recall ever having noticed time passage in any of the other dreams. Sure, day turned to night to morning, but wasn't that normal? "A minor setback." The words reverberated around in her head. What could a major setback be compared to this minor setback, she wondered? Death, she presumed. And maybe that wasn't so far fetched after all. Suppose she had died and was destined to live in this dream world until her time came to revisit the earthly plane?

She had to get up, get out, soon. She couldn't bear just lying in bed too much longer. She was too active a person to allow herself to vegetate in this manner. Had anyone called her work? And what about her other life? Her real life. What was she doing sleeping so much? Surely Cally should have awakened her by now. But what was time in dreams? A flicker of her eye in the real world could span a lifetime in dreams.

The pain was too real for her to continue believing it was a mere dream. There wasn't a pain possible of inflicting itself so profoundly in a dream world. But what did she know about dreams anyway? You fell asleep, you dreamed, you woke up. That was the extent of it. She didn't look for meanings in her dreams, she placed

them as no more than the movies of her mind, a place she went to release the day's energies.

They say (who are "they" anyway?) to pinch yourself if you think you're dreaming. But didn't the pins in her arms and legs suffice as a pinch of the factual?

So she started examining this dream world of hers. Suppose she wasn't dreaming? Suppose this was her real world and the other was the one she dreamed? Now that's just plain silly, she laughed at herself. Now you're the woman in that movie, not knowing which was which. She must not let anything formulate an impression on her mind. She had to think rationally. She knew for a fact she was an artist, and she had a partner named Cally Taylor, and they had a daughter named Gail. That life was too real for her to believe otherwise. She'd lived that life all her life, not in increments as she had this life, her dream life. So surely she knew which was which. Or so it seemed.

She'd been in a coma for seven days. Did that time warrant a lifetime? Had she dreamed in this life while in that coma, her life with Cally, dreaming of this life? It was a little too complex to her. But what did she have but time on her hands to think?

That realization was the first she started exploring. Had she, in fact, been living that other life while comatose, all the while her subconscious trying to link her back to her real world by making her dream of it in the dream?

Dreams within dreams within dreams. An odd concept, but not totally unacceptable or unrealistic.

It had to be reality; she was in this dream far longer than any other. She was a relatively smart woman; she didn't read much fantasy, or science fiction. She was more a Poe or Shakespeare lady, not HG Wells. Retaining that idea, she could only believe the unthinkable until now--she was dreaming an "other" life, while dreaming her real life within.

And that realization made her scream.

V

"Alex, Hon, you need to speak some time," the therapist coaxed, bending Alex's leg at the knee and pushing it backwards toward her chest. Alex had been her client for the past year, and the woman hadn't uttered one word, not of complaint, or of pain, nor had she laughed. Sometimes, though, she cried. It was sad really, she was a bright woman; June Abrams could see that in her eyes, albeit a dull pair of blue eyes that used to sparkle.

Alex had made great progress. She could read, and write, and soon she would be able to walk. Keeping her vocal cords working posed the biggest hurdle for June. But she had faith. All was not a total loss. If the woman had given up, then would she have continued the painful therapy sessions after the coma, struggling to relearn all the basic skills? She obviously had the will to live and continue with her life, and June made it priority one to see she was returned the full woman she was the day she'd got into her car before it was plowed into by that drunk driver. So she pushed harder, made it impossible for Alex to even think of slacking on her sessions.

"I have this therapist friend, does wonders for some people. I'd like for you to go see her, Alex. Will you do that for me?" Her brown eyes bore down into Alex's. She thought she saw the determination there falter a moment, but it was slapped back up, even stronger than before. She released Alex's leg, setting it down gently, and then leaned on a hand, propped over Alex's prone form. "You will talk again, Alex. Your tongue wasn't severed in the accident. Maybe your will to be vocal was, but we'll get that back again."

She sat back, still staring at Alex, whose eyes never faltered from her own intense stare. She whispered to her, "I know you haven't given up. You're here, you're getting better, you want to get

well, so why won't you speak? Hmm? Go on, tell me to screw off, mind my own business, anything. I'll take anything at this point."

Alex remained silent.

She was living her real world, there was no doubt about it. She'd come to that painful realization over a year ago. There was no Cally, there was no Gail, there was no comic strip. What she'd known--or thought she had known--was all a farce.

She was a tax attorney. A lowly, boring tax lawyer. Of all the pathetic things she could have been, to be saddled with the dismal of the lot was the lowest of lows. Now don't go slighting all tax lawyers, she admonished herself. Some of them actually like what they do. Did I just think that, she wondered. She almost smiled at herself.

She would get better, she would go on, but she didn't have to talk about it, or talk at all. What did she have to say anyway? She couldn't very well tell anyone what she'd gone through a year ago. How could she explain she'd dreamed a life she thought was real, and in that dream, dreamed a life that was real?

She recalled part of a poem she'd read once in that other life.

*"Where is my dream house? – what state? – what part?
If you'll try – you'll find it – within your own heart."*

"Alex? Where did you go off to now?" June was shaking her shoulder. Alex's eyes unclouded and she moved them to June's. "Daydreaming?" June wondered aloud. "About when you'll get up and walk out of here? Why not do it instead of dream about it? Hmm?" She lifted Alex's right leg and began working on that limb. Alex grimaced.

* * *

Her father wheeled her into Dr. Daniels office a month later. She hadn't voiced her agreement to see this head shrink, but June had kindly badgered her until she'd accepted the doctor's card and made an appointment.

She didn't suppose it would hurt; maybe she would even get something from the sessions. After all, wasn't that what shrinks did, un-shrink your head? Of course she'd have to talk to the good doctor in order for the shrinking to begin. She'd deal with that later. First impressions were a high for her. If the doctor messed up there, she wouldn't be back.

"Ah, Alex, welcome," the receptionist greeted her. "The doctor's in with her eleven o'clock; it shouldn't be more than a minute. Can I get you anything?"

Yeah, how about my old life back? She looked away from the woman, out the windows behind her back. There was a nice view of the parking lot. Should their car be broken into, she'd be able to see it. Not much she could do, of course, but she would be a great witness.

Ma'am, what did the thief look like?

Silence.

"Ma'am, can you describe what he wore?"

Silence.

Ma'am, how many were there?

Silence.

The door opened, drawing Alex's attention away from her meanderings. She saw a little girl no more than nine appear in the doorway. She had a pretty dress on, and shiny black shoes. Her hair was in pigtails. Holding back the tears, Alex thought of Gail and closed her eyes.

"Bye, Mom," she heard the child voice, and then the running footsteps as she made her way across the carpeted floor and through the open door.

Alex felt a presence before her, a warmth so inviting she opened her eyes and started to move them up the body in front of her. Alex just about fainted dead away when their eyes met, and she was staring into the face of her beloved Cally.

The green eyes, the white smile flawless except for the tiny chip in the front tooth from when, at eleven, she took a topple from the swings at the local park. Her hair was still that same reddish gold, the

same length. Even the wisps that escaped her careful brushings were still the same, curling around her ear, being defiant.

A hand was thrust in her face, and then the introduction in a voice that Alex would have recognized blindfolded, "Hi there, Alex, I'm Ca-"

For the first time in over a year, Alex spoke one word--the one word that made her whole world right again. "Cally..."

Softly, The Rain Is Falling...

It's strange, but as I think back on it, I remember that each time over the years when Drew and I met, it was always raining. We first met in 1929. I was fourteen and she was sixteen. We were both still immature where matters of the heart were concerned. But we did eventually learn what love and its pleasures were all about. It was a needed lesson for us both.

The day was wet and cold, and my friend and I were strolling the slippery sidewalks of the small town in which I grew up. I remember everything about Drew. I can recall how she smelled, how she blushed when we bumped into one another that very first time. I remember smiling a lot that day in April. I relive that meeting over and over in my mind because I had hoped from that day on Drew would be with me forever.

The way her wet hair was plastered to her face comes to mind quite often, as if it were only yesterday. Drew was, and will always be, someone special for whom I will cherish and forever thank the gods. She enriched my life in more ways than I even think she knows; as I hope, I have hers.

We did not immediately form a union on that rainy day. It took several years for me to overcome my fear of Drew and let her in. I guess when you're in love and you finally realize it, there's nothing to be afraid of.

I don't think I ever really cared what others used to say about me when I was younger. At least that's what my outward appearance showed, but deep down I know I must have been hurting. I never really did admit that to Drew, even with all that I did tell her that rainy day when I finally went to see her. That was our actual beginning...

* * *

"When I was young, the dark terrified me."

I admitted a fear I had had since childhood. I never dreamed Drew Peterson would be the one I needed to confide in.

"I... I still feel a bit afraid of it even now." My nervous chuckles gave away my embarrassment.

Drew understood; she always did. "The dark only holds your own terror." Her voice was so tender and soft, her eyes the kindest blue as they pierced mine, conveying her understanding. "Try listening to it," she continued to advise, almost as if she, herself, had been through the same tribulation.

I just stared at her, sure that my face must have shown the surprise, the amazement that she was telling me now what I had -- many a time -- told myself . . . there were no boogie men in those dark corners, no monsters scratching at the windows trying to get at the trembling little child hiding, crunched into a ball, under her magic blanket.

I found my voice finally after swallowing the huge lump lodged in my throat. "I tried that." I had to think of each word first before I said it in order not to make myself look the utter fool. "The dark still gets to me. Sometimes I have to force myself to sleep or I just work myself into exhaustion so I fall into bed when I get home. Then I don't worry about what may be lurking in those shadowed corners."

I felt renewed strength, a power within that seemed to appear when Drew hadn't laughed at my initial revelation. "I still sleep with the lights on." I was sure that would bring a peel of laughter. I waited -- waited for a smirk, a giggle, anything that would prove I was a silly child pretending to be a woman of twenty-seven.

"Tell me about you before we met," was all she said.

I know I must have looked dumbfounded, but on I surged, to maybe ridicule myself more. But she hadn't laughed so far. Maybe... Just maybe she wouldn't laugh at all.

I needed something cool to wash down the fear clogging my throat. Reaching down for the glass of iced tea Drew had prepared for me when I first arrived, I noticed my hand was trembling. I wished it was vodka or something stronger to dull the hurt that I was sure would arise in me as I revealed those earlier memories. My eyes rose, and there were Drew's gazing strangely down at me. At that moment I think I may have felt the first pangs of something between us, but I had to tell her all of it before I even began to hope.

"My father sexually abused me." There! I said it, now I could die of the shame.

Drew just stood there, eyes shining, little clear droplets falling from her tear ducts. Oh how my heart squeezed back then, and even now as I remember...

"When I was a kid, mom used to tell me all the time how the world was such a beautiful place." I think I may have smirked at that one. "She never said anything about its dangers. She never told me there were people who could hurt you. She never let on that I would be the one who would get hurt some day."

I remember stuffing my hands way down into my pants pockets as if to shield myself from those awful memories. I guess it did give me some security because I found myself going on. I half turned from her view toward the window and continued, "I was about six when he first started. You know, the usual, 'You want to please daddy, don't you?' 'You're daddy's favorite.' He said I was making him very happy when I touched him in those secret places. And when I didn't fight back as he touched me, he said he loved me better than my mother."

Tears were blinding my vision then as they are now, as the pain can still tear my heart apart, rip my soul with its talons.

"When I was thirteen, mother finally realized there was something happening, but by then, there was nothing she could have done to make me forgive her for not coming to my rescue sooner. How I hated her for not seeing what that man was doing to me, making me do to him. Why didn't she see sooner?" I asked a question that possibly only my mother could answer. But how did one get an answer from a dead woman?

"What did she do?" Drew's voice was a soothing caress to my ears, but barely audible.

"She continued ignoring it." I again felt a burning loathing for my mother. I still do when I think about how she could have stopped it. "A heart attack was my savior. I was fourteen and a half then." It was so very sad to think mother had let him continue his perversities for another year and a half.

I walked around the rocker resting quietly in front of what then would have been considered Drew's big screen TV. She later purchased a 35-inch model and would only watch it with me snuggled up in bed with the lights out.

Hearing a snuffle, I took a quick look to see how Drew was handling it all. Not well. Tears were openly running down her cheeks. Oh God! Could someone truly care? Was I a good person after all? Had my father's actions not tarnished me?

"People back then were so misinformed. All the talk was about 'Heartless Jem' not going to her daddy's funeral. I'm sure you've heard the stories. But they were wrong, Drew. Even mother started to believe I was the evil one, not him. She blamed me for what had happened. I just wanted to die. I tried so many times and ways to end my life back then. I'm still here, though, having to believe that no one will ever know the truth. No one knows it wasn't my fault! How could I be blamed for what a perverted man had put me through?"

"Those days don't count, Jem. They didn't want to know the truth, so why stay in the past? Half of those ignorant people are no longer living here anyway." Drew's eyes had been locked on the window, watching the rain pattering the panes with a forced intensity. Now she gazed my way and smiled.

"It shouldn't matter what anyone thinks anymore, Jem. When you come to understand this, you'll be free from that dark past. Until then, no matter who's there with you, you'll still sleep with the lights on. In order to overcome that darkness, you must forgive and let go."

"I want to." I was very desperate. "I don't know how."

"I want to help, but there are professionals out there who can do a lot more to help you. Hell, I may not be helping you at all..."

I was shaking my head as those last words came from her. "I trusted you with my pain, Drew. I've not told a soul about my father abusing me. You've helped more than you could ever know."

I recall feeling a heavy weight lifted from my heart. "I don't feel shame telling you. It's like somehow we've connected. It may be foolish, but we connected that very first time, Drew. Now after telling you, I think I could defeat those painful memories of that past and get on with my future, but having you there might be a problem. I don't want to tie you down with my afflictions."

"You could never tie me down with your pain, Jem. I wouldn't be helping you because I felt obligated to. I want to help you because I care."

My heart surely dropped into my stomach for her that day. Yes, there was definitely something happening between us. I knew it was there all those years, but I guess I was so blinded by my pain I saw nothing else. Now the shades were up, the windows scrubbed clean. I wanted... I wanted... her! I wanted to be by her side forever. But, telling her, after everything else I revealed, might scare her, like the others when I had jumped in with my eyes closed. No. This time I would go about it entirely different. There would be no slip-ups. I wanted this more than I had anything in my life.

"I think I'm in love with you." I waited for her to flee. When she didn't, only stared through that blurred window, I grabbed my coat, intending to be the one to make her escape. She must have heard me, for she turned with a pained look in her eyes, her mouth lifting slightly, an attempt at a smile that didn't quite reach her upper lip.

"I *know* I'm in love with you," she revealed. Have been for quite a number of years now. I was just biding my time until you might notice. Yes, I heard the rumors about you, but I'll be damned if I believed a word of it. I knew you had problems, and only after you overcame them would you be able to see real love, caring, understanding. What I need to know is, are you sure what you feel for me is love?"

I was nodding, grinning like a child who was about to receive a toy. "I damn well do love you, Drew Peterson. I knew it that day I was

with -- who the hell was I with?" I bit my bottom lip, frustrated because even then I couldn't remember the girl's name. And it had been my best friend, too! Drew began laughing so wonderfully. "You know, all I can recall of those days was you; how you looked, smelled, and how I was feeling so strange as you came closer. My legs were jelly as I walked towards you..."

I moved to her, wrapped my arms around her neck, and stared boldly into her eyes. Slowly, we leaned to each other, our lips meeting for the first time on that rainy afternoon.

That day so long ago was the saddest and happiest of my life. I knew in the future I could overcome anything as long as Drew was by my side. I later learned that I was capable of doing it on my own, but it was okay to let Drew help, as long as I knew I could make it on my own. I never truly forgave my mother, but I did learn that it didn't matter what anyone thought, as long as I knew in my heart the real story.

I don't sleep with the lights on anymore. I don't blame myself anymore. I sit in the dark sometimes, in the very same corners that you couldn't have forced me into in my earlier years, and I remember the passion Drew and I had.

Drew died in the summer of ninety-two. I have long since passed the age when she went to heaven on me, and I ponder how much longer I have to wait until I can reunite with my Drew. I'm not scared of death; I welcome it. I know my Drew's up there -- up there waiting for me.

As I wait for death, I look back and marvel over the changes I've made, the obstacles I've leaped over, and I know if it weren't for my finally meeting Drew on that rainy day in forty-two, as adults, I would have never even tried.

I'd like to think my life had a happy ending. Drew's death and my being left behind is not something that haunts me and makes my time left unbearable. My memories of the past and the thoughts of the future are what keep me striving forward.

Softly, the rain is falling, and as I write these last paragraphs, I'm amazed by the love Drew and I shared. We lived very full lives. I

sometimes wonder if she's thinking of me as she floats around up there.

When it rains now, I start to thinking... "that's my Drew up there," crying her tears for me, for our separating so young. Crying her tears to make the flowers grow. Her tears are joined to all the many women and men who have gone on and left their loved ones here. They're all crying to clean this Earth and make it better for our eyes to view and appreciate. They're crying for all that's past and can never be again, except in memory....

I'll not take the road that would get me to Drew faster for I would only end up not getting to her at all. So I'll wait for my appointed time, and I'll have my memories for company.

My pen is drying up now, so I guess I should end this story of Drew and I and our forgiveness, our love.

I told Drew about a billion times that I loved her, needed her, and cherished her. But you know what? There were two little words -- that really are not so little -- that I have never told her.

So, to my beloved Drew, who art in heaven, for the many happy years you gave me, I can only end this tale with these words . . .

Thank you

The Wait...

I walked down the cool, bright hallway to the door marked "Lighthouse Psychotherapy." As I opened the door, the sounds of Mozart quietly fell from the mysterious hidden speakers in the walls and ceiling. Alone in the waiting room, I sat in the chair by her office door so I could hear her movements.

I wondered if there were any subliminal relaxation messages in the music since I was beginning to feel a sleepy calmness, or maybe that was the purpose of the subdued pinkish gray, fine textured wall covering. *Manipulation as you wait -- Get your monies' worth.*

As my mind started wandering, she came out and said, "Hi, Nevada. Come on in."

I smiled and squeezed passed her, just barely brushing her hip. A rush of fear and pleasure had me dizzy and clammy and wanting another chance to do it better. She closed the door and sat, looking me up and down so quickly it was almost imperceptible. Every week she did this. Always looking for clues.

I wondered suddenly what she would think if I did it to her, only a lot slower.

My eyes crawled from her toes up her legs, pausing just under her belt, then moved up to her chest and finally stopped at her eyes, which were a bit larger now, I thought.

Her look of surprise was understandable; considering I'd been coming to see her for over a year and was usually so shy I barely had the courage to look at her face. My bravado came unexpectedly; from where, I don't know. But it was wonderful! I felt so strong, and so in control!

I smiled at her, a huge happy-to-be-me smile, and waited.

She was gripping her chair and quickly shifted her weight onto her left hip, crossing her legs.

Well, I thought, all safe now...?

"I've been thinking a lot about you," I said with a coy grin.

"Really?" she said, slightly sarcastic.

"Ah-huh. I miss you when I'm not here."

"What do you miss about me?" She was relaxing, now back on familiar ground; interrogation. However, for me this just wouldn't do.

"I miss your pretty sky-blue eyes," I said seriously. "The way you scrunch up your face when you're trying to read. Your sensitive scrutinizing looks when you ask me a painful question. I miss seeing you in those tight black jeans you've got on, too." I was really enjoying seeing her squirm. The sense of power was exciting me even more. My eyelids were heavy with arousal and the dimness of the room.

She was watching me, lips parted in disbelief, her forehead glistening and tense. Swallowing hard, she never broke her gaze. She sat up suddenly, uncrossed her legs, and said quietly, "Are you trying to make me uncomfortable?"

"Yes, I think I am."

"Why?"

"You make me uncomfortable when you dress like that. I thought I'd return the favor." I grinned with the taunt. Head tilted forward, I looked steadily into her eyes. She was in her early forties, and was very attractive, well built, with sensitive eyes. I'd wanted her for a long time.

Her fingertips were white from squeezing the arms of her chair. She was sweating, but looked perfectly relaxed now, except for her shining forehead.

"You're trying to seduce me," she said.

"Is that what you feel?" I asked wryly with a half smile.

"Yes," almost to herself.

"Yes, I'm seducing you?" I asked.

"You look very sexy in this light. Soft and romantic." Her voice was gruff and low.

"Come here," I said, breathless.

She blinked; the only movement or acknowledgement that I'd spoken. Then slowly, after a long pause, she rose.

I stood up and leaned into her, grasping her fingers on either side of her hips.

I felt her nipples hard against mine and I swayed slowly, side to side. I felt her breath, shallow and quick on my lips. I looked into her loving eyes and saw her desire. I pressed my mouth to hers and . . .

"Hi, Nevada. Come on in."

I looked with a start and smiled quickly to try to cover my red-hot cheeks.

"Been waiting long?" she asked with a smile.

The Cat Burglar ...

I

Rhiannon Murphy was trying to stretch her five foot five frame up into the dryer to get one stubborn sock out when she felt a pair of hands grasp her blue-jeaned bottom. After a grunt from the person in back, she was lifted higher into the machine. Rhiannon grabbed the sock triumphantly.

"Got it!" she called out and felt herself slowly descending until her sneakered feet touched bottom again. She said a shy, "Thank you, Loren," before she turned to face the taller woman behind.

Loren Johnson stared down at Rhiannon with curious, light blue eyes. "How'd you know it was me?"

"Isn't it *always* you?" A full, bright smile spread itself across Rhiannon's lips despite her efforts to still its progress.

"Lucky guess," Loren said, breaking into an open, friendly smile matching Rhiannon's. She picked up her basket, walking around Rhiannon to an empty washer.

Watching her dumping the whole batch into one machine, Rhiannon started to slowly shake her head. "I see you've waited until you didn't have any more clothes to wear before deciding to wash them."

Loren looked up at her, noticed the shaking head. "I hate washing clothes."

"Well, that's blaringly obvious." Rhiannon's brows furrowed. "You're supposed to separate them, remember?" She moved from her spot against the folding table to Loren's side. "You do this every time. I swear you must follow me down here." She gave Loren's slick smile

a glance, adding, "Funny how I'm always here when your clothes need cleaning."

"What would you ever do without me?" Loren's grin spread. She let Rhiannon take over and leaned back against the table, closing her eyes.

"You should find a day job; you look half dead."

Loren's eyes opened slowly, catching Rhiannon's flick away from her. "The cat burglar got Brenda last night."

Nice segue, Rhiannon mused. She let her get away with it, waving her hand to dismiss any further talk of the cat burglar, and changed the subject herself, "You still seeing Samantha," she asked casually.

"I'm doing my own clothes, that should tell you something."

"More like *I'm* doing your clothes," she reminded her, feeling sympathetic for Loren's loss, but also a giddy excitement because of it. There was no denying her relief at this new opportunity. Maybe this time she wouldn't let Loren slip from her grasp. She was a beautiful woman; tall, athletic, tanned, light eyes, and dark hair. Her single status wouldn't last long, Rhiannon knew.

"You free?" Loren glanced at the washroom door then back.

"Free? In what way?" Rhiannon felt her hands tremble and almost spilled the soap as she measured it into the cap.

"As in no one in that big bed upstairs waiting for you?" She chuckled when Rhiannon's face colored crimson at her words.

Rhiannon busied herself with the washer controls for something to do. "I've been single two months now. You haven't noticed?" She turned on her heel, heading to the washer that contained a load of her own clothes.

Loren had noticed. She wanted some signs from Rhiannon that she was interested. Finding none, she presumed Rhiannon wasn't interested in her. She hopped up onto a washer, her look nonchalant.

"Why are you asking anyway?" Rhiannon asked, not realizing she was holding her breath.

"Just being nosy." Her eyes spanned the length of Rhiannon's smaller body. She had wanted her for five years now. Rhiannon never

seemed to return the feelings. Rhiannon wanted friendship, which Loren gave in untold amounts. She would give more, but she got the impression Rhiannon wasn't the *marrying* type. She had been witness to several brokenhearted women over the years that had wanted more than friendship from Rhiannon, and when they got too close, Rhiannon would toss them away. She found herself always comparing herself to Rhiannon's other conquests. She wanted the marriage, the house, and joint bank accounts. But unlike all Rhiannon's other suitors, she wasn't about to tell her. Maybe that's why their friendship had held for so many years; they each didn't expect anything from the other. And that was fine. For a while.

Just being nosy, Rhiannon thought. She wanted to be held by arms of understanding; of deep, shared love, to move back into someone and out from meaninglessness. It was the pain of being alone, of having been alone, even while a lot of women had spoken the words, had performed the deeds, had shared their lives, she hadn't truly believed; had always known better, and had loved the many others without reciprocity. With Loren, all that would change. She would dive into her and not look back.

"So, what happened to Brenda?"

"Same as all the other women in the building." Loren jumped down and stood behind Rhiannon. She ached to run her hands through her soft, blonde locks, wanted to lift Rhiannon's hair and kiss her neck. She moved closer, drawn to Rhiannon's body heat. A desire to hold the smaller woman again for any reason almost overcame her, but she stifled it. Admitting her love just might have been thrown back in her face, and she wasn't ready for that rejection. No words were uttered from her lips.

Rhiannon shifted her weight from foot to foot nervously and prayed Loren didn't notice. They wrestled around sometimes, staying up into all hours on Loren's nights off, but this closeness was pushing it. They were both free and looking. She turned slowly and lifted her eyes to meet Loren's. There was an unfamiliar look in those smokey-blue eyes.

"Brenda says she wants the burglar to come back. She's going to leave her diamonds by the window to entice her." Lauren laughed, picturing the cat burglar out there crawling around when she just happens to notice Brenda's baubles.

Guess the moment's broken. Rhiannon scowled. "I presume she isn't going to report it either?" She hated that all the women in the building let that woman get away with her crimes- burglary, rape. It was sick.

Loren touched Rhiannon's cheek gently, noticing the anger rising. "Hey, she'll get what's coming to her, don't get yourself worked up over it."

They swayed closer, Rhiannon's eyes falling shut, her head tilting back a bit, ready for Loren's kiss.

"Rhiannon! I've been looking all over for you! Guess what?" Brenda broke the moment, noting Loren step away from Rhiannon, hop back up onto one of the washers close by. Excitement coursed through her body, and Brenda knew it was because she was seeing Loren again. That made twice in one day. The gods were smiling upon her. As she drew closer she could smell Loren's intoxicating aroma. *Give me strength*, Brenda prayed.

"She burgled you too, I heard," Rhiannon couldn't hide the sour note in her tone.

"Wait till she gets you," Brenda warned with a knowing look. She leaned against the washer on which Loren was seated and leered up at her in a way Rhiannon hated.

Rhiannon reeled in her anger. It wouldn't do any of them any good. "So, what did she take from you?" She would be sympathetic if it killed her. Didn't mean she wasn't yearning to stuff Brenda into the dryer for gawking at Loren in that manner. Had the woman no self-respect?

"That's not what matters, Nannon!" Rhiannon cringed, hating that shortening of her name. "I was paid a visit by the cat burglar! And I hope she returns. She's only visited each woman in this building once, but she hasn't come across me before." She puffed her chest out.

Rhiannon rolled her eyes and turned to fold her clothes. She could take only so much of Brenda's dramatic act.

Loren's eyes met Rhiannon's and she wondered if Rhiannon was thinking about the moment Brenda had interrupted. She couldn't get it from her mind. "Think she'll hit one of us tonight? We are the only two women in this building she hasn't gotten yet."

Rhiannon had a flash of memory, moments before Brenda came in, when she actually felt them connecting, knew something was about to happen, maybe a hug, or better, a kiss... It was probably a long gone memory to Loren now. She wondered what Loren felt having an ex-lover right there staring so openly at her. They had been lovers a few years back and whenever she got the chance, Brenda would always make it a known fact to everyone in the vicinity.

"I know one thing, she steps her ass through my window and she'll be one sorry cat." Rhiannon put the remaining folded clothes in her basket. "I guess you can finish your clothes," she tossed at Loren, hefting the basket into her arms. "I'm splitting."

"Gee thanks!" Loren was sour. She wanted to push Brenda away and pull Rhiannon between her legs. She stared after Rhiannon, her eyes darkening.

Brenda, acting as if Loren would rely on her for help, said, "Sorry, but Lizzette's the one that does the clothes in the family. And she's probably wondering where I've gone off to." She patted Loren's legs and beamed as she looked back up at her. "Sorry sexy, you have to go it alone." She chucked Loren under the chin and was gone.

Loren was mulling in her depression when she heard footsteps and looked up to see Rhiannon reentering.

"Ok, I'll finish them, but you have to suffer another loss at Monopoly tonight. Deal?" She struggled with her heavy load.

Loren wiggled her eyebrows, thinking. "I guess so," she grumbled, but Rhiannon saw the grin coming and looked away, knowing it would be a whopper.

"That's if I'm not working," Loren added seriously. "I'll have to call Lace and see if she needs me."

I need you, Rhiannon thought. She clamped her mouth shut for fear she'd tell Loren how badly.

"Sure you don't want the burglar paying you a visit tonight instead of having me sprawled all over your floor beating you at the game?" With a jovial laugh, she slid from the washer.

"Why I remain friends with you is a mystery to me." Rhiannon put her basket down, smirking at Loren.

"Because I'm always there when you need me," Loren said simply.

"And why are you there, Loren? Every time I'm having trouble I can count on you being close by. Why's that?" Rhiannon averted her eyes, didn't want to reveal the hope in them for a positive answer from Loren.

Because I love you, passed through Loren's mind, not reaching her lips. And I'm always following you around to keep you safe. "Because you're always in trouble," she whispered instead and touched Rhiannon's shoulder gently. She ran a finger down Rhiannon's arm, wanting to continue the moment before Brenda had barged in, but she worried someone else would come. She snatched her hand away, stuffing it into her back pocket. Maybe tonight, she thought, when we're alone and there's no chance of anyone bugging us.

"You really don't mind finishing these?" she gestured towards the washer. "And I'll pick them up when I come over? I have to call Lace and check in."

"Go," Rhiannon said, shoving Loren towards the door. She was being tormented by yearning and thought it better Loren left. "Make your call and I'll see you in a little while, and be ready to get your ass whipped." She wallowed in Loren's laugh as it trailed behind her down the cement hallway.

II

"I can't come tonight," Loren said regretfully into the phone a while later that evening. "I'll make it up to you," she promised.

Rhiannon felt her heart pounding. She had had everything planned. Shit. "That's all right. We'll make it another time." She dropped the phone into its cradle. She felt as hollow as her voice had sounded.

Feeling lonely and dejected, Rhiannon passed by the living room, not even bothering to glance inside. She knew what she would see; the game all set up on the circular coffee table. She set her course for the bedroom and there she found herself silently sobbing, her mind refusing to keep thoughts of Loren out. She fell asleep after a while, hugging her pillow, huddled naked under the comforter.

* * *

Rhiannon awoke around three a.m., something, a noise, had jarred her from a deep sleep. She sat up in bed, staring across the room at the shadows. She didn't know why her gaze was drawn there, but there she found herself looking. A gasp escaped her when from that corner came a tall dark form. From its outline in front of the windows, she could tell it was female. Rhiannon clutched the comforter closely, feeling her heart slamming against her hand through the thick fabric.

The woman wore a mask, concealing her features, hooding her eyes so Rhiannon couldn't even make out their color. She stepped closer to the bed, not saying a word, just lifting her hand to her lips, motioning to Rhiannon to be silent.

Just as Rhiannon opened her mouth to release the scream, the woman lunged at her, clamping a strong hand over her parted lips.

With the other hand, she clutched Rhiannon's wrist, working the handcuff securely around it. She reached to the bedpost, slapping the dangling cuff around the metal. She quickly switched hands over Rhiannon's mouth, securing her other hand.

Rhiannon felt as if her heart was about to pound itself right through her skin. She couldn't see her, she didn't hear her speak yet, but in her soul, Rhiannon knew who the cat burglar was.

Should she let on she knew? How embarrassed would the woman be if faced with the realization her game was up and she'd been found out? Or, should she not say anything and just let her have her way? Was this what they all thought? she wondered. Did every one of her victims know it was Loren Johnson?

She inhaled deeply, taking in Loren's one of a kind scent, her eyes watching Loren's masked face, trying to see her eyes. Loren was busy securing her to the bed, or maybe she was avoiding looking at Rhiannon? Maybe she knew Rhiannon already knew who she was?

Once she was satisfied that Rhiannon was unable to make her escape, Loren climbed into the bed and straddled the restrained woman's hips and then sat. She took in a deep breath when she pulled the comforter down and was met by Rhiannon's full naked breasts. Slowly, she extended both her arms, hands meeting the flesh, squeezing. She watched the nipples rise, a beam of moonlight was slicing through the shadows, lying across Rhiannon's chest, revealing her excitement to Loren.

So much for fighting back, Loren mused, moving her legs down Rhiannon's so she was lying belly to belly against her. Her mask afforded three holes, two eyes, and one for the mouth. Her lips came at Rhiannon's, found them open, waiting, glinting wet already.

Loren fought with herself not to reveal who she was, what she was feeling. She wanted to just open up and let the floods come; hoping Rhiannon had the strength to handle it. Maybe after, when she had loved Rhiannon senseless, she would tell her.

Rhiannon tugged at the handcuffs. She wanted to feel Loren's body, wind her fingers through her hair after she tore that mask off.

She couldn't even grip Loren's body with her knees. She was spread wide open for Loren's taking.

Loren took. Slowly at first, and then with a fever after the first orgasm hit Rhiannon and rocked her over the bed with its force. She lay panting, heart hammering, legs twitching, staring down at the dark head between her thighs, at the gloved hands gripping her legs, releasing, and gripping again. She could hear Loren moaning into her, a deep whine of anguish, of longing. What could she be longing? Rhiannon wondered, she's between my legs, taking my essence, pulling it from me right this minute. What more could she possibly want?

"Take off your mask." Rhiannon nudged her with a gentle lift of her pelvis into Loren's mouth. She felt the head shake back and forth, and then the lips were on her again, sucking, the tongue entering her, pumping in that delicious way.

* * *

Hours. Days. Years passed. Rhiannon couldn't ascertain the difference, didn't really care. She was floating out there, tethered to reality by Loren's mouth, her insistent sucking at her neck. Rhiannon nudged her chin, moving her own mouth to Loren's sweaty skin. With relish, she started sucking, her intent lost on Loren.

* * *

When she had gone, after releasing Rhiannon while she slept, Rhiannon walked around her apartment noting everything still in its place. Her grandfather clock, which had been given to her by her mother a couple years ago. It was an heirloom, hundreds of years old, very valuable. All her gold was still in its tray, her necklaces, her chains, and her Rolex watch. Very unusual. Rhiannon had one word in mind while she locked the door. Why?

III

Rhiannon was sitting on the terrace behind the building with Brenda when they saw Loren come from the parking lot. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold outside and she was almost on top of them before she noticed them seated there. She stopped in her tracks, looking at Rhiannon. She hoped her cheeks didn't get any redder.

Smiling, Rhiannon said hello, watching as Loren returned the smile and greeting, then a frown took over her mouth as Brenda grabbed her arm and pulled Loren down to sit with them.

"I can't stay," Loren said, flushing hotter. She had said the same thing to Rhiannon just before the smaller woman had fallen asleep. She looked at Rhiannon now, wondering if she could tell it had been the same person who voiced the whisper that morning.

Rhiannon's eyes were glued for the moment to the turtleneck Loren wore. Her mind was putting together bits and pieces of the previous night's lovemaking. She had known it was Loren, had felt it all over inside her body that it was Loren, but until that moment, seeing the turtleneck and knowing why, Rhiannon had held a small doubt. She didn't want Loren to be a thief. She didn't mind so much that she made love to all those other women, but that she also stole from them was unacceptable.

Brenda felt Loren shaking; thought she must be cold; didn't realize what it was Loren was really afraid of.

"I had a visitor last night," Rhiannon broke the moment with a burst of impatience. Watching Brenda fawn over Loren was almost too much to bear.

Loren's eyes lifted to Rhiannon's. "Going to report it?" She felt her heart thumping in her ears.

Rhiannon shrugged. "She didn't steal anything," she said softly -- adding in her mind, *only my heart*.

"Sure it was the real one?" Brenda asked, lips formed in a sneer.

"She was what every other woman in this building said, and more..." Rhiannon looked at Loren quickly, then away.

"Did she.... Did you two . . ." she couldn't get it past her lips. She pulled at her turtleneck to let some air cool her heated body. Rhiannon caught sight of the reddish brown mark she'd left on Loren and she smiled. Gotcha!

"We made love, yes." She looked directly into Loren's eyes.

"I'll see you later," Brenda said and stood. She strolled back into the building, glancing at them again, seeing their gazes still locked.

When Rhiannon was sure Brenda had gone, she stood, her eyes staying locked on Loren's. "She did take one thing," she said softly, digging into her pocket, "but she got that five years ago." She pulled out the spare key to her apartment and tossed it at Loren.

Catching it, Loren looked down at the key, then back to Rhiannon. Her face colored quickly.

"Use the door next time," Rhiannon said and walked away. Loren watched her, and then looked back at the key. She smiled.

IV

Around one a.m. a black form slipped inside Rhiannon's kitchen window. The being in the black suit didn't hear the sleeping Rhiannon in the room down the hall come instantly awake, fully aware of this new danger about her.

Something was different, wrong. Breathlessly, feeling her heart hammering in her chest, Rhiannon snuck down the hall. She knew who was there, and she was scared to death despite her bravado that day in the washroom. Her nudity made her feel even more helpless, and she cursed herself for not getting dressed. She especially chastised herself for not grabbing the bat she'd taken to keeping next to her bed. She checked three of the eight rooms that made up her penthouse apartment.

The rooms were clear, and she was just about to check the guest bedroom when the black form jumped out at her. Rhiannon screamed and turned to run. She made two steps and felt a vice-like grip on her forearm. A hand was placed over her mouth as she was drawn back against a woman's body.

* * *

Alone, Rhiannon sat at her window in the dark, staring blankly, grasping at the ends of herself, trying to bring them back to normal thought, normal hope or expectations of faith in tomorrows that hold promise.

She didn't want the pain to come, and fighting it only strained the pressure to a final, aching burst. Her face recognized the turmoil, turned repression into a grimace of rolling sobs, allowing loss to finally fulfill its need of her.

The night moved on in its perfect blackness, holding Rhiannon hostage at her window. The final raping of her body was a slap of punishment she couldn't justify. It wasn't anything like all those women claimed. It was brutal, punishing, and hurtful. A total raping not just of her body but also of her mind and spirit. Her body felt bruised, broken, and not just from the blows or words.

A knock at her door slammed her heart into sudden violence. She wiped at her face with the bottom of her tee shirt, trying to quickly dry it and hide her current state.

Loren didn't wait for the answer and went in, silently closing the door behind. She saw the shambles the rooms were in, knew she was too late. Too late... Oh God, that bastard of a burglar had gotten to Rhiannon and she, Loren, hadn't been there the one time she needed her most.

Rhiannon raced internally, searching her defenses for a place of safety inside herself. She felt stripped, far too exposed to accept anything Loren was there to offer her.

Seating herself on the sill next to Rhiannon's stiffening form, Loren slowly circled her arms around Rhiannon, offering herself as comfort, wordless and soothing, she thought, something Rhiannon would need more than to be alone in the dark.

Rhiannon felt herself ready to scream from the tenderness of Loren's embrace. She couldn't hold herself from splitting into pieces if Loren remained there, doing the act of comfort, again. It just brought her predicament into clearer focus. She must get out, get away. She couldn't accept Loren's caring, would no longer accept the transient emotions of the well meaning; they were eating her mind and soul in sharp, tearing increments. These bits of love flung at her felt to Rhiannon like scraps to a pathetically starved animal. It was no longer acceptable food.

Rhiannon was about to burst from the room like the madwoman she felt she was becoming. She couldn't handle Loren's body pressed so tenderly to her. She had craved it too often, never being able to have it, and then she had, and the next night a violation

had erased every loving imprint of Loren from her. The remembering made that particular instance unbearable. She would surely snap.

"I'm not the real cat burglar," Loren whispered.

Stroking her hand across Loren's, she allowed herself one tiny moment to marvel in the revelation, then suddenly unlatching Loren's arms. "I know."

Loren couldn't deal with her failure. She stood, moving away. In the center of the room, far enough into the shadows, she turned, steadying her voice from the threatening tremor, said, "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when you needed me most." Then stiffly, purposefully, she strode from her room, leaving Rhiannon staring after her.

V

Rhiannon honed in on Loren, who could have been anywhere in the building, anywhere in the world. This did not matter; she had to find her, needed to find her, she knew. Once out of her own mind and room, she felt Loren's internal screams and outrage. The anguish was pounding them both into a desperate hole, and if anything could, Loren's pain would bring Rhiannon running to Loren's side.

She approached the washroom, slowing her pace. Rhiannon could feel herself shaking, vibrating with the horror that must be searing through Loren, expunging any formable words in their minds. They were raging demon feelings, and some were focused squarely on Loren's detested self. Rhiannon's trembling turned violent as she crept into the dark room, knowing all too clearly Loren was seething somewhere in the deep shadows.

Rhiannon was afraid. There was murder in the room, hiding in the corner, hiding in Loren, feeding on her.

"Loren?" The word squeaked from her, a whisper of fear afraid to come forth.

Loren rustled in the easy chair at the far end of the room -- the darkest, least lit section of space.

Rhiannon reached inside herself for any composure, any strength remaining in her. Loren was being swallowed whole in her own malice, and every fiber of Rhiannon strained to run like a trapped, blind animal.

"Loren, come out of the dark where I can see you." Rhiannon said it with forceful resolve, with strength she was far from feeling.

Loren stepped from the blackness. Her body seemed to have grown since Rhiannon had last seen her a few hours ago, but when she saw Loren's face she was no longer afraid.

The connection of their eyes broke Loren's fierceness, and her expression crumpled upon itself. She approached Rhiannon with extended hands in a gesture of asking, a gesture of pleading. She needed Rhiannon as much as Rhiannon needed her. They came together sobbing and shaking into each other's arms.

Nothing could console Rhiannon like Loren's hurt and relief in her arms. Loren's scent alone helped to quell her sobbing, working to fill her with renewed meaning. Loren held her until their breathing together was cathartic and warm with respite.

"Do you want to sit down?" Loren asked quietly, trying not to disturb their peace.

Rhiannon shook her head against Loren's chest, answered, "Can we go upstairs? Will you stay with me a while?"

Loren flushed, her heart full with the need to hold Rhiannon through an eternity of nights. She never wanted to release her again; had no idea, no courage in how to tell her.

"You couldn't pry me from you tonight." And with that said, she bent and lifted Rhiannon, walking them to the stairs.

As they approached Rhiannon's apartment, she stiffened in Loren's arms. "Can we go to yours?"

Loren felt Rhiannon's body tense, heard some small plea in the question, and she understood what the danger was that Rhiannon tried to avoid in her rooms, Loren continued to her own apartment, only relaxing her hold after she'd closed the door behind them.

Rhiannon stood completely still in the spot in which she was set down, and she let the feeling of Loren's possession surround her. This was the only place of comfort for her.

"Do you want to sleep?" Loren asked, not knowing or wanting to pressure Rhiannon into anything. She watched Rhiannon's eyes dart around the room, lingering on the darkest corners, and then continuing on their diligent surveillance. She wondered if Rhiannon was searching for possible places to hide. Again her thoughts came in a fury of shame at herself for not knowing, not being there to stop what the gods had obviously ignored. She'd promised Rhiannon to always be there for her, to keep her safe. Loren flared at herself. She

cringed at seeing Rhiannon's swollen lips, her face and neck already distorted by bruises. She knew every time she looked at Rhiannon's swollen face and broken skin, she would see her own failure.

"Can I sit over there?" Rhiannon was pointing to Loren's drafting table, where Loren did all of her thinking before finalizing her work.

Loren's expression was one of gentle love, wondering why Rhiannon felt she had to ask in such a shy, almost embarrassed way.

"Sure you can, Sweetie. You can do anything you want in here." She touched Rhiannon's head, stroking a gentle hand down her hair. "What's mine is yours; don't you know that yet?"

Rhiannon looked up at her slowly, eyes puffed pink from too much crying. She stared at Loren blankly.

Realizing then that she was still in shock, Loren gently smiled and led her over to the place she'd indicated, pulled out the wheeled high chair, and released the lever with a deflating 'whoosh.' The chair dropped to accommodate Rhiannon's much shorter height.

"Wouldn't you like to sleep?" Loren's voice was low and quiet.

"Sleep? Where could I sleep?" Rhiannon answered, looking perplexed, as if there were no place in the vast world to hold her in sleep.

"You could sleep anywhere you want to. Just tell me where and I'll see it's done," Loren answered with a calm she didn't feel in touch with.

Rhiannon didn't look like she was going to answer, or add any thought; didn't look like she was having any thoughts. Loren fidgeted with the lint hiding in the corner of her pocket.

Restless, feeling Loren's unease, Rhiannon suggested, "Maybe I could lay down now?"

The fragile way she said it, the soft tone of voice, the impression she was just a small girl too afraid to hardly talk at all brought a tear to Loren's eyes. Without words, she took Rhiannon's hands, lifted her into her mighty embrace, and carried her to the day bed across the room. And like a fragile piece of glass, Loren lay her

down gently, pulling the cover aside and then over Rhiannon. She sat beside her, stroking Rhiannon's perfect face, into her hair. Rhiannon murmured pleurably and Loren didn't dare stop, didn't want to, and would caress Rhiannon forever if she wanted.

"Would you lay with me, Loren?"

Loren lay with her, on top of the cover, found this disturbing, and rolled under with Rhiannon. She clasped Rhiannon to her closely, strong hands comforting as they stroked Rhiannon's back and face, lulling her into a semiconscious state of mind. There was a shaft of light falling directly across Rhiannon's eyes, and Loren stared at them, saw them flickering, the long lashes brushing Rhiannon's cheeks like wispy feathers ruffling in the wind. Loren bent, brushed her lips over Rhiannon's eyes, pulled back and saw them flicker open, then close. The action was brief, but Loren had seen the look of calm in Rhiannon's eyes, the look of coming peace, and to continue that feeling in them both, she kissed Rhiannon's eyes again, nuzzling her bottom lip on the long lashes, feeling a slight tickling that was like a caress. She moved to Rhiannon's eyebrows, smoothed her lip across one and then the other, kissed Rhiannon's forehead.

"I love you," Loren whispered, finally resting her head above Rhiannon's, feeling the soft caress of Rhiannon's fine hair under her chin. She rocked Rhiannon easily, just enough to keep her in sleep and comforted. Her rocking continued even when she herself closed her eyes and joined Rhiannon in the blissful place where every day's pains could be released in dreams.

The Call ...

A Shift In Time...

She could see Aria inside the dome and her heart leapt. "Mind the company?" she asked, entering, happy to see Aria laying out beside the pool in a wet tee and shorts.

Aria shook her head. "Not at all." She watched Kalk go to the bathhouse. She was trembling softly until she saw Kalk coming back out, then her heart began to slam.

Alone, Aria felt awkward with Kalk, didn't know where to look, and if she stared too long at the fine lines of Kalk's muscles would Kalk notice and take it as an invitation?

Kalk laid out her towel next to Aria's, noting Aria had a second one she wrapped around her neck. She could hear Aria's heart beating faster, could feel it in her own rapidly beating organ. They sat close, watching the twinkling stars silently through the glass ceiling. Several times Aria would sneak a disquieting glance at Kalk and find her staring back, those blue eyes captivating Aria each and every time, and a jolt of craving would shatter her stomach, nearly making her wince with it's power.

From the quiet, Aria asked, "Do you think there's other life out there besides us?"

What an odd thing to ask, Kalk mused. Of all the things to ask, certainly 'Can I sleep with you' had been the most natural one. "Our planet's have hydrogen-rich gases, liquid water, energy, we certainly aren't unique and alone. With all that vastness-" She gestured with a hand. "There's probably many planetary systems hospitable to life. If we were on Konica, we'd be looking out at these same stars, the same sky and wondering the same thing, and here it is, EARTH." She smiled dubiously, added, "And what a fine planet it is."

"Don't like Earth much do you?"

"Well, it didn't take a lighting bolt for me to realize this is one miserable place. Some parts are nice, like your house, your property, this night, sitting here with you. That makes a world of difference to me."

Aria registered the touch of Kalk's fingers stroking hers finally. She hunched her shoulders and stared down at Kalk's hand morosely.

It happened quickly, Aria all of a sudden was in Kalk's arms; face nestled in the crook of her shoulder and neck, Kalk's hands caressing her back extra gently. It was all too natural to let Kalk tilt her backwards, and even more natural to feel Kalk's lips on hers again. It wasn't purely sexual, it was comforting, at first, a well meant expression of compassion, of Kalk telling Aria, 'I know your pain, I want to take it away', but then passion invaded, as it sometimes will, and Kalk's touch grew harder, her lips opened, offering Aria a soft, wet place to immerse herself in. Aria dived into the warmth, falling prey to Kalk's persuasive offering, needing it.

Confused by the whirl of feelings inside her, in her head, her heart, her body, Aria pulled back a little, to catch her breath, to give herself more time, to let Kalk know of her confusion. "I'm sorry," she whispered, framing Kalk's face with her hands, staring deeply into those beguiling eyes.

"I want to, really I do, Kalk, but there's something..." What? Missing? she wondered silently. "I'm sorry," she said again, feeling shame that she had returned Kalk's kisses, even provoked the last ones, and now she was basically throwing water on the flame. She wouldn't be surprised if Kalk got up and left her once more with her shame, her confusion.

Kalk smiled, brushing her lips lightly along Aria's. "Don't be sorry. Why be sorry? I'm not. And you have the loveliest mouth, I can't seem to resist kissing it."

When Kalk rolled off, Aria felt a chill, trembling from the cool night air that touched her without mercy or concern for her feelings. *Yes*, she invited, *something reprimand me*. Kalk was too kind. Aria knew it looked like she was flirting, or teasing, why didn't Kalk see it that way too? Did love really blind her to the reality? And what

exactly is the reality? Aria asked herself. Do you love her or not, that's what it all boils down to. Yes. Yes, I do love her. How could I not fall in love with her? She's my dream come true. She's half of me. But... Yes, Aria, but what? Everything's there, why are you stalling? Why are you throwing her caring back in her face, and yes, you are throwing it at her. All she was doing was kissing you. What's so wrong with a little kissing? It's what that kissing would have led into that scares you isn't it? Is it mating? Are you really afraid of what Kalk's sobel will do? No, she decided, that wasn't it. Is it the intensity of her love? Are you afraid your love doesn't compare? No, I know I love her a lot, have finally let myself realize that in Africa. I thought about her quite often, thought about her long hug at the air port, and what that look in her eyes meant when we pulled apart. Now I know what it meant, am I finally satisfied that I know? Has it all been too sudden? Do I need it to go at a slower pace? Will she even consider that? Or will she give up completely?

"Hey?" Kalk touched a soft finger to Aria's bottom lip, eyes twinkling in the moonlight. "Where have you gone off to?"

"Kiss me again, Kal."

Without pause, Kalk bent down, mouth slowly moved over Aria's, hands in her hair.

Again, when it became too much, and she felt like it was going too fast, Aria pulled away. This time she didn't even bother thinking, knowing she would mentally chasten herself unsympathetically. She gave Kalk a small smile, said, "You can drown me at any point, I really won't mind."

"I understand, Aria, only I've wanted you for so long I can't seem to stop and think this is all new to you. I'm sorry; I'm going way too fast. Forgive me?"

How could she not? Aria sat up, noticing Kalk's passion had risen in her shorts and was clearly visible, even in that little light. She experienced a pang between her legs, looked away, and out across the surface of the water. She swallowed two or three times to wet her vocal cords. Nevertheless, she said with a scratchy voice, trying to joke her way out of the seriousness of the whole situation, "Make

that go back in before my willpower cracks and I take you shamelessly." Acutely conscious she'd gone a little pink in the cheek, and feeling the relentless grip of desire invading her stomach and almost willing to fold under its determination as her eyes were drawn to the front of Kalk's cutoffs again, Aria rolled off the beach towel and stood in one fluid motion. Her heartbeat was deafening, her head heady with Kalk's scent, her gaze transfixed by Kalk's lopsided grin. "Here," she invited, holding out her own towel. "Cover that thing."

Expression bemused, Kalk said pointedly, "Can't run from the inevitable forever, Aria."

Aria's heart skipped a beat, and she stood there with mouth parted in shock, eyes bright and direct.

"I'm not running from anything," she muttered, voice husky.

Kalk gave her a covert look, her amusement anew. "Then sit back down with me."

Suspiciously, Aria eyed her. "Why?" she asked.

"Do you think it'll go too far?"

"I guess you could say that." Aria walked a step away. "I'm not ready, Kal."

"Ok."

"Ok?"

Kalk shrugged, said, "Sure. What did you think I'd do, force you?"

"Not exactly."

"Then what?"

"I don't know. I just thought you'd be less excepting. I wasn't expecting you to let up so easily."

"Who says I'm letting up?" She stood, and Aria couldn't help but stare at the front of her shorts. Goddess, that thing was large.

"Let's swim."

Startled, Aria's eyes jerked up to Kalk's and she saw a knowing gleam in her look, a slight smirk and knew Kalk knew she was perplexed with her sobel.

"Would you like to see it out of its confinement?"

"No- I mean- Shit- Yes. I want to very much. I've imagined what it looks like- Oh Goddess, let's swim, Kal." She tossed her towel to the ground and ran to the edge, dove in, hoping to shed her embarrassment as the water enveloped her, but when her head popped up, her cheeks were pink, she knew they were. She saw Kalk standing at the edge, hands on hips, weight on one leg. She's a Goddess, Aria thought, feeling breathless, faint.

"Come on in."

"Sure you want me in there with you?"

"Get in here!"

Kalk dove in, came up, just short of bumping into Aria. She grabbed her hips, pulling herself up out of the water, hands gliding up Aria's body. She waded there smiling at Aria, holding her around the waist. "Well, this is nice, better than sitting next to you on the towels even." Her legs floated into Aria's and she hooked her right one around Aria's, tightened her grip around Aria's waist. The stiffened piece of flesh in her shorts came up against Aria's thigh; she smiled a quite smile for Aria, pulled her closer. "Is this too much? Too fast, Aria?"

"I like being next to you."

"You can touch me, Aria, anywhere you'd like."

"This is just fine for now." She could feel Kalk's breath on her face, could smell how sweet it was. "We're going to go under," she warned when they started to sink, and neither did anything to prevent it.

Kalk released her hold on Aria's leg, kicked her feet to get them afloat again. "Let's go back to the house."

"I like it out here like this with you."

"Yes, it's nice," Kalk agreed, kissed the hollow at the base of Aria's neck and added, "But I'd rather be back at the house with you."

* * *

Approaching the house, they could hear the angry bellows of a deep male voice. There was a door slam, and a woman's scream then everything was silent.

When Kalk looked at Aria's face, she saw the tears already pooling in her eyes. "Aria? What is it that makes tears rise?"

Aria shook her head. "You'd better go, Kalk."

"Come home with me?" Kalk was smiling, albeit nervously.

The shouting started again, and Aria knew she wanted to be any place but there. "Yes," she agreed and slipped her hand into Kalk's. No matter how the evening turned out; if they made love or not, at least she wouldn't lie in bed crying herself to sleep like she had so many times before after her parent's nightly arguments.

The apartment was cold, and dark. Kalk entered and went around flipping lights, tossing discarded clothing into a closet. She put the heat up full blast and turned to face Aria. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No thanks, I'm fine."

"Hmmm, what else is it your race-"

"Maybe some music?" Aria interjected, smiling. "Music would be nice."

"I can do that." Kalk was giddy. She hurried to the stereo and poked a few buttons. "There, How's that? If you'd like, I can change the CD, I have a vast variety of music, and there'll be something here that you may like."

"This is fine, I like Dado. Thank you."

Kalk had to kiss her again, perhaps Aria wanted to kiss her again too. She gestured a hand towards the couch, and moved forward, meeting Aria there. They sat down together, slightly turned to face one another. "Is it warm enough now for you?"

"Yes, it's getting there, thank you." She didn't know why she felt so awkward, she'd known Kalk for a year, well, technically three months, the rest of that time had been when she'd gone with the peace corp. down to Africa to help rebuild and distribute supplies to the sick and poor. The images had faded somewhat now that it wasn't a daily occurrence, and she could dream again in peace without seeing

starved children dying on the streets. Of course she could go to any run down neighborhood in America and see the same. Stop thinking of that, she admonished herself and turned a smile on Kalk. I'm scared of the unknown, that's what's wrong with me, she knew. Suppose Kalk wasn't even an alien? Just a crazy hermaphrodite? It could happen. So she had a strange name, no last name, she could have made it up. She realized she had no real proof to the story Kalk had told her in a long letter. It was her eyes though; Aria couldn't deny the truth she saw in their depths. That's why you're here, because you believe her story.

II

"Sector 134, right there." The alien known as Leader 6 pointed a long index finger at the hologram map illuminated before the council. Kalk stood just to the back of the room. She was middle order, unlike the Top and First orders, thereby her status as a pilot didn't mean much outside of a ship. Here, with the council, she had no say in the plans to visit this new solar system they had found after receiving repeated signals from it over the years. At first it had been radio transmitting, and after, visual streams had reached Konica. Kalk would travel with three others. They were to touch down on the Earth's surface, find their Top and First orders. Make contact, as Leader 6 had explained. They were to take samples from this planet, their soil, their water, their animals, and their humans.

Until Kalk had met Aria, she'd had no problem with the mission, but after the fated meeting, her views towards the plan had faltered and she no longer wished to see any harm come to any of the beings of Earth even if it was for the betterment of understanding this new culture. When she failed to comply with orders, she had been abandoned down on the planet. All communication severed. The Konica never did meet up with Earth's Top and First orders, or as Aria later explained, they were called the President and Vice President. And Kalk had an awful feeling she would never see her home planet again.

Aria had never seen her ship. Upon landing in the vast fields of Kentucky's farmland, the three beings had hidden the craft and stolen Earth smocks to cover their nakedness. It was while the three visitors had been searching for suitable accommodations Kalk had come across Aria riding a huge beast. She later learned it was a horse, a

common mode of Earthling transportation in certain parts of their world.

She hadn't told Aria she was from a planet far out of Earth's solar system, or even that she was an alien. She simply lied and said she was from another country and didn't know the customs of the United States. When Aria presumed she was an exchange student gone awry, Kalk went along with it, pretending she'd lost her belongings at an airport and therefore had no identification to show. Aria had allowed her to stay at the plantation at first, until her father had found the taller woman sneaking into his house one night. When he'd thrown Kalk out, Aria had arranged lodging for Kalk with a couple of close friends. And then came notification she was to plan her trip to Africa. Aria's jubilation had been dimmed by the thought she wouldn't see Kalk for seven months. In the three that she had known her, she'd fallen into a strong like for the woman, unbeknownst to her, it was actually love.

They wrote constantly to one another. Learning Earth's complicated language had been relatively easy for Kalk. She rather enjoyed using a pen or a pencil rather than her mind to formulate her emotions to another being.

Without their communication modules, Kalk had lost track of her two companions. She presumed they had found charitable host's as she had, and were now learning of Earth, possibly meeting their Higher orders. Eventually she learned her friends had been captured by the Government and had died when they'd been administered a medication that their system's weren't accustomed to. She never knew that it was their craft seen on Earth's radar that had given their arrival away, nor her two friends had protected her presence by telling that there had only been the two of them that had arrived on their planet.

When she had deactivated the hologram over their ship, she'd learned that she was to return to Konica with the human she had come into contact. The woman that trusted her would have no qualms about following Kalk to the field and being taken prisoner. Kalk would not agree, and it was with great sorrow she watched her ship disintegrate before her very eyes.

Having no other alternatives, she'd written to Aria and explained the whole story. She didn't know if the Earth being had believed her at first, but when she'd seen Kalk's extra appendage for the very first time rise under the fabric of her jeans, she soon came to realize Kalk may have been telling her the truth.

Incomplete story

Seeing Red...

Name's Rainie, you know, like in, it's an awfully rainy day today? Mom thought it would be a blast while dad had his own misgivings. I like it; it has a certain ring to it, you know- what with my last name being Summer an' all. Well, enough about all that, I'm here to tell you about my story. My friend Jenny said not to use my real name or they'll lock me up for lying, but I would be committing a worse crime if I lied about my name. So anyway, I'm Rainie Summer, nice to make your acquaintance...

I come from a strange town. I heard it isn't so bad up in Freetown, so maybe Jen an' I'll go on up there when I hit thirty. As it stands now, I haven't been allowed to go anywhere without my parents permission. Of course this sucks. I have a pen pal down in Beld and she says she gets to go wherever she wants whenever she wants. There are no restrictions where she comes from, but living here in Irving sure sucks. So I'll have nine more years until I can blow this town. I guess it won't be so bad, unless they stick the spies on me. But so far I've been safe an' it's been, oh hell, how long has it been anyway? Well, I passed sixteen... Education around here is scarce, I heard it's much better up in Famina and Freetown and those states around there. Man, I gotta get there.

It was my birthday last week, I hit twenty-one. Oh, I got it, that's five years now I've held my secret. Jen too. I had to tell Jen, she's my co-existence. That's what the person you sleep with is called here in Ivering. My pal down in Beld says there is a lot of things I can call Jen: like lover, mate, partner, wife, but I just call her Jen. That's short for Jennifer. She's thirty one, well passed the age when she

could have left me and gone on to a better place so that means she really does love me. We've been together since I struck sixteen and didn't get my period.

See, we have a law here in Irving, it's kind of stupid since we're the only state that upholds this law from a long time ago when our forefathers and mothers first set it down on paper. Story goes that females began in the beginning to not get their friend at that time of the month, and these women turned out to favor other girls. Well, seeing this, men and women with the power and a voice decided it would become law that any teenage girl that got her period would be straight while the ones without would go with women.

Folks up in Famina, Kent and Freetown done gone and erased that law for good. Smart people they have up in Freetown and the surrounding states. Been that way, oh, I'd hafta say going on a hundred years now, maybe more. They don't like to tell you nothin' about our history around here in Irving 'cept the history Irving lives by today.

Well, 'nough bout that. I went an' turned sixteen and didn't get my period. I was best friends with Jen at the time. She was the art teacher back then and although I was starting to look at her in a more serious way, she was oblivious to my needs. That is until I kissed her one afternoon while she was leaning over my shoulder watching me dabbing in the blue eye color of a portrait I was painting of my mother. I got blue eyes too. Daddy got lemon ice tea brown and my sister Danny, short for Danielle, got blue too. Guess Daddy's chromosomes weren't too strong back then.

Now where was I? Oh yeah, Jen and me.

Incomplete story