

Chapter 1

When Sarah sat on the low stool the model buildings were at eye level making it easy to believe they were real. Her town, which surrounded her on low platforms extending from the walls, all but filled the twelve by fifteen foot room. It was the space in the "sierra line" of apartments that most of her neighbors in the complex used as a second bedroom, or, if they were childless, as a den.

As she fiddled with a few details, moving a bush here and there, Sarah remembered the night when, at the age of six, she had first learned to substitute her fantasies for the realities of life when things got ugly.

That night, as on many others, the shouts seemed to rattle the walls, the shrieks came through the door as if it was open, and Sarah, who was too scared to sleep, slipped out of her bed and began to play with her dolls.

She knew if she made up a good enough story it would engross her and she wouldn't have to listen to the noise her parents were making. She succeeded. That was the night Sara came into her life. She had been six, but she still remembered it. Sara had changed her life.

Sarah lifted the doll to a sitting position and Sara woke up, "they're fighting again, I hate that." Sara listened for a minute, then she got up and walked to the door. It was time to do something about it.

Sara waited for a lull in the shouts then she opened her door and walked to the living room. Her parents were standing a few feet apart staring at each other. Her mother's eyes were red, her father was breathing hard, his whole face was red.

She had to speak before they started again. She put her fear aside and said, "You two should be ashamed of yourselves."

They turned to her, still angry she could see, but so surprised she had a chance to keep speaking.

"You sound like a couple of little children. You are supposed to love each other. You are always telling me not to fight with Julie. You should do the same. Now go to bed, it's late, and maybe in the morning you can talk about it without fighting." Those were the words they used on her, and she had found they sometimes worked. Sometimes in the morning she couldn't remember exactly why she hated her sister, maybe it would work for them.

Her parents still hadn't said a word. Their mouths were hanging open a little, but they weren't moving. She clapped her hands together twice, "I mean it, go to bed right now." She was amazed at how well she was able to

imitate her mother. Of course she'd heard it often enough. She looked first into her mother's eyes, then shifted to her father. "Go on. We'll talk about it in the morning."

She turned on her heel and walked back into her bedroom. Behind her the light went out and she heard the door to their room close and silence closed in like a warm blanket.

Sarah wished she could do that. She knew though it wouldn't work that way for her. They'd tell her to go to her room before she could say anything. And if she did get to talk the words would come out wrong.

Sara was very bright, and she always knew what to say. She knew how to explain to a teacher why her homework wasn't done, or how to tell Eleanor Kravitz to mind her own business. She knew how to make friends, and how to make people leave her alone. She wasn't afraid of very much, and she was able to figure out ways around those things she was scared of.

Sara was a great comfort, she told Sarah that someday she would be able to handle things the way she did. "Someday you're not going to be afraid any more. Someday you'll see how easy it can be."

Sarah had been waiting for that day for twenty one years since Sara had first told her that, and she still believed that it would come. "I can't tell you when or how, but something's going to happen to you which will make you feel strong enough to try it. When it happens there will be no going back. There will be no stopping you. All you have to do is keep believing and not let yourself get bitter. If you get bitter it can swallow you up like it did your mom."

At times it had come close. During the period when she had been tending to her mother, the world had closed in on her. Sara had been struggling to get her career off the ground, but she was doing something. She was meeting people, she was spending evenings with friends who laughed and didn't moan or complain about their fate like Sarah's mother did.

When it was at it's worst she'd come to see death as a blessing, if not for her mother than maybe for her, because, as sick as her mother was, it seemed like she was going to go on suffering, and making those around her suffer, forever.

She wanted to have the strength to tell her mother she needed to be in a nursing home, Sara had done that months ago, and it was working out. She wanted to wake up and be Sara. Every night she'd prayed for that, and every morning she'd heard her mother calling to her impatiently asking for this or that to be brought to her. Ready to recite her inventory of pains.

The morning when her mother hadn't called for her she'd gone in feeling guilty about hoping to find her dead. She'd actually considered waiting to call the ambulance, but, in the end, she had.

That had been three years ago, and, even though her mother had passed on, she still wasn't Sara. Someday she would be. She was sure of it. All she needed was for the right moment to come along, and then she could jump on to the merry go round the whole rest of the world seemed to be riding.

Chapter 2

Something was not quite right with the model. Sarah nibbled on her lower lip as she bent down and examined it from ground level. She'd done a good job on the beach and was particularly proud of the sand dune the house sat on. But it still didn't look right. She moved a little looking at the other sides of the house. Of course, how silly of her, beach houses don't have lawns. She bent down and picked up the patch of felt which lay between the house and the road. The plywood surface of the shelf glared up at her. What could she do?

She slid a box from beneath the low, wide shelf and began rooting through its contents. She pulled out sand, a few small pebbles, and a batch of dried moss which had been dyed dark green. "Ok, this will be better." She scooped a fair amount of sand onto the board and smoothed it so it rose up to join the dune. She usually used the moss for trees and shrubs, but if she mashed it up a little it could resemble a thicket. She put a fair sized clump alongside the road to screen the house from the curious tourists and scattered pieces between there and the house.

The effect was better than she expected, she'd need to get some more for the area behind the dunes, but for now it was all right. She put the bags back into the box and slid it under the shelf. With a critical eye she studied the model, everything was ready. With a glance at her watch she got up and went into her bedroom to get dressed for the party. She would wear her Sara dress, the one that was cut low in front, and which she would never dream of wearing outside her apartment. Not that she had any call to, she thought, as she adjusted it making sure it didn't reveal too much.

Chapter 3

Sara had been looking forward to this party for the past week. The invitation meant she was finally on the A list and that meant she wasn't

going to have to deal with Louise Fisher and her endless supply of boring stories about her children. This was a crowd that had better things to talk about than snot nosed brats. Besides, the party was going to be at Stewart's beach house and she was anxious to see if all the things she'd heard about his parties were true.

She checked herself in the mirror and adjusted her dress so that it showed more cleavage. If what she'd heard was true, this was a party where it was ok to flaunt it, and she was ready. After all, Stewart had said the party was to celebrate her new album, of course he'd added that Skip was celebrating too, he'd just been nominated for some award or something, but that didn't matter. She briefly debated whether she should take a copy with her, and decided that Stewart was likely to have bought one already, but if he hadn't it wouldn't seem too brash to have a CD in her purse. After all, she was a success. Successful people couldn't afford to be too modest.

She dallied for a few minutes, so as not to be too early, and then with a rush of pride swept out the door.

The directions had been easy to follow, and the uniformed guard posted out on the road showed her where to turn. She was loving every second, the way the second guard ran his finger down the list on the clipboard, and then with a respectful tone said, "Go right on up."

She worried briefly that she was too early, but saw some cars parked along side the driveway, and relaxed. A teenager in a red jacket with black trim opened the door for her, climbed in and sped off to park. 'All right!', she thought, as she walked across the drive to the door.

A maid greeted her and waved her on towards the back of the house. Sara took two deep breaths in an attempt to slow her heart, and reminded herself to remember every moment.

As she entered the living room, two stories high, at least sixty feet long, and with a wall of glass which overlooked the bay, she knew she hadn't needed to bring a copy of her album. It was playing on the sound system, not loudly enough to impede conversation, but with enough volume to be a bit more than background music. She suppressed a terrible desire to giggle, it felt so good, she fought an impulse to sing along with the record. She spotted Stewart standing with a group near a door which opened out onto the deck and moved towards him.

He spotted her before she got half way to him and, in a voice which was loud enough to reach everybody in the room, he said, "Sara, you look wonderful." He paused and she watched as everybody in the room turned towards her. "Let me introduce Shoreside's newest star, Sara Bloom." There was a smattering of applause and Sara felt a blush begin to rise.

She hoped she'd be able to talk, that her voice wouldn't crack, "Stewart, it's good to see you," she answered, just a little louder than necessary. The group he'd been with broke up with a couple walking out onto the deck, and a man, a handsome tanned man, dressed in casual clothes -- so elegantly casual that she knew must have cost several hundred dollars advanced towards her with Stewart.

"This place, it's magnificent," she said.

Stewart shrugged off the complement, "Do you know Greg Lawler? He's a fan of yours."

She turned slightly, looked the man in the eyes, and smiled, "Nice to meet you." Who was he, the name seemed familiar?

He took her hand and looked deep into her eyes. It was like a romance novel, it seemed like she was falling into his soul or he into hers, she didn't know which.

Stewart continued, "Greg's too modest to tell you, but he's one of the hottest of the new generation of film makers to come along in a few years."

If one more thing happened to her she was sure she would burst. Greg spoke, "I've been looking forward to meeting you ever since I heard 'Going Home'".

He had to be a fan. 'Going Home' was on her first album. It had sold only twenty thousand copies, due, in large part, to the fact the record company didn't put its heart into promoting it. "Thank You, not many people got to hear that one."

"This new album isn't going to have that problem," he gestured towards the speakers where 'Glory Be', her favorite cut, was just beginning. What timing, she thought,

"Well glory be to the god who made this man.

Glory be to that which brought him to me.

Glory be to the promise of this night.

Glory be to the wonders of this life."

She realized she was singing along - swept up in the moment. Well, she had to go along with it now,

"When I was down I promised

I would never forget

how you made me reach for the stars.

I'll always remember

how you helped me see the light."

She kept her voice low, careful not to over do it. Was it her imagination or was he being swept up by the same wave as she?

She became self conscious, "Can we go out on the deck? I want to catch the end of the sunset."

He turned and followed her through the doors. The sound system extended to the deck too.

"Glory Be to the power you made me find.

Glory Be - Glory Be - Glory be."

The sun was below the horizon, but it still illuminated the tops of the clouds to the west. Wondrous purples and reds were set against a swiftly fading pale blue. Her body felt so full, almost as though she was going to come. Many times sex hadn't come close to making her feel this good. She was aware of Greg standing close beside her. The music was muted some by the breeze and the sound of breaking waves, "Surrender yourself to the magic. Let it sweep you away. Ride the wave as it slides towards the shore."

"If you tried to do this in a movie, nobody would believe it," she said.

"Unless you did it exactly right, and then it would hit you like this," he moved closer and kissed her. It began gently, but in a moment it had the intensity of a 747 hurtling towards take-off. She felt herself shudder, she was actually heading towards an orgasm. He hugged her tightly, she fought the impulse to scream, and let out a muffled moan as his tongue played with her lips.

The sky was much darker when they finally came up for air. The last words of the album, "Surrender your soul to me and I am yours," slid out of the speakers and drifted towards the beach. She took several slow deep breaths wordlessly wondering what could come next.

She felt his chest expand as he took in a breath, he asked, "Do you believe in getting married on the first date?"

Or love at first sight? She asked herself as she laughed and hugged him a touch tighter.

"I don't know, I wouldn't want you to think I'm easy."

"I said it as a joke, but you should know I'm not sure I wasn't saying what I really meant.. This is no passing fancy."

She felt it too, for the first time in her life it seemed like the hollow feeling she had inside her was completely filled. She knew better than to believe it, but she wasn't going to make any mistakes either. "Let's let that wave take us where it will."

They looked in through the glass wall at the party. It seemed like they were enjoying a cat's-eye-view of an enormous aquarium which was filled with exotic fish. After a moment, without saying anything, they turned and walked down the stairs to the beach. The stars were coming out, she felt like she was in the center of the universe. She kicked off her shoes and felt the warmth of the sand on her feet. It was like she was in a movie. The script was memorized - she was the character - the character was her. It was new, but it was real.

They walked well away from the pool of light spilling from the house and then reached for each other again. It felt as though his hands were electric as they slid up and down her back. She willed them to find the zipper and, as though they were her own, they did. His hands touched her skin. With a shock she pulled him closer then pulled back and shrugged so the straps could slide off her shoulders. She let the dress fall to the sand then reached up to unbutton his shirt.

The warm evening breeze caressed her body like a thousand unseen fingers as she ran her hands up his chest. In a moment they were naked and running towards the sound of the surf. He pulled her through a wave and the cool of the water caused her to gasp. They rose as another wave passed and embraced again. She wrapped her legs around his waist and felt him guide himself into her. She was weightless as the moment was timeless. She pulled her mouth away from his and sang like she had only occasionally been able to before. "I give myself to you. I place my heart in your hands," he touched her just right and she left the lyrics for a wordless aria. A rushing sound, which might be new heights of orgasm grew louder, but as she felt them lifted and then buried by a rushing wall she knew it was the wave that would sweep them where it would.

The wave picked them up, then threw them forward and down tumbling in it's powerful eddys. She gripped him tightly, felt them hit bottom and then rise up as it passed. They gasped as their heads broke through the surface. Another wave followed and knocked them down again. She was pushed across the bottom and felt the sand rasping at her legs and back. When it passed they were in shallow water with him on top of her. He gave out a heavy groan as the next wave thrust him deeper inside her. They screamed as they came together in a mindless biological frenzy.

The wave receded leaving them partially exposed to the breeze which now seemed cool as it passed across their wet flesh.

Forever they lay there then with slowness he pulled back and helped her to stand.

There were no words which could say what she was feeling, it was as if the entire cosmos had moved slightly and clicked together for her. Her soul was whole. Her mind was fresh - free of the thousand little doubts and troubling thoughts which had always plagued it. They washed the sand off of each other's bodies and then walked up the beach in search of their hastily discarded clothes.

It was very dark now and at once she knew they were going to have trouble finding their clothes. Behind them a wave crashed and hissed its way up the beach. His hand held hers and through it she could feel no apprehension. The wind made her shiver and she pressed against him. He put his arm around her. "I guess we'll have to keep each other warm."

She laughed, choosing deliberately not to let it be a terrible embarrassing situation.

They walked in a few circles hoping to stumble across the clothes, all the while knowing it was hopeless, but not wanting to break the spell. The current had carried them up the beach, that much she was sure, but neither of them had paid much mind to where they were when the frenzy had begun.

He led her back up the beach towards the house. When they got close to the pool of light he said, "I'll go and get us blankets and a flashlight."

She didn't reply, but she didn't let go of his hand either, and together they scrambled up the dune towards the house. There the party was a lot louder, it seemed, and Sara wondered what Greg had in mind. He walked up to the edge of the deck which was waist high and called to a couple who were in heavy embrace. "Hello, excuse me."

The couple either didn't hear, or were ignoring them. Sara could see the party through the glass wall and somehow found it thrilling to be there naked watching. She wasn't prepared to walk into the crowded room though even if a couple of starlets had taken off their tops and were dancing on top of a coffee table. Greg called again then gave up and led her around the house to where another deck jutted out. It was vacant, and the room behind was dimly lit. He helped her climb up and then led her to the sliding glass doors which led inside. After sliding them open he pulled her in behind him. At once she realized they were not alone. A woman, as naked as she, lay on the bed. She lay on her stomach with her head twisted to the side. At first Sara thought she was asleep, but then saw her eyes were open. It took her a moment before she realized the woman didn't seem to see them. Her arms were at an odd angle, Sara didn't know how she could lie in an uncomfortable position like that.

The door to the room was closed, and the party beyond was just a muted rumble. Greg moved to the bathroom and fetched a couple of large

towels while Sara stood staring -- unable to move. The woman was young, very pretty, though a bit too thin. Her chest wasn't moving. She wasn't breathing. "Greg?"

As he came back into the room he said, "Yeah?"

"I think she's dead."

Chapter 4

Sarah took a sip of wine. She often amazed herself with the twists and turns her characters' lives sometimes took. She bent over again and looked into the model of the house.

Greg stopped as though he'd walked into a wall. All the self confidence and poise seemed to drain out of him. Slowly he turned to look at the woman on the bed. "No, she's just passed out."

"I don't think she's breathing."

He handed Sarah the towel and wrapped his around himself. Then he went to the side of the bed and gently touched the woman. He drew his hand back quickly. "I think you're right." As he turned to her Sarah saw fear in his eyes. She wrapped the towel around herself, "we've got to tell somebody."

Greg shook his head violently, "No."

"What?"

"I don't want to get involved. If we find the body we'll have to talk to the police."

"So?"

"So -- I can't get involved in this." He moved towards the door.

"We can't just leave her."

"We can't stay either, someone might come in," he grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the door.

She let herself get pulled for a couple of steps but slipped her hand from his before they got to the door. "It's not right."

"It may not be right," he said, "but I know this girl and it will be trouble if I'm involved with this."

Sara looked at him, the evening where she'd been walking on air was gone, barely remembered. The man who had touched her soul was behaving like a frightened rodent.

As she watched he grew more agitated. "Listen, I'll tell you everything once we get out of here, but we've got to go now."

Something about the urgency in his voice broke her trance, she nodded and followed him out onto the deck taking one last look at the woman.

She let him lead her until they were back on the beach. "Now what is that all about?"

"Look, babe, I used to see that woman, and she hangs out with a rough crowd. They're real heavy into coke. One time when I was with her I got stopped by the cops and they found dope in the car. It was hers, but I took the fall and got probation. It's strange, but in show biz it's ok to play with drugs so long as you don't get your hands burned. I've got a couple of deals that are ready to be cut, and I can't have this appearing in the papers. Not with us coming naked from the beach. There isn't a paper in the country that could pass that one up."

"So what do we do now?"

"You wait here - I'll go back to the house and get a flashlight." He squeezed her hand and then started back towards the house.

She felt no urge to accompany him. The bond had been broken. She watched his silhouette as he walked towards the house, then turned and stared out at the blackness of the sea.

"Well, that was something," she said aloud. Close, but no cigar, she thought. The hollowness was back, she wondered about the girl on the bed. How desperate a life had she lived? She guessed she had died from coke. Trying to fill her soul by stuffing powder up her nose. Drugs, she thought, were the curse of artistic people. She thought about Janice Joplin, and all the others, living life as though it didn't matter. Reveling in their fiery plunge into the abyss.

The waves crashed and hissed in front of her, their rhythm slow, requiem like. A wave began to break, she sang softly, "She died so alone." She paused until the wave began its push up the beach, "In too fast a rush to go nowhere, spilling her dreams behind her." She savored the silence for a moment then as the next wave crashed, "Her body - now a shell..... in which a little girl once lived."

"She grew too far - too fast..... her spirit lies still in a shattered heart."

She was brought out of her reverie by a beam of light which danced on the sand around her. She turned, Greg was coming back. "Sorry it took so long, but no one knew where a flashlight was."

She fell into step beside him as they trudged up the beach. The soft sand made walking awkward. She didn't remember that from the previous trip. But then her feet hadn't really been touching the ground.

Greg was sweeping the beam across the sand, and finally it touched the pile of hastily discarded clothes. To Sarah they looked like the leavings of a hurried breakfast piled in the sink. Wordlessly they shook the sand from the clothes and pulled them on. She was dressed before he was and started back without waiting for him. She heard him call her name, and the light swept across the beach where she was walking, but she did not slow. She heard him call, but a wave wiped the sound away.

She didn't bother going inside the gaily lit house, she knew there would be laughter and earnest conversation - until the body was found. She didn't want to be there for that.

The parking valets were surprised to see her come from around the house, but said nothing and quickly went off to fetch her car.

Her headlights cut a hole through the gloom of the night as she drove on the empty roads towards her home.

Sarah pulled herself out of her fantasy. Why can't they ever have pleasant endings, she wondered? She moved the car into the slot in front of Sara's house and then scooted the casted stool back to the elaborate model of the Beach house at the edge of the layout. This model had a removable roof to allow glimpses of the partitioned interior. She started to put the roof back on, but decided she'd watch the party. Sara hadn't wanted to be there when they found the body, but she did.

Chapter 5

If anyone wasn't having fun it wasn't because they weren't trying hard enough. Three couples were engaged in heavy petting on the deck. Two others were doing considerably more than that in the hot tub on the other side of the house, and the host was happily watching two naked starlets dancing on top of a coffee table in the living room. Greg was there too, he was drinking a large tumbler of straight scotch as though it was Pepsi. The song ended, it was no longer Sara's music, and one of the buxom bunnies jumped down from the table, and after briefly pressing her body against Stewart, headed down the hall towards the bedroom.

She was the perfect one to find the body Sarah thought, maybe it would give her reason to reconsider how she was living her life. When the screams came, only Greg did not look up. Instead he drained the last of the drink and walked over to the bar to pour himself another. Stewart suddenly

seemed more sober as he hurried down the hall followed immediately by the other girl. Greg saw this and must have realized he would appear strange if he didn't go too, so he took his drink and headed after them.

The two starlets-to-be were clutching each other and were crying. Stewart was sitting on the edge of the bed frantically trying to find a pulse. First he tried her wrist, then he put his fingers on her neck. He did not lose his air of calm the way Greg had, she noticed. Greg moved into the room. "What is it?"

"She's dead." Stewart stood, a sad look passed across his face. There was a mirror on the nightstand. A silver straw lay across it pointed to a small pile of powder. Sara had missed seeing this entirely. He looked at the mirror, considering whether to take it, or to leave it for the police to find.

"What are you going to do," asked Greg?

Stewart turned and looked at him, "what do you mean?"

"It won't be good if she's found here."

Stewart nodded, "what do you suggest?"

Greg's eyes went shifty, he closed the door behind him. "Look, she could have had a heart attack as easily when she went swimming in the surf."

"Are you saying we should move her?"

"It might be best for us all."

Stewart looked at the two women who were still clutching each other, their eyes locked on the body on the bed. Then he looked at Greg. It was a hell of a choice, if they moved the body the three of them would have something on him, not that he wasn't in a position to pay them off with the favors he could bestow, but he didn't like the idea. But if she was found here the police would search the house, and there were a number of things he didn't want them finding or pawing through. And then there would be the tabloids calling it a death house. That would cost when he tried to sell it.

"Ok," he stood and walked over to the girls, standing between them and the bed. "If we move her, it means the police won't get as involved. It also means you'll have a secret to keep. If you can do that it will be good for your careers. I'll call your agents tomorrow and see that you get something." He looked at them, their eyes were locked on his. "Can you do that?"

They nodded. He looked at Greg. Greg was the one he was not sure he could trust. Then he knew. "Ok Greg, you take the body out off the deck there and down the beach a ways." If Greg did it he'd have something on him too. Greg nodded and bent down to pick up the body. It was heavier and more cumbersome than he realized. Stewart shooed the girls into the bathroom, closed the door, and helped Greg pick up the body and put it

across his shoulder. Once it was balanced Greg had no trouble with it and quickly walked through the sliding glass doors and out onto the darkened deck.

Stewart quickly took the mirror and stuffed it in the dead woman's handbag. He smoothed the cover on the bed and then turned to the bathroom. The girls squealed as he opened the door, they had wrapped towels around themselves, but were still very nervous. He led them out of the room and across the hall to the empty screening room that was in the center of the house. He sat them down on a couple of overstuffed chairs. He turned to them and said. "I know you were doing blow with her. Remember the secret goes both ways, you're in this as deep as anyone." They nodded rapidly. He took a step towards them, "it makes me nervous whenever I have to trust somebody with a secret, I think you can understand that I want a little more insurance?" They nodded again, but a little more slowly. He walked over to a cabinet and pulled open a drawer. "Stand up and take off those towels."

They stood, but hesitated. He turned with a Polaroid camera in his hand. "I want a picture of the two of you kissing. I told you before I'll make your careers move along, but I want something that I can bring them down with if you ever go against me."

They looked at each other for a moment and then embraced.

He walked over and tugged at the towels so they fell off, then he stepped back and took two pictures.

Immediately the two women picked up the towels and covered themselves. "I'll keep them in a very safe place." He led them out of the room, "Maybe you ought to stay here with me tonight so you can be there when I call your agents."

They nodded, Sarah knew they had been hoping to stay over anyway. "Go on up to my bedroom and wait for me I'll be up when the rest of the guests have left."

After they left Stewart turned and went back into the room where the woman had died. He found her clothes, a tiny pair of panties and a dress that almost wasn't. He took her purse and walked out to the beach looking for a place where he could leave them. As he walked towards the water he heard Greg's voice off to his right. "Stewart?"

He turned and moved in that direction, trying to remember if the tide was coming in and wondering if he needed to be careful about leaving footprints. Greg came up to him, he was soaking wet and breathing hard. "I

took care of it, I decided to take her out beyond the breakers, there's a current there. Do you have her things?"

"Yes, and I got some insurance on the two broads."

"Good, I was worried about that."

"I'm not going to need any more insurance on you am I?"

Greg took a deep breath and softly said. "No, no you aren't gong to need anything. Not that you don't have enough other things already."

Stewart wiped her bag with his shirt to make sure there were no fingerprints on it. The tide was coming in he realized, good. He dropped the bag and her purse on the sand as a wave slid up the beach and washed around his feet.

He turned and headed back towards the house. "So what was it like with the singer? What happened there?"

"It was great. We fucked in the surf then", Greg paused, Sarah realized he was working on a lie.

"Then what happened, where did she go," asked Stewart?

"I don't know what happened. Afterwards she got freaked out, she must be uptight about sex or something and she split."

Stewart stood there for a moment, finally he said, "let's get you some dry clothes."

Sarah looked at her watch. It was a little after one, she wondered if she should stay for the little sex scene Stewart and the bimbettes would be having. Whatever happened, she wanted a drink, after all she'd had a rough evening, so she got to her feet and went into the kitchen for another glass of wine.

The bottle was almost empty, she frowned trying to remember when she'd had the rest. Oh yes, before the party Sara had been a little nervous - she had it then. She poured out the rest, it was only half a glass. She wanted more, said, "what the hell", to herself and reached into the cupboard for another bottle. As she struggled with the cork she tried to remember the last time she'd had more than one bottle in a night, couldn't, so she told herself that it was ok so long as she didn't make a practice of it. She filled the glass and started to set the bottle down on the counter, but changed her mind and took it with her. Maybe she'd go back and visit with Sara, she'd be having trouble sleeping, maybe she'd be having some wine too.

When she got back the last of the guests who were able to drive were leaving. A couple who were too drunk to drive safely had been bedded down in the room that had recently been the scene of so much drama. Greg had changed and repaired to the couch where he was busily trying to empty

a bottle of Scotch. Stewart gave the maid a few last directions and then climbed the stairs.

The girls had found some more blow and they were, he saw, wired. In a way he'd been afraid they'd be asleep, but in another way he wasn't happy with the prospect of having to deal with two still nervous coked up women. They'd taken the towels off. As he watched them moving around he had to admit they were more than pretty. They'd been drinking some too, and he wondered what kind of sex they'd be into with their inhibitions so shattered.

"So girls, what will it be?"

Sarah took a gulp of the wine. She really didn't like them. She wanted to see them make fools out of themselves. She knew Stewart had a secret drawer full of kinky sex props. Was she, she wondered, up for such a scene? She reached down and touched herself, emboldened by the wine, but still embarrassed at the act. This was nothing Sara would do, but it might be fun to have them do it.

Stewart walked over to the dresser and took a slug of the vodka. He turned back to the door and secured the lock then he said, "Tell me girls, when you're wired, and drunk, and not afraid to let go, what kind of sex do you like?"

Chapter 6

The blonde turned towards him, licked her lips, and asked, "What do you have in mind? Do you want us to get it on together while you watch?"

That wasn't what he wanted, not really. "Is that what you like?"

The redhead sat down on the bed, "it doesn't really turn me on, not unless you really want it."

The blonde moved closer to him and started to unbutton his shirt. "I'll bet I know, I bet he likes his sex a bit kinky." She looked into his eyes, and Sarah knew that behind the silicone and rouge sat a computer which had his number figured out, probably to three decimal places.

Stewart nodded, "sometimes it can be fun, especially when you're too ripped to be embarrassed." The blonde opened his shirt and kissed his chest giving his nipple a little bite. He jumped a little at that.

"Do you like to be in charge, to direct things," she asked, "or do you like to be the one who's at the center of all the attention?"

"I like to be in charge," actually, he liked it both ways, but tonight he wanted to be in control.

The redhead stood and walked over to the dresser and took a hit on the bottle. "So tell us what you want us to do, and then tell us what you'll do for

us tomorrow." Despite her drunkenness she was still thinking - there was a real look of greed on her face.

Sarah sensed that Stewart really wanted to do some nasty things to her. At least, she did. Stewart thought for a minute. "I'll tell you what I can do for you first, then you tell me what you would be willing to do for me."

"I've got a couple of pictures coming up. In one there are supporting roles, good ones, for two young woman who are on the rise in a big company." He reached out and took the bottle from her, and sipped. "The other film starts production in a couple of months I can get you both speaking parts in it, but I can't do any better than that because it's got mostly male roles except for an older woman." He reached out and fondled her breast, "but if you can be patient, I was talking with Greg tonight about a project for next year, a television series about a bunch of actors and actresses in summer stock, sort of a L.A. Law for actors. I could see that you both got regular roles in that."

Sarah saw both women brighten, she had the feeling that the promise might have started off as a lie, but there was something about the redhead that made her think he was going to have to live up to it.

The blonde moved behind him and unbuckled his belt, and reached inside his pants. The redhead took his hand in hers and squeezed his fingers on her nipple, "I think I know something that you would like. How about you come into the room and find the two of us in bed together? We ask you not to tell anyone, you tell us you want to punish us for being lesbians, and then you spank us and at the end you show us the advantages of having sex with a man?"

The blonde nodded and kissed him on the neck.

Sarah took a sip of wine and drained the glass. She was amazed at her mind, she didn't usually think like that. It was close to two, she decided that she didn't have to be there to see it because she knew Stewart had a secret video taping system built into the bedroom. She'd be able to go back and have him watch the tape some time in the future.

She put the roof back on the model, turned off the light and rather unsteadily walked into her bedroom.

Sara had drank a lot after getting home too. She was remembering how wonderful the sex had been, wondering what would have happened if the bed had been empty, and Greg and she had decided to take advantage of it.

Sarah didn't masturbate much, as a rule, but Sara was feeling no pain, so somehow it was alright and she allowed herself to touch herself without feeling the shame she normally did.

Chapter 7

The next morning Sarah remembered the last time she'd drunk more than one bottle of wine in a night. The next morning that time had been just like this one. Her mouth felt bad. She couldn't decide if it felt more like a mouse had crawled in there to die or someone had stuffed it with moldy bread. When she tried to sit up the headache hit her and she sank back down onto the bed. The last time this had happened she'd made a pledge not to ever go beyond one bottle. She reaffirmed the pledge, and knew that headache or no she had to get up or wet the bed. It took three applications of mouthwash and a thorough brushing of her teeth before her mouth began to feel clean.

After the shower, she looked at herself in the mirror as she toweled herself dry. "You are one sorry stupid girl. Look at you. You can't stand up straight. You lead a fantasy life because you're afraid to have a real one, and even in that you won't let yourself have a good time for more than half an hour. You get drunk and play with yourself, that's the only sex you've had in three years. Come to think about it the sex three years ago was a disaster, so that doesn't really count either."

She paused, trying to decide if she was any fatter than the last time she'd taken a good look. "You're starting to get overweight, and next it will be dumpy. You don't eat right. You spend all your time and money on that damned town, you haven't read a book in six months I'll bet."

She moved into the bedroom looking for some clean clothes. "This room's a mess, you've got to do a laundry every so often, you know, and you know what you're going to do? You're going to go back and check on that town. You're going to watch a video tape in your head of a couple of over-sexed-dumb-as-shit sluts getting spanked by a grade A sleaze ball, and it's going to turn you on - you know why - because you think it ought to be you getting spanked in some posh bedroom by a man who says he's going to make you a star. Then you're going to watch things happen there and you're going to tell yourself it's better than watching a dumb tv show. Maybe it is, but there ain't nothing that says you got to watch tv, and another thing - at least you don't believe tv.

Sarah began to get tired of the voice that was saying these things. Even though she was talking to herself it sounded like her mother was the one talking to her. "You haven't even looked out the window to see what

kind of day it is. You ought to go out and spend some time in the fresh air, you're so pale you'd think it was January, not June."

She did take a peek out the window, it was a beautiful day. She knew the sun was reflecting off the ocean in a blinding glare. The beach was deserted. The first of the joggers were still doing their warmups. Sarah took the roof off the model of the beach house. The two women were still asleep on the bed. Stewart was not there, and it took her a moment to see that he was standing at the window looking out at the ocean. "You expecting to see something," she asked?

She decided she'd watch the video downstairs in the screening room so she imagined herself sitting in the plush chair beside the monster console.

The women showed that they had the potential of being pretty good actresses, she thought as she watched the two of them cavorting on the bed, or maybe they do swing both ways. Stewart came into the picture and she watched then go through the plot he'd outlined. He'd tied them up before spanking them and had used a leather covered wooden paddle. They hadn't expected that, this was no test of their acting abilities, Sarah could tell that the spanking really hurt them.

She hated to admit it but she really enjoyed watching this and maybe she was right about herself when she'd said she wanted it to be her. Eventually he'd stopped and then had tried to have sex with the women. That was the best part, he hadn't been able to get it up, he blamed it on the stress and on the booze, but the result was the same. The two girls hadn't minded. They were glad to be left alone.

Sarah was glad she'd watched the tape now, she was sure Stewart would erase some or all of it as soon as he thought of it.

Out on the beach the first joggers and dog walkers were appearing. Sarah was pretty sure one of them would find the body, so she kept an eye on the beach as she watched a couple of choice sections of the tape over again.

Sure enough it was a man jogging with his dog who noticed the body lying in six inches of water. He shoed the dog away and waded in to pull her further up the beach. It was hard work and Sarah could see he didn't like touching a dead body, for that was clearly what it was. Her arms hung loose, her eyes still open, her face coated with sand.

The man called his dog and raced off to the nearest house. It was the next house down the beach, Sarah liked that touch, the police wouldn't come to Stewart's house first. He'd be able to walk down the beach to see what the fuss was about. He'd be able to feign surprise, to realize that this woman

had been at his party the previous night. She'd told him she was going for a walk on the beach he'd say.

"About what time," the cop asked?

He shrugged, "maybe about ten thirty or eleven. I didn't pay it any attention." She hadn't been naked he thought she'd been wearing a blue dress or was it green?

"Nobody at the party realized she was missing?"

"No. I think she came alone, come to think of it she was acting funny like she was drunk or high earlier on." Someone had told him she'd broken up with her boyfriend, "do you think she drowned herself?"

The cop shrugged, made sure he had the name and address right and said some would be contacting him later.

Sarah knew she should eat something even though her stomach told her it would be risky. Not much would be happening for a while. Not until the autopsy told them she hadn't drowned. As she rummaged through her refrigerator looking for a yogurt which wasn't past its expiration date she told herself she'd have to do a laundry today too.

She finally found a container of yogurt and to her surprise her stomach accepted it with no particular protest.

Chapter 8

Sarah stood in the center of the room and surveyed her world. Set on low, wide shelves which ran around the entire room was a town in miniature. It still amazed her that she had been able to make it look this real. She was particularly proud of the houses at the beach where the elite of the community lived when they weren't jet-setting around the world.

Stewart's house had taken her nearly three weeks to complete, partially because it was a large complicated model with a removable roof so you could view the interior, and partially because she hadn't been able settle on the interior design.

Originally she had begun her project with prefabricated models intended for electric train sets, but had found she needed to switch to architectural modeling for the fancier parts of her town. This had slowed her down considerably, one house had taken a month of evenings, but as she viewed the results, she knew it was worth all the effort.

Sarah looked at her watch, if she didn't get moving now she was going to miss her bus. She wished all her fantasy friends a good day and closed the door to the room she'd never shown anybody.

On the bus she let the fun filled exciting world at home slip away and slowed her mind for the coming day at work. She had to be careful that Sara, who wasn't afraid to take risks, stayed in the closed room, there was no room for her at work. Sara wouldn't like it at work, she wouldn't be able to take the boredom, she would find ways to make Sarah painfully aware of the defects of the job and the people she worked with.

She knew Sara was right about some of these things, but Sarah also knew that this job was about all that she could handle right now. Maybe some day she'd be able to take some risks, but not yet.

Sarah looked out the window at the passing scene and wondered why it was that she had never felt as though she quite fit in with the rest of the world. Why was she so much more afraid of things than everybody else? Maybe one day she'd replay her childhood at home and see where she'd gone off the track. The bus sighed to a stop a block from her office. She knew she had time to have a cup of coffee, and a Danish she really shouldn't have, before work. She had a choice, take this bus and get to work with time to spare, or take a later bus and look at her watch anxiously every time they got stopped in traffic.

Today work was going to be pretty light. The monthly report had gone in yesterday and there was going to be a short lull before the memos and calls asking for explanations and clarifications would start to come in.

Sarah was glad for the break, it meant she could take her full hour for lunch and do some shopping. There was going to be a lot of things to follow up on. Sara was going to have to snap out of her depression and the police were going to put the investigation into high gear. Sarah didn't to waste any time after work doing anything so mundane as buying pantyhose.

Once the line between fantasy and reality became blurred for Sarah her life became a lot more interesting. She'd turned to her dolls again when she was held a prisoner by her mother's condition. At first it had taken most of a bottle of wine for her to allow herself to slide into what her sober straight self called childish playing, but once she'd gotten over the embarrassment it had come easier.

A part of her was afraid that one day she would surrender to the fantasy world, and would not be able to come back. There was some basis for this fear, she thought as she stood waiting for the elevator. It was getting harder and harder to drag herself into work these last few days, and she found herself taking little breaks throughout the day during which she would call the recorded weather number and would have a conversation with one of her characters.

"Hello, Roberta? Yeah, I was calling about the party."

"Increasing cloudiness, followed by periods of light rain"

"Yes, I can come, I was just wondering how dressy it's going to be?"

"The high today will be 67 and the low"

"Ok, that'll be fine. Is there anything I can bring?"

"Winds out of the northwest about 10 miles per hour gusting to 15 - 20 during the showers."

"Oh, sure I can do that, no problem. By the way, has Tom RSPV'd yet?"

"A strong frontal system moving in from the west will dominate."

Sarah made a face, "I really don't know why he insists on bringing her." She paused, "But of course it's none of my business, listen I've got to go. I'll see you Friday."

"Excuse me?"

Sarah jumped, she'd been turned in her chair and hadn't seen him as he came in. He was good looking, sort of, in her world not Sara's, and even though he was wearing a suit, he didn't quite achieve a professional appearance. Maybe it was his hair which stood up in places, or the pants which had gone too long since being pressed. She realized he was waiting for her reply.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Mr. Smith, I've got an appointment for eleven."

She looked at her watch, it was ten-thirty. "You're kind of early," she pulled out the appointment book. There was a Jonathan Wright scheduled for eleven. "Are you Mr. Wright?"

"Yes, I know I'm early, but I had planned on getting lost, and for once I didn't."

"Why don't you have a seat, Mr. Wright, I'll tell him you're here." She lifted the phone and eased back into her work routine.

She was a little nervous at having nearly been caught in her fantasy world. She took a peek at the man who had taken a sheaf of papers out of his briefcase and was reading them. She'd better get busy, she thought, and pulled out the reports she had to compile. If it only wasn't so boring, if only they had some meaning, she thought. She brought up the document on the computer and had just started keying in the new information when the phone buzzed and Mr. Smith asked her to send the man in.

Chapter 9

The phone buzzed, "Yes Sir?"

"Sarah can you come in here? Mr. Wright has some questions about the combined report you do." She gathered up the papers she'd used to prepare the report and went into the office.

They had her report spread out on a table over by the window. She wondered what was wrong with it.

"Hello Sarah, I believe you met Mr. Wright earlier. He's a consultant who's going to see if he can make our computers do a better job for us, and he wants to know where some of these figures come from."

She walked over to the window relieved that they weren't telling her she'd made a mistake, at least not yet.

He looked at her, he seemed more in his element here, she thought. Pointing to the report he asked, "This column, I would guess, comes from the monthly branch report?"

She nodded, "for the most part. I correct it before I type it up though."

"Correct it?" He looked up from the report, waiting for her to explain.

"Yes, the figures from a couple of branches usually need adjustment. They do a lot of business towards the end of the month so they give an estimate to make the deadline for the monthly report. I call them a couple of days later and they give me the actual figures." This interested him, she watched as he made a note on the report.

"Do you know if they give these new figures to the data section as well?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so, I used to give them to Claire, but she left and the person who replaced her didn't seem to know what I was talking about and I stopped." Was she talking too much? She pointed to another entry, "This one is often off too. I don't know why, but when I call there to check on the figure they usually give me a different one. Close, not more than a hundred or two off, but not the same."

The man frowned and made some more notes. She continued, "The next column - I get the information from a variety of sources. These," she circled a group with her finger, "come from a memo that is faxed to Mr. Watson on Friday. His secretary makes a xerox for me." She ran her finger down the page, "These come from bills which are sent here, and these are from bills which are sent to central purchasing."

She paused and looked at him making sure she hadn't lost him, "This is where it gets a bit tricky, because the bills we get here are for the prior month, but the bills to central purchasing run from the fifteenth of prior month and end on the fourteenth of the current month. They usually get

them on the twentieth or so, they are usually the last thing to go into the report because I don't get them until the third of the following month."

"Why don't you get them sooner?"

"I guess I could if I wanted to go all the way over there and dig through the paper myself, but that can take most of an afternoon, and I don't like to be away from my desk that long." She didn't add that that division was run by a woman who was called The Axe by everyone who had ever come into contact with her. Sarah made it a point to stay as far away from her as possible.

She waited for his next question, but it wasn't the one she was expecting, "It's almost noon, and I'm hungry. How about showing me a decent place to eat and we can talk about it there?"

Before she could think, she answered, "yes," and surprised herself. He seemed nice enough, and she didn't want to have to listen to a lecture from herself later on how she was afraid to have lunch with him.

Chapter 10

Going to lunch with a man was preferable to shopping for pantyhose. At least she was sure it was supposed to be. Actually she wasn't sure, not really. First, he was something of a dufus even if she couldn't afford to be picky - and she had the feeling that he wanted to talk about that stupid report. She studied the menu for much longer than was necessary, having decided on linguini with white sauce almost immediately. If she closed it and put it down then she'd be in the middle of one of those silences it seemed like she'd been in for all of her life. Finally the waiter came to take their orders, and she was forced to come out from hiding.

He spoke first, "So how long have you been working here?"

"Three years."

"That report must make your job hectic."

"Actually I used to look forward to it because it was a challenge, but it's become routine now. I'm glad when it's done because it makes me busier than I want to be for a few days."

He didn't come up with another question and when the silence seemed so heavy it was about to burst, she asked, "Your job must be interesting?"

"I guess, but it's got its drawbacks. The travel. I am beginning to hate the travel."

How could he hate traveling? Sarah had never really traveled unless you counted a few visits to her grandparent's home in Florida years ago. Sara, on the other hand, was considering going on tour for a couple of months, and if Sarah could work out the logistics of the models needed, she was going to do it.

"I'd like to travel, I would think it would be exciting."

"It was at first, but it's not as though you go to Paris. And the rooms in Holiday Inns all look the same. Some mornings I don't know where I am until I get up and buy a paper."

She saw something in his eyes that she saw in the mirror every morning. Before she could think about where it would lead she said, "it must be lonely."

His eyes brightened. He sat up a little straighter, "well it's not too bad. I do a lot of work in my room at night," then he stopped, "but there are lots of times when it gets really bad."

It was as though she had flipped a switch. The quiet shy man told her how hard it was going into offices where you didn't know anybody, where everyone you met was suspicious of you because they were sure you were out to replace them with a computer or at least were going to tell them how to do their jobs.

"One time I had just about finished a project when one guy said to me, 'it won't work, you know.' I asked, 'why,' and he said, because you forgot to include this and that.' Things that he had deliberately not told me."

He paused and took a sip of water, "Well, I wanted to kill him, it was going to mean rewriting two modules, 'how long have you known this,' I asked? He said, 'for about a month now.' Why didn't you tell me?' The man said, 'I just did. Besides I didn't want you to look too good.'"

Sarah nodded sympathetically, "That must have been hard."

He nodded, "Yeah, we went over budget, and I caught hell for it when I got back to headquarters. It taught me a lot though, when your boss was trying to explain the report to me I realized he didn't really understand it, that's why I asked him to have you come in. If I hadn't asked he would have tried to bluff it through."

When she'd asked him some more personal questions his guard had gone up and he had answered her questions minimally. He did not reciprocate. For that she was thankful, because she realized, she wasn't ready to tell anybody about herself either.

Back in the office they spent another hour chasing details, until he realized he had a meeting to go to. "How late do you work?"

"Five, why?"

"Ok I'll be back by then. I'd like to take you to dinner, you've kept me from making a lot of mistakes like I made on that project I told you about earlier." He smiled and left before she could come up with a reason to decline.

By the time he returned she had three excuses thought up, but just as she was about to use the first of them, she glimpsed that lonely look in his eyes, and, again, it was like looking in a mirror. The words died before they got to her throat.

He took her to a halfway fancy place and insisted on ordering a bottle of wine. "I never get to use my expense account the way it should be used, and, like I said, you saved me some real headaches." She was sipping at her wine when he said that, and she had to stifle a laugh.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It was just an association, the wine and the word headache."

He smiled, "So you are human, from the way your boss described you it sounded like you were half computer."

She must have frowned because he hurriedly added, "I'm sorry if I said something wrong."

"No, you didn't say anything wrong. It's just that you stepped into the middle of an intramural fight I've been having with myself."

She paused hoping he would nod and go on to something else, but he didn't. "You asked some questions at lunch, and I didn't really answer them. I guess it's because I don't think there is much interesting about me beyond what I do."

"At least that's interesting."

"Yeah, I suppose it is, but it's just that I'm never in one place long enough to do anything that takes more than a couple of weeks." When he said that Sarah realized why she would have trouble traveling, she wouldn't be able to have her town.

She took another sip of her wine and noticed that she had emptied the glass. She remembered the waiter had re filled it once, so this must be two, she was going to have to watch it. "So what do you do at night," she asked?

"When the project is further along I work on a computer in my room, but it's too early for that now. I was hoping you could tell me where there were interesting things to do."

"I don't get out much."

"A pretty girl like you? I would think you would."

"I'm not pretty."

"Not like those impossibly beautiful women in magazines maybe, but you are still pretty."

Of course this is coming from a nerdy man who, by his own admission, was lonely. Still, it was the first time a man had said that to her in a long time.

"I just don't feel comfortable going out alone."

"You're not seeing anybody?"

"No." She hoped she'd put the right tone on it to preclude further questions.

"It's hard isn't it? When you look around it seems like everybody else in the world is going out with somebody. Do you know this is the closest thing I've had to a date in three years?"

She couldn't admit the same was true for her. She nodded.

Thankfully he continued, "I just can't break through whatever it is that makes me feel like I'm an outsider all the time."

She felt as though he had touched her. The same shock she remembered when Jimmy Wilson had held her hand for the first time back in high school passed through her. It wasn't the intense cosmos clicking into place feeling Sara had experienced, but it was in that direction. She took a deep breath, "Sometimes I feel that way, I once saw a movie where a character said he must have played hooky the day they taught everybody how to get along with other people. I feel like that."

"That's one reason I work so hard," he said, "people respect me for that, and I don't have to bother with the other part of me. Sometimes I get on a computer network and play games with other people, but that's easy because you don't have to see them."

She responded, "I like it at work too. I know what's expected of me. I guess I stay at home so much because I can do the same kind of thing there." She realized she'd gone far enough, revealed enough, maybe too much, of herself. The conversation eased after that as they attacked their dinners.

The food was good, she was careful not to drink any more wine, she'd almost slipped and told him about her town - that scared her a little. He drove her home, but made no move to come in, much to her relief. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said, "and for the next three evenings I'm going to be tied up with the initial proposal, but I'd like to go out with you again on Friday."

A spontaneous invitation was one thing, this was going to be like a real date. The wine kept her from panicking and helped her say, "Yes, I enjoyed talking, I'd like that."

Chapter 11

It was easier to check on the day's developments than to think about the evening. She'd enjoyed herself, but some parts of it, especially the way she'd let her guard down, were kind of frightening.

The easiest thing to do was to call Marcie. she was based on a classmate in high school. The real Marcie had been a first-class gossip and snoop. She always knew everything, and then some. It was a useful device, she'd be able to tell Sarah what needed paying attention to.

"Well, first, there was the autopsy of that woman they found in the water. That proved she didn't drown, and they found that she'd been doing mega coke and that's why she had the heart attack. The detective in charge of the investigation is all hot and bothered about it, but the chief is trying to cool him down. He said, 'there's no murder. The girl died of an overdose. It's too bad, but the only one we know who broke the law is dead.'" The detective said that there was no way she could have walked into the water with that much drugs in her, he's pretty sure she died in Stewart's house, but he can't prove anything. So he's over at the Owl tavern drinking about how the rich have one set of laws and everybody else has another."

"He'd love to nail Stewart for something even if it was littering."

"Stewart, on the other hand, is doing pretty well. He called the girls' agent while they were giving him a massage that had to be seen to be believed, and everyone is very happy at the outcome. He's a little nervous about Greg who is still drinking like there is no tomorrow, but he's pretty sure he can keep him under control. Greg is drinking, partially over the dead woman, but as much as that, over the fact that he really blew it with Sara. It turns out he wasn't acting when they did that swan dive into each other's souls. It scares him, the last time it happened he got married."

"He's married?"

"Not for long. He alternates from being angry at Sara for not understanding how things really are - to being pissed at himself for letting himself look like a toady."

"It turns out that the girl was at the party because she was delivering the coke. It seems like she kept a little more than normal for herself and Stewart is thinking about trying to get some money back from the dealer, or at least some of the coke replaced."

"What about Sara?"

"Let's see, on Sunday Sara didn't get up until two and then she started drinking about five. She passed out at eight and woke at six this morning feeling real bad. She took some pills and felt better physically, but she started drinking at three and is trying to write some sad love songs.

'WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME? HOW MANY JERKS CAN I FIND TO FALL IN LOVE WITH? and HE LOOKED LIKE A PRINCE BUT WHEN WE KISSED HE TURNED INTO A TOAD.'" The trouble is she isn't a country singer, but you never know."

Sarah briefly considered developing some new action, but decided against it as she wanted to be wide awake for work tomorrow.

Chapter 12

She'd seen Jonathan only in passing as he scurried from one set of meetings to another. He'd called twice, but both times he wanted to speak to her boss, and she was beginning to think that he'd forgotten the date they'd made for Friday.

At home she'd tried to incorporate him into her world, but he didn't fit. At least not where she wanted him. Stewart's neighbor, Randolph, had made his money in computers and it was easy to have him come to install some new widget or other, but he just didn't fit in with the suntanned lean crowd that lived along the beach. He had to arrive via the beach so that Sara could have a chance to meet him on the rebound when she would be vulnerable. Of course he didn't have to be a computer person, After all, Sara wasn't a secretary, but she didn't know what else to make him. At least she'd sung in the church choir, and for a while had been a soloist. She'd given that up when her mother had her stroke, but there was some carryover between Sarah and Sara. Sara was a might have been, making John, she didn't like Jonathan much, something else just didn't fit.

Well, it didn't matter much, details like that had a way of resolving themselves. She let Sara feel sorry for herself, which was pretty close to how she felt, because something as simple as a date was showing her how out of whack her real life was. She concentrated on the police detective who was trying to figure out a way to bust Stewart.

He'd learned to keep his ambitions to himself when he'd noticed a picture in the Chief's office showing the Chief and Stewart standing together on the deck at Stewart's house.

He'd interviewed many of the guests at the party, and was going to have to declare the case closed, "death by misfortune", if he didn't get something soon.

He turned up Hillside Road and pulled into the apartment complex. This woman Sara Bloom had been there, but was reported to have left early. She was a singer, he remembered seeing her years before in some joint down by the river. She must have made it, he thought as he surveyed the BMW's in the lot, and, he thought, to have been invited to that party. He tossed the police identification card onto the dashboard hoping it would prevent the

private security jerks from putting a "You are Parked illegally" sticker on his car.

Though it didn't seem all that different from the apartment complex where he lived, there were a lot of little signs that told him that he couldn't afford to live here. After the tennis courts, the big one was the closed circuit tv intercom, so that the tenants could decide if their guests were tastefully enough dressed before they buzzed them in.

He must have passed the test, or maybe she was one of the last few people in America who had respect for a badge. When she opened the door he thought that she looked sick, and he noticed, she seemed nervous. Still, she had no problem inviting him in. Of course people in this place didn't want the neighbors to know they were being interviewed by the police.

"What can I do for you?"

"You were at a party on Saturday at Stewart Gardener's house?"

"Yes." He couldn't be sure but he thought he saw her go a little more pale.

"You arrived about eight and the parking attendants said they thought you left about eleven, is that right?"

"Yes, I guess so, why?"

He ignored her question, "Did you see anything unusual at the party?"

She put on a brave smile, it was strange for Sarah to be playing seeing Sara through the eyes of another character, but it was interesting. "No, I don't think so. It was a party and was a little wild I guess." Then her eyes got a little wider, "are you here about that poor woman who they found?"

He nodded, "Yes, one Karen Coffee. Did you happen to see her at the party?"

Sara shook her head.

"Not even once?"

She swallowed, "to tell the truth I didn't really stay at the party. I spent most of the evening on the beach." He watched as she realized the implication of what she'd said.

"Oh really, I'm most interested in what happened on the beach. When did you leave the house and go to the beach?"

She flushed a little, "Almost immediately. Stewart introduced me to a man, and we went out on the deck and watched the sunset and then decided to go for a walk. It was real dark out there and we didn't see anybody else."

He was sure there was a lot more to the story, but his hunch was it was just making whoopee on the beach and he let it slide. "When did you return to the party?"

"I didn't really, I.. I guess you might say I had an argument with the man and I walked around the house, got my car and drove home."

He wondered what kind of argument would make her do that. "So you went to this party, met a man and never went back? Ok, can you tell me anything else, like was the ocean rough? Could the victim have been killed when she went into the water?"

She paused before answering, "Well it was a little rough, but if you were a good swimmer it would have been ok, I guess - is that what happened?"

"I don't know, that's what I'm trying to figure out. There is evidence that she was doing drugs, and she was found in the water, but she didn't drown."

"Didn't drown? Then how did she die?"

"Heart attack. Coke is bad for the ticker."

"Oh, I guess I knew that."

She had more to tell him but he couldn't figure out how to get her to do so, "What was the name of the man you were with on the beach?"

Anger flashed in her eyes, "Greg Lawler."

He thought quickly, that was the guy who had stayed the night and in the morning was having his corn flakes with scotch, except he was going light on the corn flakes. "Was he with you the entire time on the beach?"

He'd learned to tell the difference between when a witness was recalling events, and when they were thinking very quickly trying to foresee the results of their next answer. She was doing that. He let her. If she told him enough of a lie he might be able to get inside her armor. "We were together almost all the time, I mean he went of behind a dune to, you know,

"

"What about after you left, was he headed back to the party?"

"Yes, I think so, but I wasn't paying much attention. I was pretty angry."

"What was that about?"

She looked startled for only a part of a moment, "He just didn't turn out to be the kind of man I had thought he was."

Good answer he thought, that could mean anything. He started to get up, then he stopped. "Listen, he said,"you seem like a nice enough person, and there's something about this that is bothering me a lot. He paused for a second and she nodded, "Well the thing about this case that gets me is that everyone is acting like this woman didn't mean anything. I haven't met anyone who said they were all broke up over it - in fact some of them are reacting like it was a piece of disagreeable litter that washed up. Is that

crowd really that callous that they treat people like they were disposable items? Use em once and throw em away?" He really didn't expect an answer to his question, he was just venting his frustrations, but, as he watched, her face seemed to dissolve, and she started to cry. What's this, he thought, and decided to give her a minute.

She sniffled loudly, then nodded. "It seems that way, I didn't know her, but still it's sad."

His hopes dropped, he'd thought she was going to tell him something, then she blew her nose. "I didn't have anything to do with it." Her eyes frantically searched his face looking for reassurance. He gave her a little smile and nodded, "Go on."

"Well it was like I said. I was on the beach with Greg, the and we went swimming, but when we came out we couldn't find our clothes, so we went back to the house to get a flashlight, but we couldn't exactly walk into the living room could we? So we went around the side and into a bedroom there." Sara paused and took a deep breath, "She was lying there on the bed, and at first I thought she was asleep. While Greg went into the bathroom to get a couple of towels, I was looking at her and realized she didn't seem to be breathing. I told Greg that we had to call the police, but he said it would only mean trouble, and he talked me into going back outside. He went into the kitchen then and got a flashlight, we found our clothes, I got dressed and came home."

She sniffled loudly and took in a deep breath. "It really upset me, he treated the whole thing like she'd made a really big social error by dying at the party. He said he'd get in trouble because of something that had happened out on the coast and the cops would suspect him if he was the one who found her, and the tabloids would kill his career."

BINGO. "About what time was this?"

"I don't know, I wasn't wearing my watch. We'd been on the beach a while, and after that it didn't take long to find my clothes and go home so I guess it was about ten thirty, but I can't say for sure."

So that's what the fight was about. That's why she looked as though she hadn't been sleeping well. "What did he say about this woman?"

"He said she ran with a pretty rough crowd, that she'd been in his car and they'd been stopped and the cops had found some coke. It was hers, but he was arrested and was put on probation. He said she was bad news." She looked scared now, "You're not going to arrest me are you?"

He wondered how to play this. He had her if he wanted her. Technically a person who discovers a body is required to report it, but if he arrested her, she'd get a lawyer and would never be heard from again. The

ones he wanted were the persons who'd dumped her in the ocean hoping she'd float away. It also made him wonder if there was something he'd overlooked, some other piece to the puzzle.

"No I don't think so. You broke the law by not calling us, but your cooperation is going to make up for that. Do you have any idea what happened afterwards, how her body got into the ocean?"

She shook her head, "I think Greg just didn't want to be the one to find her. I don't think he'd do something like that. All he wanted to do was get out of that room."

He nodded and got up. He needed to find Greg, the first time he'd questioned him he hadn't paid him much mind because he was drunk, and had claimed to have been drunk at the party and not able to remember much. He got to his feet. "I want to thank you for being honest with me. I don't know where this is going to go, but it relieves me that somebody thought of her death as more than a nuisance."

He let her lead him to the door. She put her hand on the knob, but before she opened it she turned to him, "I know this is going to sound funny, but can you keep my name from the papers? I mean I just have gotten my career going, and I don't need to be on the front page of the Enquirer with a headline like 'Nude singer finds nude corpse and loses her voice?'"

He nodded, "I see your problem. You used to sing around here didn't you?"

She nodded, "I think I must have sung at every dive in this city at one time or another."

"I think I heard you once or twice a few years ago, down at Mooney's near the river. You were good, better than anybody they've had since."

She nodded, "Thanks, it's been a long road."

He smiled, "I'll see what I can do. Between you and me I don't think this will go anywhere. Stewart has got a lot of juice, and it's not as though you saw anyone move the body."

She turned the knob and he left, wondering where he should go next. Greg was the man who needed talking to, but while she was telling him the story he had started wondering who at the party had been with the victim. He suspected the two twinkies who had been hanging around with Stewart had been dipping their sculptured noses in coke at the party, and he was pretty sure they might more about mystery corpse.

He decided to risk the chief's displeasure and run out to the house one last time. What he needed was numbers where he could reach Greg and the two twinkies. What he wanted to do was see if Stewart was still putting up

such a good front, and if he got lucky, one of those people would still be hanging around.

Sarah got up and put a dinner in the microwave, she was pretty proud of Sara for having had the guts to tell him what was going on. It would help her get out of the rut she was in, and, besides, she kind of liked him, even if he was a bit frayed around the edges. While the microwave hummed she wondered if there could be anything more sinister about the death. Could the Coke have been poisoned? No. if that was so, half the party would be dead. She stored that one away, that was a possible plot she could use sometime in the future.

Was it worth the effort, Sarah wondered? She could have further results of the autopsy reveal something that would make it seem like she was murdered, but then things might get really hairy for Sara. She didn't like the idea of there being a murderer in the crowd she hung around with. The microwave chirped and announced its work was done. She removed the dinner and tried to work up some enthusiasm towards the food steaming on the plastic tray.

It wouldn't be bad to have the detective frustrated by this one. She'd already started building some sinister sides to Stewart's character. Power, sex and cocaine were a pretty good mixture. There could be blackmail, or maybe he could be involved with people who catered to perversions, maybe he could be getting willing girls for some sickos and maybe he could be a customer, when only the wildest fantasies would satisfy him.

"Yes, that would be good." After his failure the other night, he knew he needed a woman he could really hurt. He needed to be able to reduce her to a whimpering creature, but one who could never come back to him later, like those two could have.

Well, all that could wait, she needed to finish this little scenario first. She took her dinner into the room and settled onto her stool.

The detective walked up to the door of the beach house and rang the bell. While he waited he rehearsed his bluff. He was a little surprised when Stewart opened the door himself. He didn't expect a maid, but maybe a house boy or some hanger on. "Well, detective, what brings you here?"

"Mr. Gardener, I'm trying to tie up some loose ends, and I was wondering if you could give me a number where I could reach," He pulled out his notebook and flipped a couple of pages. He knew the names, but he wanted Stewart to see that he had a fairly large set of notes, "The two girls, Melissa Fleck and Randi Robinson, and."

Stewart cut him off, "You looking for a hot evening, let me tell you those two will set your shorthairs on fire."

He had to work at not losing it. Instead, showing his anger by saying, "No I'm not interested in joining the disease of the month club. I want to ask them some questions, and I'll also need the number for Greg Lawler."

He was glad to see the barb hit home. He was sure Stewart had some friends who had AIDS, and he had to have a fear of it somewhere inside his libido driven self.

"Of course, come in Detective, I'll get the numbers for you." He turned and led him into his office which was set off the side deck where the hot tub shimmered in the sun.

When he had handed the detective the numbers, Roy paused, then asked, "I'm wondering about a couple of other things too." He flipped through his notes, "One witness reported that he'd seen the victim in a ground floor bedroom. I was under the impression that the bedrooms were all upstairs."

Stewart paused slightly before answering, "Well, there is one ground floor bedroom on the other side of the house where I sometimes put overflow quests. Who saw her in there?"

Roy didn't answer, "Could I see the room please?"

"Certainly, but can I ask why? I've told you everything."

Roy said, "I'm trying to draw up a timetable of her activities that evening. I want to see if she could have left that room and gone to the beach without anybody having seen her."

"I told you she told me she was going for a walk on the beach."

"Yes, but you didn't tell me you saw her leave. Most of the other people at the party don't even remember seeing her, and no one has said, 'I saw her walk down to the beach.' I find that a little strange."

"Well there's a simple answer to that, come I'll show you." Stewart led Roy around the screening room and down the hall to the bedroom. "You see, there's a deck outside and she could have gone to the beach without going through the rest of the house."

Roy took a long look at the bed, trying to imagine how the woman must have looked. He held his look there for a few seconds, trying to plant a little seed of concern in Stewart's mind. Stewart walked by him and slid open the glass door, "See, there are steps that lead down to a path to the beach."

"Do you know if this room has been cleaned since the party?"

"I imagine it has been. I had a crew in the next day if you remember."

Roy nodded, "Do you know if they found anything she might have left behind here? You see, we found her naked, but haven't been able to find any of her clothes or her purse on the beach." He stooped and looked under the

bed, there was nothing there. "What I'm thinking is that it's possible that she decided to leave her clothes here before going for that final swim. I've done a bit of night time swimming myself and I know how hard it can be to find my clothes later. Besides, why would she take her purse if she was going down to the beach?"

Stewart took a second, but answered, "She smoked, she probably wanted to take her cigarettes with her."

"And her drugs."

Stewart nodded, "and her drugs too, very possibly. I'll ask the housekeeper if anything was found here. And feel free to look through our lost and found box. You'd be surprised at the things people leave behind."

"I'd like to do that," Roy walked out onto the deck and took a look at the path leading along side the house towards the beach.

He knew he'd found the means by which the corpse had walked from the bedroom to her final resting place. When he came back inside, he noticed the bathroom, "Mind if I use the John?" He walked in and shut the door before Stewart could answer.

Inside he took a quick look around and, on an impulse, took a look inside the toilet tank. Taped to the top of the tank was a plastic bag which he guessed had to contain two ounces of coke. "Oh my oh my," he said, knowing there was nothing he could do about it. He had no warrant. If it had been in plain sight he could have slapped the cuffs on the pompous ass, but no court in the world would accept a contention that he had just happened to see the bag. He needed some time to think, he made loud a farting sound with his lips, "Mr Gardener, I'm afraid my Mexican lunch has caught up with me I'll be a little while."

Stewart's voice sounded a touch nervous when it answered, "Very well, I'll be in my office, I'm expecting a phone call."

He'll be on the phone all right, to his lawyer, thought Roy as he poked at the bag. He had a couple of options, as he saw it. He could remove it and place it in a spot where he could claim to have seen it. That was illegal, and risky, especially if he was up against the kind of legal talent this guy was sure to have.

He could poke a hole in the bag and let the moisture in the tank get into the precious powder, but that seemed both petty and might not do anything much to the dope. He wondered whose fingerprints would be on the bag. He could take it with him, but it would lose all value as evidence if he did that. Besides, it might lay him open to charges of theft and corruption if it came out. What a stupid hiding place, he'd given Stewart more credit than that. Maybe it wasn't his, maybe the victim had left something behind

after all. Suddenly he had an idea, he reached inside the tank and pulled the little chain off of the flush lever.

He could say he'd tried to flush the toilet, it hadn't worked, he'd opened it up to do it from inside, and look what I found. Yes that would work. It wouldn't work as a bust, but it would do for being able to confront Stewart with the evidence. If he denied it was his, as he would, Roy would be able to take it in. Then he could dust it for fingerprints.

Just in case Stewart had decided to wait in the room for him he went through a charade of trying to flush the toilet, lifted the top so that it clinked, flushed the toilet and said, "oops."

It turned out that he didn't need to go to all the trouble. Stewart was in his office, but the look on his face when he saw Roy walk in with the tank lid in his hands, was worth all the trouble. "I'll call you back," he said as he hung up the phone. "What's going on?"

Roy had decided to play it a bit tough. "I might ask the same question, The damned toilet wouldn't flush so I had to lift the top to pull up on the chain, and I found this." He turned the lid around so that Stewart could see the bag which was taped there. If he had to guess, it would be that Stewart hadn't known about this stash. His eyes widened, but in surprise, not fear. "What are you trying to pull, detective?"

"I'm not trying to pull anything, except that little metal chain that opens the flapper at the bottom of the toilet tank. What I found, in your house, is what I would guess to be a couple ounces of Coke."

"You don't have a warrant."

"That's true."

"You can't search without a warrant."

"That is true also, but you did invite me in, and in the course of my visit I did happen to find this little darling. Now I don't guarantee that a judge won't rule that I performing plumbing without a license, but you never know."

Stewart reached for the phone, "Before you call and everything gets official, why don't we have a little chat which each of us can deny later if it comes to that."

Stewart stopped his hand half way to the phone. He looked at the detective as he tried to decide what the detective wanted. A bribe? Or what?

"Ok I'll listen, and then I'll reconsider the call."

"Ok." Roy put the tank top down on a table. "Let's call this an unfortunate coincidence. Now for starters, there's enough dope here for a heavy felony. And even if it gets thrown out of court it will make more than a couple of ounces of trouble for you. It will get in the papers, and I'll bet

your lawyers charge a fair amount for court time." He paused, Stewart said nothing, he wasn't dumb enough to offer a bribe, at least not before one was asked for. Roy spoke again, the tape in his little recorder only ran for thirty minutes. "I happen to have a hunch that if we took prints on this bag we wouldn't find yours among them. You don't look like the type to hide a stash under a toilet tank lid, but you know what I would bet? I'd bet that we would find fingerprints of the dearly departed all over the bag and tape."

Stewart look relieved at that. He started to speak, but Roy held up his hand, "Let me say a couple of things more, ok"

Stewart nodded.

"Ok, you have to understand a couple of things. I'm a local cop. I'm concerned that this drug is in our community, but I'm not worried that you are out in school yards selling it to my neighbor's kids. Anyway, that's for the narcs to worry about. What worries me is the mysterious death of that woman who washed up on your neighbor's beach. I'm in homicide, and I take a lot of pride in making sure my cases are ready to be closed before they go in the file."

Stewart began to look worried again, good, he thought. "So I guess what I'm saying is that there are several ways of looking at this evidence," he emphasized the word, "and that the way I would like to look at it is to see if there is any connection with the dead woman's death, and to see if it makes the picture any clearer." He paused and let Stewart see the rope he was throwing him. "Now I know the woman was in that room. I also know she died in that room." Stewart went a bit paler, his hand twitched towards the phone. "You want to make a call? Go ahead, I'm almost done."

Stewart let the hand fall back onto the desk. "Now, I'm not going to pretend you don't have a lot of juice, but this is going to be messy one way or another. The chief may have been to one of your parties, or maybe you had him over for hot dogs and burgers one afternoon, but there's a district attorney who's looking to get his name in the papers. Think he wants to be a Senator some day - I could see him trying to seize this place under the federal drug laws. But all I want to know is how that woman died, and how a dead woman took a walk on a beach before going swimming."

He had one more piece of evidence, and he wondered how to play it, but mindful of the tape that was running in his pocket he decided to be forthright. "One last thing, there is a possibility that the woman was murdered. If you were involved in that in any way you might be better off standing up to the drug charge and fighting it in court."

"Murdered? I thought she died of an overdose."

"That she did, but there was something kind of strange about it. You see a lot of snow had been sucked up her nose in her short life, the medical examiner said it would have been hard for her to have snorted enough to kill her. He said the inside of her nose looked as though a shotgun had hit it. Then he turned her over and found traces of coke in her anus - traces of a whole lot of it. Any port in a storm I guess - anyway that leaves us with the possibility that someone gave her enough to pass out and then when she was unconscious, or didn't care, they turned her over and gave her what it took to kill her. Right now I'm only speculating, and I shouldn't be doing that with a suspect in the case, but then again I'm just a hick cop from a small city and what do I know?" He smiled, "your turn."

Stewart picked up the phone, looked over at the lid sitting on the table, put down the phone, and said, "You're no hick cop."

He took a deep breath then said, "you said early on if I call my lawyer it becomes official, what does that mean?"

"It means the lawyer would want to talk to me. I'd take the phone and he'd ask me why I'm talking to you, and I'd tell him I am investigating a suspected homicide, and had found some dope - some dope which might have the killer's fingerprints on it. Then I'd tell him I was taking you in for questioning, but would not do so until he arrived."

"By the time he got there I'd know a lot more. I'd know if she had touched this dope. I'd maybe know if anyone else had. I'd have a team in here taking all sorts of fingerprints off of the toilet, and the room. I know the woman had a history with dope, I would find out more about her and maybe about her connections. Then I could start looking for possible motives. Who knows where it might lead? I will say this though. If you call your lawyer and you listen to him you will probably tell me nothing. That will force me to do some checking on you too. Again, who knows where that might lead? Now if I were to find only her prints on the bag I might feel that, as disgusting as it seems she poked the dope up her own butt. If there are others I'll check them out. I guess what it boils down to is - are your fingerprints going to be found on that bag and or on the toilet?"

Stewart was actually trembling slightly. Roy told himself he was not a nice person for enjoying it so much. But then again being a detective meant not having to be a nice person.

Sarah was enjoying this too. She thought about having a glass of wine, but decided against it, if only as penance for her excess on the weekend.

"What if I made a deal? What if I told you everything I know, and maybe it involved just the last part of the mystery, what would happen?"

"You mean how a dead woman decided to go for a swim?"

Stewart nodded. Roy shot back, "If it turns out that she was murdered, it would look like you were trying to conceal evidence. It would take a lot of cooperation to get me to believe that you were not an accessory after the fact, if not involved. If it turns out that there is no proof of foul play, moving a corpse is a felony, but it's a lot less serious than possession of a wholesale amount of cocaine, and I suspect you have enough juice in this community to get it hushed up pretty quiet." He spread his hands, "it's your choice, and it depends on whether or not you think we'll find your finger prints on the dope."

Stewart nodded. "God what a mess."

Roy waited.

"You won't find my finger prints on that dope. I've never seen it before, I did not know it was there. If I had known it was there do you think I would have let you use the bathroom?" "Look, you've got to believe me. I did not kill her. I don't think anybody did, but if someone did I want them to be caught. What I don't want is for this to become a circus, with the fucking press camped out on my lawn."

He paused, "I'll tell you this too, you're a good cop. But I know you don't like me, and that's ok by me, but I don't trust you. I don't think you have the power to make deals like you're saying, so what I think I'd like to suggest is that I call the Chief and ask him to drop by. I think it's only fair to tell you I've been recording this conversation, we'll let him hear it and see what he thinks." He paused and held the detectives eye with his gaze, "how does that sound to you?"

Son of a bitch. No wonder this guy's a big shot, he knows how to operate under pressure. Roy was sure it would not endear him to the Chief, but he hadn't broken any laws, unless you counted the vandalism to the toilet. "Ok, if that's the way you want to play your hand. But I suspect the Chief is going to tell you to call your lawyer. The lawyer is going to listen to the tape and scream, then he's going to tell you that it's your civic duty to assist the police in their investigation. And the tape becomes evidence." He paused, "it's a good move though. Getting the chief involved will probably keep me from calling for a car to take you downtown for our chat. It gives you the home court advantage, of course I may have to go to the bathroom again before we're done." He smiled as he said that.

To his surprise so did Stewart, "Don't think this is a bribe, but when you get your twenty years in and think about retiring, give me a call, I could use someone with your balls on my staff." He looked in his book for a number then called the Chief.

Chapter 13

The chief arrived first, the lawyer was going to have locate his copter pilot and would be at least an hour. While they waited Stewart played the tape for the chief, who cast some pretty cold glances at Roy as he listened. When it ended the Chief said, "I'd like to speak to my detective alone, could we use your office?"

Stewart, the gracious host, gestured in its direction, "Be my guest."

Roy tightened his gut, when he listened to the tape he realized he'd played pretty fast and loose with rules of evidence, department policy, and the whole Miranda business. Still he felt pretty good, he had a bag of dope, and some leads where there had been none. "Do you have a burning desire to take a pay cut and write parking tickets on the night shift?"

Roy shook his head. "Do you know what it means when I personally tell you to treat Mr. Gardener with respect? Do you know how close you have come to losing you badge?"

Roy began to get pissed, he told himself to cool it. The chief was ignoring a dead woman, he was ignoring two ounces of drugs. "I was under a deadline to get this case finished. I was up against a stone wall of denial, what was I supposed to do, leave the drugs there, tell the man he had a problem with his plumbing and leave?"

The chief blinked, "You should have called me, immediately. You should have let me handle it. You have a lot to learn about tact."

Roy had the sense to keep his mouth shut. The chief relaxed a little. "I'll admit there was some pretty good police work going on, but if this man was a serious suspect in a murder you might have completely compromised any case we could ever build against him."

Roy nodded, it was time to remind the Chief he was a street cop, a good one. "What the tapes can't show is his reaction when I walked in with the top of the toilet. My gut told me that it wasn't his dope. His eyes told me he had no idea why I was walking around with a piece of a toilet under my arm. When I turned it around so he could see the dope, he looked scared and surprised, but not terrified the way he would have if he was involved with it. I know I stretched some procedures, but if I hadn't done it he would have just bid me good night and I'd be running the risk of having a killer running around.

"Are you sure it was a murder?"

"I'm not sure, but I have the feeling that girl had help. Maybe it was like that actor out in Hollywood, the one on Saturday Night Live, and she

asked some one to help her get off. But there's another possibility too - some of these folks play with a pretty rough crowd."

The chief sighed, and leaned back in Stewart's chair, trying not to look like he was trying it on for size. "It's going to be a tough one to prove."

"It might have been easier if someone hadn't taken the corpse for a swim."

The chief nodded, "is there any way you can do this without opening up a real big can of worms. Can we keep this quiet?"

"I've got no idea where this is going to lead. Like I said on the tape, I'm interested in a possible murder, not the coke styles of the rich and famous."

Despite himself the chief smiled at that, "Ok, I guess we've got no choice, but I want it understood that you can't treat these people like you would some nickel and dime hoods."

Roy nodded, "Understood."

The chief stood and moved towards the door. "Mr. Gardener's attorney is going to do some heavy screaming, I'm going to want you to keep quiet, unless I give you the go ahead. I'm going to paint you as the cop I'm straining to keep under control. By the way, exactly what do you think he did?"

"I think he helped move the body. The party is in his house. He's got to know about it. I don't think he actually carried her to the beach, but I'm sure he was there. What I want is a bag full of leads that I can use. He was cavorting with a couple of silicone enhanced starlets that night. I'll bet they knew the victim, maybe even were partying with her. I think they can tell us something. I also think he knows more about the victim than he's saying. It's a hunch, but I'll bet she was the one who delivered the coke for the party."

"But you said the dope wasn't his."

"I think he paid for it, but I think she was keeping it back."

"What about immunity?"

"That part gets tricky, like I said on the tape that slick bastard in the D.A.'s office would love to get elected to something on the publicity this could give him. I don't want to bring him in until I absolutely have to."

"We agree on something. I don't trust that son of a bitch either, you got any ideas?"

Roy nodded, "I do, but it's street cop stuff."

"Let me hear it."

"I happen to know he's going to a convention on Tuesday, and then he's going to take a couple of weeks vacation. I figure that might give us a

window when we could go to someone else in the office. There will be hell to pay when he comes back, but I was hoping we might have things sewn up by then."

"How do you know about his plans?"

"I was in court on a case and I heard him tell a judge why he needed a postponement. There's another angle, we can present the case so it's either too hot or not interesting enough for him. I haven't figured that one out yet."

The chief nodded, "I'm glad you're on our side."

Chapter 14

The attorney dressed sharp, acted sharp, and immediately took Stewart off to the office for a conference. Sarah had it already plotted out, the lawyer was going to listen to the tape, figure out Stewart's vulnerability, and then was going to urge him to cooperate. "The first one to the trough cuts the best deal. Between a little bit of bargaining and the questionable tactics of the police, I'd guess that we can just about keep you out of it. The thing is, like the cop said, you tell a lie now and they'll hit you like a ton of bricks. What he said about you having juice is true - to an extent, but the flipside is that if they get you for something the old saying about the bigger they are the harder they fall. You don't have to go to jail to be ruined."

Sarah cut to the chase. Stewart admitted that the victim might have been the one who brought the coke to the party. He told them that she had a boyfriend, who he had heard, was a dope dealer. He had no problems with this man himself, but he'd heard stories that others had. He said he'd also heard that the man was having difficulty with the woman. Roy didn't like it - it was too simple. Then Stewart told them how he'd been told about the body and that it had been moved from the bedroom to the beach. They didn't ask for any names just then. He was reluctant to link the starlets and the victim, and Roy figured there was a separate sub-plot going on there. Roy also told them that he'd heard rumors that Greg had an affair once with the woman, and that it was possible that she was blackmailing him.

Sarah hit the fast forward button and jumped to Roy's meeting with the silaonized starlets who, at first, denied knowing anything. He had to work at now being awed by their beauty at not letting his eyes drift from their faces to the cleavage they displayed and admitting they weren't nearly as dumb as he would have imagined. They'd been at the party, but they claimed to have been so drunk they couldn't remember anything. Then they tried to seduce Roy, who resisted temptation by thinking of his disease of the month club line.

Then he told them that if he didn't solve the case Stewart was going to take a fall, and with him all their ambitions. That struck a chord, their faces fell faster than a bad facelift, and they practically fought for the opportunity to heap him with gossip, innuendo, and occasional tidbits of tantalizing truth. He learned more about Stewart's sexual preferences than he needed to simply because he had the feeling that the information might come in handy some day.

They confirmed that the victim had claimed to have brought the drugs, and that she was bragging about making the big score. Yes they'd seen her do some lines, but up her nose. They claimed they hadn't been in the room from the time they first got high until they found the body about eleven.

Roy knew enough about coke not to believe that, but he needed a wedge, and he decided it was time to play his hand. He opened his briefcase and pulled out a couple of blank finger print cards. "Now don't be alarmed, but I'm going to have to have your finger prints for comparison with prints that we found at the murder scene." This was the first time he'd used that word, and its effect was immediate.

"Murder, you mean somebody killed her?"

"We think so. We are going to be looking very closely at everyone who was in that room."

They stood and looked at each other in disbelief. Then the blonde said, "Listen, we didn't have anything to do with it."

Roy shot back, "of course you did, you stood there and let people move the victim of a crime in an attempt to hide evidence of the crime. That makes you accessories. It doesn't matter if you knew about the murder or not."

The redhead got up and poured herself a stiff drink. "Ok suppose we did see something, what would happen to us?"

Roy didn't answer, he concentrated on preparing the ink for the fingerprints.

"We did see something once, we were out on the deck smoking a little reefer when somebody came into the room and started getting it on with her. They got going pretty hot and heavy and then she gave off a scream like she was coming, you know. After a while he climbed off of her, got dressed, and left. We waited a minute, then we figured she was asleep, so we snuck back through the room and went back to the party."

"Who was it?"

"I think his name's Dave, he's a director."

The blonde said, "no it was a guy named Greg. I know because he was trying to come on to me, and I was interested until he told me that he

liked his sex in the back door. I said I didn't do that and he said he had a way that it wouldn't hurt. I told him to fuck off."

"How did he do it with the victim."

"That way."

"Describe it to me."

He was amazed to see her blush, he didn't think it was possible. "Well she was pretty zoned out, but he got her onto her hands and knees, then he did it to her doggie style."

"Exactly what did you see? I want to know everything."

"What are you some kind of freak who gets off on hearing about it?"

"Look, I can't tell you now, but I need to have you tell me everything that they did or happened while they were in the room."

"Well the door opens kind of slowly, and she's lying on the bed. I think she'd already done at least one other guy, so she was naked. She wakes up a little when he comes in. I heard him say, 'I've got a little surprise for you. Something I think you'll like.'

"She had a little trouble getting on her knees, then he put on a rubber and went inside her."

"He wore a rubber?"

"I think so, he was doing something with his cock, then he reached in a jar, I figured he was greasing her up. I remember watching thinking that it could be happening to me, and being glad that it wasn't.

"You saw him put something inside her?"

"Yeah, she kind of grunted, then he slammed into her. Whatever it was that he had must have worked because she didn't scream, not until a minute later. If it had been me I would have screamed right then."

He turned to the other woman, "is this what you saw?"

"I wasn't watching so carefully. I've seen it before."

"With this guy?"

"Yeah, it's what he calls his patented fuck. He puts some coke up you so you don't feel nothing, then he comes inside you as you go on this real heavy rush. He sweet talked me into it once, I hope you nail his ass."

Roy shook his head, Jesus, he thought he'd heard everything. But something didn't make sense Sara had said she was with Greg out on the beach, and it's tough to be in two places at once let alone be making love to two women at the same time in different places.

"What time was this?"

"Oh it was pretty early, I remember when we went back into the living room we were still had all our clothes on. And people were just starting to come in."

"Did you see Greg there?"

"Yeah, he was with Stewart, then he went off with the singer when she came in."

This guy had to be something else, he fucks one woman to death, then he goes off and makes it with another out on the beach. He ends the evening by dumping the first into the ocean, and then he gets drunk. No wonder Sara described him as being so spooked when she told him that the bimbo was dead.

Sarah looked at her watch it was, a quarter past ten, that was a pretty good ending. Sara had really walked close to the wild side on that one, but she'd escaped relatively unscathed.

She'd leave what would happen next til tomorrow. Roy was going to love telling the chief this one. He wasn't going to be able to prove premeditation, unless he found a real good motive, and even then, he doubted any jury would buy it. Manslaughter was definitely in the running. She laughed as she imagined how the papers would play this one up. They'd be hard pressed to find euphemisms yet still not lose the headlines that would sell papers as fast as they could print them.

Chapter 15

On Thursday Sarah concentrated in being in the real world. She was afraid that she would let her fantasy world slip out and that Jon would laugh at her or think that she was childish for having all these fantasies. Being childish had been her mother's most often used put down. It had implied unintelligent, immature, and lacking in whatever it took to be a real person. She could remember three separate occasions in her childhood when she had come home to find that her mother had thrown out her doll collections. Each time she'd been devastated, but had secretly rebuilt it - switching to smaller, easier to conceal dolls. On more than one occasion her mother had very nearly caught her playing with the dolls, but she'd managed to hide the fact.

Her mother had said a thousand times, "If you keep on playing with dolls you won't ever learn how to get along with people." Sometimes she thought her mother might have been right. She could make the dolls, and now her imaginary people, do pretty much what she wanted them to do. If one of them misbehaved or hurt her she could see to it that his wagon got fixed but good. That was what she was planning for Greg.

In real life Sarah had never done well with men. Her mother was right about one thing, they only wanted one thing. And since she was hardly glamorous, or in with the right, crowd the ones who had come her way had

tended to be a rather motley lot. It was men like Greg, tanned, self assured to the point of conceit, and seemingly unable to make mistakes in life that really made her angry. She didn't know why, probably it was the attitude they had. In any case, she decided it was going to be fun watching Greg get raked over the coals and probably ruined. Actually, now that she thought about it, it had a lot to do with sex. The first time she'd ever seen an erect penis it had scared her. That a man got to dominate women with what they referred to as their tools, while women had to lie back and accept it, even though it hurt, was just so unfair. That's why she liked to find a way into the fantasies for a woman to be able to dominate the man. The district attorney who try the case would be a woman. Maybe the judge would be a woman, and on the jury there would be at least three women who had been abused by their husbands. Greg was going to twist in the wind, and in prison his good looks were going to get him into a lot of places he wouldn't want to be in.

She caught herself, she was doing it again, she was thinking about her world rather than the real world. Besides she had real world things to decide. Would she, for instance, buy a new dress for tomorrow? The first real date in a couple of years seemed to demand that much, but she didn't want to go overboard, and since they were going out after work, she didn't want to spend an embarrassing day having to respond to people commenting on the dress and asking if she had a hot date. Maybe she should have Jon pick her up at home, but then she rejected that, that would make him wait until late because she'd have to take the bus.

She couldn't ask him to drive her home so that she could change because she couldn't have him wait in the car while she ran upstairs to change. No, she decided, she'd have to get something that was conservative enough not to be noticed at the office, anyway what was she thinking about anyway? She wasn't all that interested in this guy who was as lonely and socially inept as she.

During her lunch hour she'd found a nice dress, it was cut so that it made her figure stand out more than she was used to, but it was still conservative. It cost more than she had planned on spending, but she didn't want to have to try again after work so she bought it.

She spent the afternoon regretting it. It was sure to cause some notice, and the last thing in the world she wanted was to be noticed, at least not by anyone in the office.

She hurried home so she could look at it in the mirror, and so she could get on with the downfall of that perverted Greg.

The dress turned out to be ok she thought, especially if she wore one of her ordinary bras, not the ones she used when she was playing Sara.

Roy was standing in the Chief's office, "I know you don't think we have got enough for murder, but maybe we do."

He ticked the points off on his fingers, "One, we know he had a prior connection with this woman and had a grudge against her. The records in that case have him claiming that the dope was hers, and that she was setting him up because he dumped her. Her story was that he was a dope fiend / sex maniac who wanted to have sex in ways she wouldn't."

"Two, he's had a lot of experience with the dope. He knew she was high or else she wouldn't have agreed to go to bed with him, so it would not be hard to say that he certainly was aware that his act was going to endanger her life."

The chief interrupted, "that's why the DA wants manslaughter."

"But if they start there he can plead down. If we start with murder then he can plead down and still do real time. Anyway I'm not done. Three, there are lots of rumors that he was being blackmailed by the victim. Nothing hard yet, no canceled checks, but she had parts in his last two films, and everyone agrees that he put her there. She couldn't act, she couldn't sing, she couldn't dance.

"Four, he was starting to really make it big. She was telling people about the big score she was going to make"

"That's still part of three, but you've got a point."

"Ok four, this one's a bit strange, but it might work. He was committing a felony when she died. Just like if some one has a heart attack when you're holding up a store."

"Having anal sex isn't a felony."

"True, but giving some one drugs is."

The chief groaned. "I can just see the district attorney trying to get that point across to the jury."

The Chief laughed quietly, "I can see the defense attorney asking you, and just how did he give her these drugs, did he hand them to her? You answer no, he gave them to her with his penis."

"Those questions are going to be raised what ever the charge, chief, and remember we got a witness who saw him handling her ass, and another who can establish a pattern of behavior, and another who saw coke in the room, and we got the autopsy that shows."

"I know what the autopsy shows," the chief threw up his hands, "Ok, if you can sell it to the D.A.'s office you can say I'm behind it," he smiled, "did you get that one, behind it?"

"Sure chief, I got it, and we lucked out with the D.A.'s office, I went over and talked to some people and they put Carolyn Finestein on the case."

"What, you did what?" The chief exploded out of his chair. "That woman makes a circus out of every case she tries. Remember that rape case last year when the defense hammered at the victim? She went out and got every woman the defendant had ever gone out with and asked them about how he did in bed."

"She won that case."

"She had reporters from a hundred miles away camped out in the courthouse."

"She won the case. Put that creep behind the wall. Besides, she said that she understood how sensitive some parts of the case are."

"I'll bet she did. Tell me, did she drool when you told her about it."

"Drool's the wrong word, but when she heard that he had a history of doing this to women, and that we had that bimbo who would testify that he'd done the same thing to her, she went a little crazy. She danced around a bit, then she stops and looks me in the eye and said, 'you know what we're going to do to him don't you?' I said that I had a good idea, and she said, so help me god, 'We're going to ram this case so far up his ass that you'll be able to hear the testimony come out his ears.'" He shook his head, "it really got to me, she's all of five foot three, and she dresses like she might have been a nun once, except that she's real cute. She's the girl from next door that your mother would have done anything to get you to marry, and when you hear her talk like that it makes your blood run cold."

"She may look like the girl next door, but I don't think there's a man in this half of the country who's got the guts to go out with her. Shit I'll bet if a guy asked her to go to bed with him she'd have him arrested for soliciting or something. So when does she go to the grand jury?"

"Tomorrow, she knows she's got to move fast before her boss gets back."

"Ok," the Chief closed his eyes, "I guess I've been to my last barbecue on beach road."

"Sorry about that chief."

"No you're not. Get out of here and see if you can find any other women who had him do similar things to them."

"Now that's a line I never tried with a woman." Roy ducked out the door and headed home.

Sarah decided he was going to stop on the way and see Sara. Sara was startled when the doorbell rang, she wasn't expecting anybody. When she saw it was the detective, she got a little worried. Were they going to arrest her for not reporting the body after all?

When she opened the door he seemed a little uncomfortable. As soon as he was inside, he said, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask some indelicate questions. The other night we were able to coast past certain areas on assumptions, but things have come together fast."

"Go ahead," she smiled trying to look calm, all the while feeling her heart thumping in her chest.

"Did you have intercourse with Greg?"

He actually blushed slightly, she thought. She was surprised, she didn't think he was the kind who would blush easily.

She nodded, "yes we did." She paused, "what does this have to do with the case?"

"I can't tell you that right now, but it's important. I have to ask now, was it ordinary sex or did he have a special trick?"

What was going on? "We made love in the ocean if that's what you mean by a special trick."

He shook his head, "My mother would die if she knew about the details of my job. Asking strangers, did he enter your vagina or some place else?"

"Isn't making love in the surf special enough for you."

"It would be more than enough for me, but it's really important to this case."

"All right it was regular sex - his penis in my vagina. Aside from being in the ocean there was nothing kinky about it."

Did he seem relieved? He'd raised a lot more questions than he'd asked. "Why? Can't you tell me what this is about?"

"I'd like to, you gave me the piece that led to the big break in the case. You'll be reading about it soon."

"I thought the woman's death was an accident and all you were investigating was how she got from the house to the ocean."

"It's a bit more involved than that, he turned for the door, but stopped, "listen I bought a copy of your new record today, and I'm wondering if you would autograph it for me."

"Sure," she looked at him, he wasn't carrying anything except his note book. "Where is it?"

"I left it down in the car, I didn't want to come up here on false pretenses, besides I felt funny enough having to ask you those questions after asking for your autograph first. I'll be right back. He hurried out the door.

While she waited Sara tried to figure out what was going on. And what did it have to do with kinky sex? He was back in a minute, and she

took a magic marker out of a drawer. "Where was it you said you heard me."

"Mooney's, down by the river."

She smiled, "I remember now," and wrote, "To," you know I don't know your name?"

"Roy, Roy Crookit."

"Roy," she continued, "who heard me when I sang in a dive called Mooney's many moons ago." Then she signed her name with a flourish.

"Thanks."

"Sure, but about those questions, do they mean something is happening?"

"Yes, but I don't think it will involve you. I haven't given anyone your name as a witness." He paused, there was something about her that made him want to be gentle and honest. It wasn't something he felt all that often. "Look, it turns out there are a lot of witnesses to the fact that she was dead in the house, but the shit is going to hit the fan on something else. "It's possible that," he shook his head, "look can we sit down?"

She nodded and they sat. "The other night I got the impression that you weren't too fond of Greg despite the fact that you'd spent a romantic evening with him, is that still true?"

"Yes," I don't know what it is, but something about the way he reacted to her being dead, made me suspicious. You know he didn't want me to come back to the house with him?"

"No you didn't tell me that."

"Well he wanted me to stay on the beach while he went back and got a blanket and a flashlight. What kind of man is going to leave a naked woman standing alone on a beach, even at night? Then when I told him I thought she was dead, he said "No, she's just passed out."

"Then I told him she wasn't breathing, but there was something in his voice, and something in his eyes when I said 'I think she's dead.'"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I would expect it to startle you, but it hit him really hard. I don't know."

"Look, I got to tell you something, but you really have to promise me you won't breath a word of it to anybody."

She gave him a solemn look and nodded. He proceeded to give her a quick overview of the case.

"So that's why you were interested in the wheres and how we had sex." She looked around the room, "Jesus, what a scumbag, and to think that

for a while I thought he was God's gift to me," she reddened in embarrassment.

If Roy had been sitting closer he would have been tempted to put his arm around her. Instead he let his gaze wander around the room. After a moment she spoke again, "Will I have to testify at a trial?"

"Maybe, if there is one. He might try to use you as an alibi, but we've got a witness who saw it happen before you got there, anyway I have a feeling he's going to cop a plea."

"Does that mean he'll get off?"

"Not hardly, I can almost guarantee that he's going to do some serious time."

She nodded, he thought he saw a slight smile cross her face.

"Listen I've got to go. Please keep this to your self, I just didn't want you reading about it in the papers."

"Thanks," she nodded, "that would really have freaked me out."

As she was closing the door behind him, she was struck by how real he seemed. "Wait." He stopped, "Listen I just realized I've got some tickets for a show I'm doing on Saturday. It's kind of a warm up practice run to see if I should do a tour. "Would you like a couple?"

"I'd like that, but one will be enough."

She let that one go by. She dug into her purse, "It's at the civic center, at eight."

He took the ticket, "Thanks I'll be there." He turned and walked towards the stairs.

As she watched him go, she realized that making the big time wasn't all it was cracked up to be, not if the only way you could meet decent people was to have wild sex with a killer first.

She hugged herself, and made sure the door was double locked.

Chapter 16

Sarah hadn't seen Jon for more than ten minutes in the last three days, but on Friday it was a different story. In the morning he asked her boss if he could "borrow her" for a while, took her to a vacant conference room and rehearsed his presentation in front of her. She was impressed, he had produced a professional looking document, complete with charts and diagrams. He was also wearing a better looking suit.

He started out with a shocker, "Gentlemen, and Lady." (There was only one female senior manager in the company), "I have taken a close look at your current data system, and have found not only that it is seriously

flawed, but that it is in fact being held together by a secretary who is earning twenty six thousand dollars a year. It is her job to produce some of vital reports which should be based on the data in your system, but she has discovered that if she is to produce accurate reports she has to go outside the system." Technically it was her boss's job she was just supposed to type them up, but she said nothing. "If this woman were to leave your current system would start to limp after the first end of month, and would end up producing quarterly reports in which the figures would be off by thousands of dollars."

He pointed out specific flaws in the current system. He presented these in a way that did not point any fingers, and explained them as having happened because the current system did not have the flexibility to cope with changing conditions which were not foreseen when it was developed.

He was not the insecure lonely man who had taken her to dinner, instead he projected an air of competence. His recommendations were too technical to make much sense to her, but from what she understood, he was suggesting that there be some basic changes in the structure of the people who were accumulating and reporting on the data. She had the feeling that her boss would come out of the meeting quite nervous.

"So what did you think?" He put down his notes, and sat in a chair across the table from her.

"I'm impressed, you've been working hard. Everything you said about the data was right, but when you started talking about restructuring some of the departments I wasn't so sure about what you were saying."

He nodded, "Yes, you don't have to worry, I told McCormick about how you were the glue that was holding the current system together. He wondered what your boss had been doing all these years, and I understand, is having a talk with him this morning."

"What's going to happen?" Change scared her. Even though her boss was lazy and incompetent, he was predictable. She wasn't sure she wanted to have to learn the foibles of a new boss.

"Like I said there's going to be a restructuring, McCormick is going to use my report as the reason for it, but he said he'd been looking for an excuse for a while now. I expect you'll do well in the changes. I don't know the details, but don't be surprised if you get a call to go see McCormick himself after the meeting this afternoon."

He was wrong about that. Her boss was not in his office when she got back, and as soon as he returned, ashen faced, she got a call from the president's secretary.

She was really glad she'd bought the new dress yesterday. It made her feel a little more confident as she rode up in the elevator.

She'd never been in the president's office before. She'd dropped a million reports off with his secretary, but aside from an occasional peek through the open door she didn't know what to expect.

Jane gave her a big smile, "go right in he's expecting you."

McCormick was a tall man who had an angular face which seemed to add to his intensity. He was standing at the window as she entered. "Hello Sarah, come in have a seat."

She felt naked without her steno book. "I don't know if you've been told, but ten minutes ago I informed Mr. Smith that his employment here was being terminated immediately."

Sarah shook her head, he continued. "The consultant we've hired has spoken very highly of you, he said that you were the only person who kept the balances in line. He said that if it weren't for you initiative we would have made some serious misrepresentations in our annual reports, as well as having made some decisions based on erroneous data."

She nodded, she was not used to getting much praise. "I was just trying to do my job well."

"You were not only doing your job, you were also doing a lot of Smith's job. He admitted to me that you had told him about the problems with the reports, then he tried to tell me he hadn't wanted to step on any one's toes. I know better. I've been around for a while. He thought that so long as he was the only one who could produce the correct figures, nobody would ever question why it was that he did practically nothing." He paused, "Excuse me, I guess I'm still angry. We are going to be restructuring the entire department. Data entry will no longer be handled by MIS because the people there have no interest in making sure the data is correct. They have no way of knowing if what they are entering is right or wrong." He reached down onto his desk and picked up a small pile of papers. "Could you look at these for me please and tell me about them."

Sarah leaned forward and took the papers. Though she'd never seen them before, she knew what they had to be. "These must be what MIS gets from the field offices." She leafed through them thinking this must be some sort of test.

There it was, it was so simple, she looked at the office code and nodded. "This one is wrong. That office has never had a month that went above five hundred thousand in the three years I've been doing this. I'd guess they added a zero, but I'd need to call to find out."

"Who would you call?"

"I don't remember her name, but it would be the office manager."

"Not the field office director?"

She shook her head. "No, when a director gets a call from the central office he usually gets real nervous, starts hemming and hawing and you can't get reliable information out of him. And if he learns that you are a secretary sometimes they'll talk down to you. She paused, "You'll have to excuse me if this sounds funny, but if you want real information you have to talk to the people who are doing the work."

She turned to the next paper, without trying to gauge his reaction to that, hoping she hadn't said something that would get her fired too. "This next one is one that I told the consultant about. For some reason this branch gets a ton of business at the end of the month, and since the deadline for the report is the first they can't get it totaled up in time. So what they do is send an estimate. I always call them a couple of days later and get the real figures."

"So you don't think the directors do any work?"

She'd been afraid of this, "No, what I meant was that they don't know the details. They wouldn't know that something was wrong if an invoice came in with six digits, or it started with 027, that happened the other month."

"What's 027 mean?"

"It's an obsolete form, the rates are wrong on it, the office must have run out of the new ones so they put an order in on one that must have been in the back of a supply closet."

She started to look at the next page, but he stopped her. "That's enough, I haven't worked out all the details yet, but I'm putting Mrs Phillips in charge of the conversion. You'll be reporting to her, I'm afraid you'll have to continue to produce the report for a while, but when you're not busy with that I will want you to work closely with her and the consultant."

Ms. Phillips, The Axe, oh my God, Sarah was stunned.

"When we get the new system in place I'm going to put you in charge of what we're going to call the reporting section. You'll have to train the data entry people to spot the errors and hopefully we will have a system that prevents the bad data from getting into the system in the first place." He looked at his watch, "I'm afraid I'll have to cut this short, but I want you to spend the afternoon moving your things into the office Mr. Smith should have vacated by now. Next week we'll get you a secretary, and have the personnel office figure out the details of your new title. In the meantime, I'm having the payroll office cut you a bonus check for five thousand dollars, as a way to let you know that we appreciate what you've been doing, and for

what you must have had to put up with working for that jerk for the past three years. How did you do that?"

She smiled, "I got real good at keeping out of his way."

"That's going to have to change, we're going to need teamwork to make this work," He stood and held out his hand, "You're right, by the way, the way to get work done is to go to the people who are doing the real work, that's why I'm going to you."

Sarah glided out of the office. A promotion, a raise and a bonus - and moving into the office her boss used to have. For a while she forgot about The Axe. She remembered how good Sara had felt walking down the beach, this was like that, except it was real.

Mr Smith hadn't left, the door to his office was closed, but she could hear him shouting through it. She thought about going in and offering her condolences, but instead decided it would be wise to slip out to lunch early. She had just retrieved her purse from her desk, when the door opened behind her. She turned and looked at him. "Sarah, would you come in here for a minute?"

Against her better judgement she nodded and stepped inside. His possessions were packed in cardboard boxes on his desk. He had a cold hard look in his eyes. "In case you haven't heard I've been fired, and I want you to do something for me." She nodded, he continued, "I've been very good to you Sarah. Remember all those times when I let you leave early so you could get to the hospital?"

That had been when her mother was dying, she remembered, and he had acted like he was really doing her a big favor, "and I want you to repay me by going to a terminal in Joe's office after lunch. I want you to enter what's on this piece of paper at the terminal and then leave. Will you do that for me?"

She nodded, and took the slip of paper. "Good, I've always been able to depend on you, I know you won't let me down. By the way, it's very important that nobody see you do this and that you tell no one about this." He turned away and resumed the job of emptying the drawers of his desk. She watched him put a company calculator into one of the boxes, realized that was all the good byes she was going to get then turned and walked out.

Why did he want her to do it, she wondered as she passed the man from security who was standing outside the office?

She stuck the slip of paper in her purse as she was waiting for the elevator. She didn't recognize the command, and was vaguely surprised that he had any programs on that particular computer, maybe it's something left over from before he moved to this department, she thought.

She didn't think about it much as she was practically bursting with all the things that had happened that morning. She really wanted to tell someone, but realized there really wasn't anyone she really wanted to share it with or who she wouldn't feel like she was boasting to. No one who would feel glad for her rather than jealous. That's ok, she thought, she'd be able to tell Jon all about it tonight, even though she suspected that he knew most of it.

She went to an art supply store and bought some more dyed moss as much to prolong her lunch hour and give her ex-boss time to get out as for any other reason. When she got back to the building she ran into Jon as he emerged from the news-stand in the lobby. He gave her a big smile, looked at his watch and said, "show time in twenty five minutes."

"Good luck, oh by the way I've got a question for you." She pulled the slip of paper out of her purse and handed it to him. "What would happen if you punched this into the computer?"

He took it and studied it intently, when he looked up at her his eyes were piercing. "Where did you get this."

"I was asked to punch it in."

"Did you?"

"No. I wanted to check it out first."

He practically pulled her out of the elevator. "Did Frank Smith give this to you?"

"Yes, he said it was something that needed doing. What is it."

"I'm not sure, but I think it's a bomb."

"A what?"

"Don't worry, not boom kind of bomb, but one that's equally effective on the insides of a computer. I'm going to have to look at the code and see, but I think he wanted to go out with a splash."

He looked at his watch again, "Come with me please, I've got to see McCormick about this right away."

He walked right past the secretary and opened the door as soon as he knocked. "What is it Jon?" They'd caught the company president practicing his putting on the carpet in front of his desk.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but Sarah was asked by Mr. Smith to put this into the computer. I'm not sure, but I think it's some sort of computer bomb. Sarah had the sense to come to me with it, but we can't be sure he isn't trying some other way."

The president of the company dropped his putter and took two steps over to his desk. He picked up the phone, "get the head of MIS," he barked. He turned to Jon, "What should we do?"

"Cut off all the terminals."

"Hello Bob, Listen we may have a problem here, I want you to have someone cut off all the terminals immediately. I'm sending Jon down and he'll explain."

Jon was already heading out the door. Sarah turned and followed him. He ran down the hall, by-passed the elevators and tore down two flights of stairs. When she emerged on the floor the computer center occupied she was fifty feet behind him. There was no use in her running, she realized, as he turned into the main computer control room.

There was a lot of activity in a place where things usually happened at a civilized pace. Jon and three men were looking at a screen while one of the operators struggled to keep up with their commands.

"We've got to change all the passwords immediately, and we're going to need to put a strict control on access from outside. It would be a pisser if he called up from home and crashed us that way."

One of the men moved to another terminal and began to work. "Now," Jon said, "let's see what he wanted to do to us." He bent down and fiddled with the keyboard. He hummed and hawed a couple of times, then he said, "crude, but effective. I want this transferred to a clean tape and then we'll wipe it from the system."

The department manager added, "Then some one's got to go through the system bit by byte and take out anything that doesn't belong. That includes the pictures of snoopy, the calendars, the starwars games, and anything else that even looks funny."

Jon looked at his watch, "I've got to go, maybe you ought to send a message to the users saying the system will be down for the rest of the day, I'll be back as soon as I can." He turned and spotted Sarah, "Oh hi, listen I think the fire's out. No need for you to hang around here."

She nodded and walked with him to the elevator. "What was he trying to do?"

"He wanted to encrypt the data and do some other nasty little things. I suspect that he wanted to get us to pay him for the key so we could get it back. It's more common than you'd think. He figured that it would be something like a pension plan for him." He shook his head, "If he's stupid enough to call we ought to have enough evidence to prosecute him."

He stopped at the door to the conference room, "Well you found a way to keep me from worrying about the presentation. I'll see you later."

When she got back Sarah was happy to see there was no sign of her old boss. A maintenance crew was at work removing his name from the glass on the door to the outer office. She walked into the inner office and sat

in the chair. This wasn't the way things were supposed to happen. The office looked very different from this side of the desk, it was going to take some getting used to.

A few minutes later the director of personnel himself came in while she was moving her personal stuff into the inner office.

"Well, congratulations, Sarah. He handed her an envelope. "Mr. McCormick said to make sure you got this today."

She resisted the impulse to tear it open, "Thank you it's kind of a shock for me."

He nodded, "yes I'm not used to having things move quite this quickly. But while I'm here I need to ask a few questions. First, what do you need?"

"I need to have my p.c. moved in here, then I'm going to need to figure out what my job is going to be."

"What about a secretary?"

"I'd like to wait a little on that. I don't even know if I'm going to need one. I suspect I can handle my own typing. He never got all that many calls, and I understand I'll still have to produce the report, I'll just have a view when I do it."

"I'm sure there will be a lot more to it soon."

Sarah was sure of that, she nodded. "Mr. McCormick said something about a data entry section that I'll be supposed to train."

"That's at least three months down the pike, we don't even know where they'll be located yet, or how many there will be." He stood, "until we get things firmed up some there are some details which are going to have to wait, I'm afraid, like for example what your new title will be, and your final salary."

"There's a big raise involved, and we'll increase it immediately to thirty five. I'm sure it will end up a little higher than that, but I can't tell exactly what just yet."

Sarah stood up too, "Ok, that sounds fair. Thank you."

He nodded and left the office. Oh, yes that did sound fair, fair for the first time since she started there. She opened the envelope, as promised it was a bonus for five thousand dollars. Last week she would have been grateful for a raise of twenty five dollars a week.

Chapter 17

They got started late on their date because Jon had been tied up in the data center. That was ok with Sarah because she was busy trying to figure

out how to organize Mr Smith's job so it wouldn't take too much of her time. She knew she'd have to be efficient if she was going to work for that woman. Smith had found ways to spread the work out, she had to do the opposite.

"So how did the presentation go?"

"If anyone had planned to object they had to keep quiet because I'd just discovered another big problem with their system. For a minute I thought McCormick was going to fire the director of MIS for letting that bomb lie around in there for so long without noticing it, but he calmed down and didn't. So, I heard you had a pretty good day too."

She smiled, she'd been waiting for this cue since 11:30. "You could say that. My asshole boss got fired, I got his job, a raise, a promotion and a bonus to boot. Yeah and it's Friday too."

"That it is," he said, "Where should we go for dinner?"

There was one restaurant in town she'd always wanted to go to go to, but had never dared, somehow thinking it was too good for her. Let's go over to the Riverview, it's supposed to be very good."

It was. They were shown to a table next to a window which overlooked the water. Waiters came and went delivering wine and food which somehow put just the right finish on a good day. The success coupled with the wine went right to her head, and by the time they were half way through dinner she found herself thinking that he wasn't such a nerd as she'd originally thought. It just took a lot to get him out of his shell.

The incident with Mr. Smith prompted him to tell a number of stories about computer sabotage. He had a way of making them funny, and she enjoyed laughing with him. They had brandy with their coffee and when they were through didn't care that the bill came to close to a hundred dollars. Outside, he asked her what she wanted to do now. Of course the tumble tongued clod he was he said, "do you want to go home now?"

She had answered, "No, not yet.", but she realized she did not know what it was that she wanted to do. They walked for a while, but the neighborhood and the darkening sky made them both nervous. The car was parked outside a liquor store and Sarah realized she had no wine at home. "I just realized I don't have any wine at home, let me go in and get some." It wasn't until she was paying for it that she realized how much that must have sounded like an invitation." Certainly they couldn't go back to the Holiday Inn, neither of them would survive a disco, and she realized they were going to end up at her place, as if the fates had willed it. Like how things happened often in her fantasy stories. How could she explain the town to him? Could she keep the room closed off?

"Jon, there's something about my apartment I want to tell you about."

"I don't mind if it's messy."

She wished it was. "No, I've got a hobby sort of and it's kind of taken over the apartment."

"So long as it isn't breeding poisonous snakes."

"No, not like that at all. Do you remember how we were talking about how hard it was to be with people? Well one way that I was able to avoid being lonely was to make this fantasy place. It's a model of a town."

He turned and looked at her, "That sounds interesting."

She felt relief that he was not appalled.

"Do you make up characters for people who live in the town?"

"Sometimes, especially when I'm feeling bad about myself. I can be anything I want there. I can be a success, I can have people like me and want to be with me."

"I'd like to see it. How big is it?"

"Well it takes up all of the spare bedroom and parts of it have kind of popped up in the kitchen and living room too."

It took a lot less time in a car than the bus did, she thought as he pulled up in front of her building. Her heart was thumping as she led him inside the building and up the stairs. As she turned the key she somehow had the feeling that it was a turning point in her life. If Sara could have them why couldn't she?

Chapter 18

As she swung open the door to her apartment Sarah thought, I must be drunk - or something, this isn't like me at all. She was struck by the drabness of the apartment, seeing it for, she realized, the first time as a host. She'd been here three and a half years and she'd never said, "come in," to anybody before.

She didn't know what to do with him. She didn't really have a living room, as it was filled with her fantasy world, and she still wasn't sure that she wanted to show him that.

The kitchen was small, and she realized, needed a cleaning. That left the foyer the landlord claimed was a dining room and the bedroom.

She had to do something she realized and lead him further in. "So where is this model town," he asked?

She resigned herself to it and said, "right in here." She opened the doors and led him in. There wasn't any appropriate furniture there either. She had a bunch of large pillows she sat on while playing there, and

suddenly she was very ashamed. She could almost hear her mother's criticisms carrying through all the years. He was behind her and she was afraid to turn around to see his reaction.

He wasn't saying anything, was he desperately trying to find something polite to say. It was too big she thought, she had really let herself get carried away with things, and he's going to figure out exactly how crazy I really am.

"My God, this is incredible."

She forced herself to turn, he looked at her, and his eyes were sparkling. "I didn't expect anything like this, you must have spent years on it."

"Yes," three years of my life spent in a foolish pursuit. "I guess it's kind of silly."

"No, not at all, it's wonderful. You did all this yourself?"

"Well some of the models over here I assembled from kits. I had to paint them, but the parts were cut out." She pointed to the beach houses, and some of the larger buildings in the downtown section, but I built these from materials I bought in art supply stores."

He knelt down on a pillow and took a close look at Stewart's house. "This one looks so real it's incredible. "

She was starting to feel a little better, and realized she was still holding the bag with the bottles of wine in it. "Would you like a glass of wine?"

"Yes, that would be good," he didn't take his gaze off of the model.

When she got back with the glasses, she found him running a car up river road. He looked up a little sheepishly, I hope you don't mind, but I couldn't resist."

"No, that's fine, I do it myself."

He took the glass and drank as she sat on a pillow next to him. "Tell me, do you have characters who live in these places?"

She didn't know how to answer that without revealing the size of her fantasy. But she knew she had to answer something, she nodded, "Yes the beach house belongs to a Hollywood producer. She leaned forward and removed the roof, "This model has a completed interior, most of them don't" Maybe if she could keep him focused on the physical aspects of the models, she thought, maybe he won't have to know.

"What about you, where do you live?"

"It isn't exactly me," she regretted saying that, now she'd have to explain Sara, but the character I sometimes play lives here. She pointed to

an apartment complex back near the wall. She took a sip of wine, and then another.

He turned back to the model. "Do you have an ongoing story, or is it just episodes?"

"It's, it's, I guess it's an ongoing story."

He took another swig of his wine, "This is amazing, it sure beats watching television." He paused and moved the car up the road a little, "Would you tell me a little of what's going on in the town?"

She was in the process of taking a sip of wine, but his question somehow made her take a gulp. She had to swallow twice to get it all down. When she could speak she said, "I don't know I'm feeling a little embarrassed by all of this, I've never shown this to anyone before, let alone told anybody about what I do with it. I mean it isn't exactly normal is it?"

He reached over and poured her another glass of wine. "I don't think there's anything to be embarrassed about. I think a lot of people would love to play with something like this."

"That's the point it's playing, I keep hearing my mother telling me to grow up."

"What do mothers know? Anyway I promise I won't ever tell anyone a word about this. How's that?"

Maybe she could. The things that had been happening were a lot less dumb than a lot of television shows. She took another drink, the wine helped too. She sure couldn't do it sober.

"Well ok, I guess," she said and then proceeded to tell him an abbreviated version of the party. She left out the sex in the surf and the exact nature of the cause of the woman's death.

He asked a few questions as she explained the story, and was particularly interested in Sara. As she was winding down he said, "that's neat, you've got a very creative mind. Do you think I could play too?"

She was amazed, not only hadn't he laughed, but he was actually asking to join in the fantasy. "Well I suppose so, who could you be?"

"Well I'd call myself John with an H in it, and maybe I come to town as a reporter to cover the story, or, how about I'm an investigator hired by the defense lawyer because he doesn't think that his client is telling him the truth?"

"That would be good, it could give us a picture of things from a different angle." She stopped, of course he was bound to find out about the things she'd omitted from the story, unless she changed things, but that was going to be difficult as she was sure she'd never keep the two stories straight.

What the hell, he hadn't laughed at it so far, so she told him some of the details she'd left out.

"Boy, you know how to make it interesting, ok here's how I think it ought to start for us, "I'm good at what I do, but there's a part of me that likes to keep moving, going from one assignment to the next. I'm something of a loner, maybe I was engaged once, but the woman was killed, and I haven't gotten over it and have a hard time connecting with people. Anyway what the defendant wants to do, His name's Greg, right?"

She nodded impressed by his memory.

"What he wants to do is implicate as many people as possible. He wants to make like everybody was a suspect. He hopes that if it gets sticky enough some of the heat will come off of him. Now he's really a nasty sort, and the things I've been given to start with are that Stewart was directly involved in supplying the cocaine for the party. He had called up the victim's lover and ordered it, and he had asked that the woman be the one to bring it down to the party. And, in a desperate move, he's also going to say that you were alone in the room with the victim, and that since you were obviously so smitten with him that you had a motive for making sure she didn't get in your way. The coke was there beside the bed so that was the opportunity. He can say, "I am sure she was breathing when we came in, I even saw her move. When I came out of the bathroom she's standing beside the victim telling me she's dead."

Sara took a big sip of wine and frowned, she was going to have to be careful not to drink too much. Roy had warned her that this private detective was going to come and try and question her. Now he was downstairs and she had to decide what to do. "I really don't think I have any thing to say to you, I told it all to the police."

John nodded, "I can understand that, but I've been hired by the defense to find out what happened that night. If I need to I can have this questioning done by the lawyer in a pretrial hearing with you subpoenaed, but I doubt that you would want it to come out that you had sex with the alleged killer on the same night he's accused of killing that woman."

Sara nodded, she was trapped. She could only hope that she could convince this man that she was telling the truth. "Ok I'll tell it to you, but I'll bet you that Greg's been feeding you a pack of lies."

He just nodded. "Ok why don't you tell me what happened that evening, and we'll see how close it comes to what my client has told me."

Sara was slightly embarrassed to be telling all of this to a stranger, but she realized that it was better to tell it to one stranger than a room full of strangers and reporters. At one point he interrupted, "so this guy wasn't all

that bad I guess. You let him sweep you off your feet and have sex with you?"

"Yeah, I don't know what it was. I was feeling so good about the record I must have had my defenses down, and of course he's good looking and soon to be famous, and he's a fan from way back, what's not to like? Anyway, it was just a quick thing, you know how it is." She felt a little like a tramp when she heard herself say that.

She finished the rest of the story and waited for him to say something. He was looking at her with a softer expression than she had expected. She warned her self to be on her guard. At last he said, "Ok there are some points I need to clear up. You say you got there at eight thirty, couldn't it have been earlier?"

Sara knew what he was driving at, the women claimed to have seen him in the bedroom with the woman a little after eight. "No. I'm sure of that. I remember looking at my watch as I went in I was afraid I was late."

He looked at his notes, "You know that exactly, but after that all the times you give are approximate? Especially the time when you were in the room with the victim."

I wasn't wearing my watch then.

"Listen Sarah, I think we may have picked the wrong character for me to play. We're on opposite sides and I don't think I can really get into trying to break you down."

"Yeah, I was starting to feel uncomfortable too. What if we changed the police detective's name to John, Sara kind of likes him."

"Yes, that's a good idea. He could decide to drop by and tell the two bit private detective to beat it. Then he could tell Sara what Greg was up to."

"What a sleaze," said Sara, "Thanks for getting rid of that creep. He's just the kind that I would expect Greg to hire. What's he up to anyway."

"Most of this is just a guess, but I think he's trying to muddy up the waters. We've been getting anonymous tips to check out Stewart's connection with the drug dealer, and I think he was here seeing if there was anyway they could have turned your escapade into an alibi. Maybe they think if they can make you nervous then you will be a less reliable witness or something."

There was something else, she could sense it, "What?"

"Well," he let out a sigh, "The lawyer said something about a lot of people having been alone in the room with her that night and that Greg was sure she was alive when the two of you came in off the beach."

"What?" She stood, "is he saying what it sounds like he's saying?"

"He was deliberately leaving things vague. He's trying to put the squeeze on you."

Sara felt scared all of a sudden, she was really glad this man was there. She looked across the room at the windows which were showing the very black night. She took a sip of wine. Saw that his glass was empty, "would you like some more?"

"I guess that means I'm officially off duty now, sure"

She poured the remainder of the bottle into his glass. and debated whether she should open the other bottle now.

"Thanks," he took a sip, "this is good wine."

She nodded, "Thanks. Ok, what do you think I should do?"

"I think you should relax, try to forget it now, there's no point in getting all worked up about it when there's nothing you can do right now. Besides, I have a feeling it will all work out in the end." John reached and put his hand on hers. It sent a shock through her.

"You're going to think I'm a silly helpless woman, but would you put your arm around me."

He smiled and set his drink down. He reached and took the glass from her hand and set it next to his. Then he put both of his arms around her and gave her a warm gentle hug.

She let herself be enveloped by his warmth and strength. She felt her grip tighten until she was sure she must be hurting him, but he said nothing. She felt tears running down her cheek, and then his finger brushing them away.

At some point he pulled back and looked into her eyes, and smiled. It made her feel better, then later, she wasn't exactly sure when, she felt his lips brush her cheek and then finally her own lips.

Where has he been all my life? Why did she have to endure so many creeps before meeting him? She felt them settle onto the pillows on the floor, and she began to kiss him back with a vigor born out of a lifelong need.

Sara felt his arms move and his hands moving over her back. He seemed to be fumbling with the catch at the back of her dress, why would he fumble, then she remembered him saying he'd only need one ticket. Why had he had so many problems finding the right woman, she wondered, as she twisted slightly to give his fingers a better angle on the problem.

This time it was Sarah who felt the heat of his fingers as they touched the skin on her back. It was how it had felt to Sara. For a moment she wondered which one of them she was, but then forgot the question as he began to kiss her neck.

Not here, she thought, "The bedroom," she whispered, and helped him disengage enough so they could stand and make their way from the rather cramped area between the two halves of the town.

She let her dress slide down her body, and then reached up to help undress him. Don't say a word she willed, don't break the spell.

He was slow. He was gentle and patient and did not rush her. He was there, he was a man, and she took him and admitted him into the deepest parts of her soul.

BOXALL2

Chapter 19

Sara moved slightly in her bed as she slowly rose through the last stages of sleep like a swimmer floating towards the shimmering surface of a pool. She was in no hurry - it was warm and safe where she was. She was unburdened by thought - her thigh touched the delicious warmth of her lover and Sarah shot into wakefulness like a performing dolphin exploding into the air. A man. There was a man in her bed. She was naked, and sore in places that told her they'd had sex. Then she remembered. All of it. She wanted to bolt from the bed. The headache rose as quickly as her embarrassment. The nakedness which had been so natural now screamed at her as she opened her eyes to the dazzling light pouring in through the windows.

Mortified - that was a word her mother had used. She'd always thought it was an excessive expression, but now she knew better, damn her mother. The victim in her fantasy may have had the right idea. There were some things you should not wake up after.

What would Sara do, she wondered? Sara wouldn't have this bad a hangover. Sara would get up and go to the bathroom, take aspirin and then she would go back into the bed to lie and enjoy the man next to her. When he too awoke she would have a way of making it a special awakening. Soft and gentle, not wild and explosive like the night before. She felt herself flush as she recalled scenes - scenes of sexual abandon which required the loss of inhibitions that only a whole bottle of wine could provide.

Sarah had to get up; her bladder screamed for relief. Careful so as not to awaken him, she slid from the bed.

The mirror in the bathroom threw her nakedness in Sarah's face. Through the pain of her hangover her conscience sang a complicated melody. "At last you finally had the guts to get laid. Of course it took

enough wine to turn your eyeballs red and now you'll undoubtedly blow it by letting your embarrassment set a tone which will send him screaming from the apartment as fast as he can. You picked a winner too, someone who's as socially retarded as you. Someone who can put on the clothes and survive work, but, like you, he's a terrified child under the front he puts up."

She brushed her teeth and started to wrap a towel around herself, so that, if he was awake when she got back, he would not see her, but she stopped. The only way to survive this was to be Sara. Sara would remain naked, or maybe she'd put on something slinky and sexy. She would return to bed, she would wait for her man to awake. If she touched him right, if she kissed him gently, but not possessively, she could start his day with a stroke of confidence. The aspirin was helping, she rubbed her temples, and then gently massaged her nipples to make them erect, and, in what she hoped was a natural walk, left the bathroom and returned to the bed.

If he was awake he was playing possum. Sarah used the time to get hints and ideas from Sara.

"If a man is dreaming at the end of his sleep cycle he'll wake up with an erection. Essentially, if you can get a hold of a man by his penis, especially if it's hard, he's like putty in your hands. But go slow, in the morning there is no rush, you want to overwhelm him gently."

Sarah was intrigued by this information, it was news to her. Not that there had been that many mornings, but they had always been difficult - ranging from awkward and silent to tearful and screaming.

"Touch him gently, bring him softly awake. Let him feel the heat of your flesh and as he gets more awake the brush of your lips on his body. When you do finally speak to him, and it can be much later, 'good morning lover' is much better than 'I love you'. If you say that too soon it can scare a man right out of your life. Besides you don't know if you do yet.'

Sarah moved closer to him. She could feel his warmth before she even touched him. When her stomach touched his back she had to fight the shock of it, to let herself be Sara. She kissed his shoulder, and her fingertips slowly, softly, stroked his arm. Her hand dropped down and slid across his belly. She'd halfway expected him to be a little pudgy, but he wasn't and she was glad for that. He shifted a little pressing against her. 'Good,' she thought and her hand worked its way down to see if Sara had been right.

She was. Sarah was fascinated. Every time she'd ever encountered an erect penis it was connected to a man who had only one

thing in mind, and he'd never let it remain in view for very long. She let her fingers explore it , and decided she wanted to see it too.

It took some doing, to climb across him without waking him up, but it was worth the effort. She felt a little like a voyeur as she examined it. What an amazing piece of anatomy, she thought. He grunted quietly and rolled over onto his back. 'Now's your chance,' she heard Sara say, 'He's yours.'

What should she do? 'Kiss it you fool, then climb on top.'

Sarah had never made love on top , but she wanted to. She'd never liked it when men had wanted her to kiss them there, but this time it was coming from her, and that made it different.

She felt like a whore, but that excited her. He groaned softly as she ran her tongue down the length of his shaft. This was better than trying to stuff it into your mouth she realized. 'get on top before he wakes any more,' Sara prompted.

It was very different being the active partner. It didn't seem so noticeable that he was going into her, it was as though she was swallowing him with her sex.

It took a moment to position herself correctly, then she slowly slid down the shaft and his eyes popped open. He looked startled, confused, yet she knew he wasn't going anywhere. He reached up to grab her, but she wasn't going to give up any control yet. She caught his wrists and pushed his arms back down onto the bed. This brought her face much closer to his and she was able to rub her breasts on his chest. She pushed down on him and found the pressure very arousing and exciting. He began to thrust some, not that he could move much, but it was enough to put pressure where it was needed and she felt her self losing control. She went wanton, she moaned. She caught sight of her self reflected in the mirror over the dressing table. It wasn't her, not Sarah, she didn't have this kind of thing in her - she couldn't be as sexy as the woman she saw in the mirror. That woman had the look of someone who knew what she was doing. For a moment she was fascinated by the way her breasts bounced as she moved, but her attention quickly was drawn back into herself. It was a little confusing being on top, it was almost as if she was the man. She reached down and grabbed his nipples and, as a wave surged through, her she squeezed them.

His eyes widened, his face grimaced, and he bucked - almost picking them both up off the bed. She started to move her hand, but he said "more," and she pinched them again feeling the power that comes with making another person writhe. With one hand he reached up and pinched

her right breast, and with his other hand he touched the place her mother had told her was the button that would call the devil.

She shuddered, she screamed, she came in a frightening rush. She wasn't Sarah. She wasn't Sara - she was a song, she was a flower bursting into bloom. She lost her sense of place and forgot his name. Her body took over and kept her mind at bay.

When she next started to think she found herself lying next to him looking at the top of his head while he nuzzled at her breast. Her other shameful secret; that she never had an orgasm, no longer mattered, she realized. He lifted his head and she looked into his slightly glassy eyes. "How do you like your eggs," she asked?

He moaned softly in reply.

She was energized, she wanted to touch and taste him, but Sara told her to back off. 'Give him time to recuperate, now it's time to do the mysterious female bit. Kiss him, then let him watch as you hide your body in some clothes, and then leave him be for a while.'

She didn't give the town a glance as she walked to the kitchen and put on some coffee. The bonus check was lying on the table where she'd dropped it last night. She picked it up and looked at it closely. She looked down at herself, the clothes which had seemed fine yesterday were so obviously wrong for her. Somewhere she'd turned into a frump. Her body screamed from under her clothes, "let me out, show me off." Sarah wanted to sing. She wanted to dance around the apartment ridding her closets and drawers of her drab dull wardrobe which was designed to make her blend into the background.

She decided they could eat at the mall when she saw the refrigerator contained nothing which appealed to her. She heard his steps as he came down the hall to the kitchen. His eyes were still not really focused, "Good morning, lover," she said.

He had put on nearly all his clothes, they were a frumpy match to hers. And she was disappointed, Sara's lover would come to breakfast bare chested, proudly showing the love bites from the engagement in the bedroom. He would take some training, she realized, or maybe she'd trade him in for a new model when the time was right. She told herself she was a shameless hussy, and smiled as she felt the lingering warmth in her loins.

She handed him a cup of coffee and said, "We'll have to go out to eat, I'm afraid I wasn't planning to entertain a man for breakfast today."

He sipped the coffee and nodded. He was staring at her, a look of something between adoration and utter disbelief on his face. She realized he hadn't said anything yet and recognized it as a symptom the old Sarah

would have had. He's afraid to speak, he's sure he'll make a fool out of himself.

She decided to give him a break. She went over and kissed him on the cheek. "Are we having fun yet?"

He nodded so violently he almost bumped into her. "Oh yes, this morning, I didn't know what was happening and then when I did I couldn't believe it. You were amazing."

"Yes I was, wasn't I," that sounded wrong, "I guess I was ready to break out of my shell."

He smiled, "I'm glad I was here to catch the pieces."

Not bad, she thought, not great, but an ok improvisation. She picked up the check. "I thought it would be interesting to see if I could spend all of this on a new wardrobe in one day. Do you think I can do it?"

"I don't know, that's a lot of money, are you sure you want to? Don't you need anything else, don't you want to save some of it?"

God, he talks like I used to think. "Yeah, come to think of it, I think it's time I got a car too."

"You can't do both on that check."

"The one thing I used to be was frugal. All I ever spent money on was that town." She set her cup in the sink, "You want to come shopping with me?"

It was a question, but she knew it was rhetorical. The look in his eyes told her he wasn't going to let her out of his sight. That could be a bother sometime in the future, but it would be fun for the weekend. "Sure, I guess, that would be fun."

Chapter 20

Sarah experienced none of her familiar uncertainty until she had the day's purchases piled high on her bed. When it struck though, it came with a magnified force. On the way back from the mall she had totaled up her purchases to be a little over three thousand three hundred dollars. On the bed there was a large pile of clothing, but not that large. What had she done? She'd gone shopping with Sara that's what she'd done. She'd listened to her, and now she was going to have live with it. They were nice clothes, she admitted, glad that Jon had gone back to the motel to change, but they weren't her.

If she started dressing like an executive immediately people were going to think she was taking on airs. Her private aloof nature was sure to be viewed as snobbishness. She was sure they were going to despise her, besides, it was going to take more than a change of clothes for her to be able to carry this off. She realized she'd started a process that was going to get her fired. She wouldn't be able to handle the new responsibilities, and there was no way they'd make her a secretary again, so she was going to have to start somewhere new all over again.

And the haircut. What had gotten into her? Jon said he liked it, but what did he know? She'd had basically the same hair style for as long as she could remember, simple straight forward, easy to take care of. But now she was going to have to spritz, and moose and fiddle with it or else she'd look like a disaster. She glanced in the mirror and took a careful look. The wool suit fit nicely, but the blouse was cut in such a way that it showed off her breasts a little more than she was used to. Together the effect was good, but the problem was she didn't recognize herself.

It didn't do you any good to look good if you opened your mouth and made a fool out of yourself. This part was easy, making a fool out of herself came naturally.

She wanted to rush back to the store and return everything, but she knew she didn't have the guts to walk back in and ruin the sales woman's day. She sighed and took two of the suits to the closet. At least there was plenty of room for them, she thought. At the bottom of the pile was a box which contained some very sexy things. She'd bought them while Jon was taking a breather in a computer store. This went beyond crazy. What was she doing buying things that Madonna might buy? There was no way she was ever going to have the guts to put them on. She started to make room

for them in the back of her bottom drawer, but Sara stopped her. 'at least see how they look.'

"I know how they'll look," but she took a closer look at the bustier she was holding.

She needed to get out of the suit anyhow, she didn't want Jon to come back and find her modeling it. She wondered if he was coming back - he'd looked a bit overwhelmed as he'd helped her up stairs with all these things.

It was tight, it pinched a little and pushed her breasts up so she looked like she had more than she did. It didn't really cover them either, at least half her nipple showed above the rim of the bra. She was still wearing white cotton panties and she laughed at the sight in the mirror. She slipped them off and replaced them with a scrap of black silk. She posed in front of the mirror, too bad she'd never have the opportunity to wear it for a man. Something wasn't right though, and it wasn't until she stumbled over the box that contained the high heeled shoes that she realized what it was. She put them on and then went out into the hall where she could look at herself in the full length mirror on the closet door.

A little lipstick, a little rouge and she could get herself arrested on suspicion of prostitution. Sara had outfits like this, she'd even gone to a party once wearing one underneath a more demure dress. It had excited her, made a dull evening more interesting. Maybe she could wear it under her suits to work. No, she decided, she couldn't stand to wear something this tight all day. After all, it was designed to be taken off.

She wandered into the living room, and stared down at the town. she hadn't given it much thought all day, even though Jon had several times asked what she thought might be happening to the characters. She had sensed he had wanted to start playing again, but today she hadn't felt the need.

But now that she was there, she didn't have to think about the clothes, or about Monday, or wonder if Jon was actually going to come back.

'He'll be back. He'll be back sure as ducks fly south in the winter.' Sarah suspected that Sara was right. She sat down on the pillows where last night had gotten out of control and let herself go into Sara's apartment. Not really to her surprise Sara was wearing an outfit like hers. She seemed more comfortable in it. She was plotting a surprise for John when he got back from whatever he was doing. She was going to throw open the door, dressed, or undressed as she was, and before he could react she was going to drag him into the apartment. She would give him a kiss

that would stun him and leave him gasping for air. Then she would step back and let him get a good look at her.

Next she was going to slowly take off his clothes, but not let him touch her. She would drive him wild, she would have him bring her a drink, have him get her something to eat. Then she'd make him get dressed and go out and get something they didn't have. Champagne, perhaps. When he got back she'd be wearing a different outfit. Maybe the one with the tiny bra and the black leather g-string.

She'd make him pleasure her this time.

The buzzer squawked, and ripped her out of her fantasy. It was Jon. She went to the panel and buzzed him in. Then she turned and dashed to the bedroom. She kicked off her shoes and was starting to squirm into a pair of jeans, when she stopped. What was she doing? Sara knew what she was doing. There was a knocking at the door, she stood there with her pants half pulled up, then sat on the bed and kicked them off. He knocked again as she put on the high heels. 'Take your time. Let him wait a bit.' She walked to the door, and, after using the peephole to check that it was him and that there was no one else in the hall, she opened the door.

His mouth dropped open, she had to reach out into the hall and pull him in. As she kicked the door shut she held his head in her hands and gave him a kiss that forced him against the wall.

When she pulled back his eyes had that half glassy look again. 'Like shooting fish in a barrel.' He'd brought her flowers, she saw, good. She decided not to undress him before sending him out for champagne and snacks to fuel their bodies. Instead, she teased him through his clothes. Undressing him would just waste time. She took the flowers and held them in front of her bosom.

"John, I was wondering if you'd mind going out and picking up a few things for me, I could do it but I'd have to get dressed."

He shook his head violently. "I want champagne, and things to eat. Stop at the chinese place two blocks down, I want to eat gooey things for dinner, and things you can eat with your fingers too." She put a sexy huskiness in her voice as she said that and watched as he absorbed it. She'd never felt power like this before and she liked it.

"And get fruit and cheese for later. I'm going to want you to feed me grapes for desert." He stood rooted to the floor, unable to take his eyes off of her. "And one of those cans of whipped cream, that might be fun. We might need some quick energy."

"Anything else", he managed at last? He was able to keep his voice from croaking, but just.

"Surprise me. I like surprises. While you're shopping think about your fantasies. I think that tonight John is going to tell Sara some of his fantasies. Maybe she'll think they sound like fun. If there's anything you need for them get it."

She kissed him again and gently pushed him out the door. "I hope he doesn't have an accident, I'm not sure he's in any condition to drive."

'He'll be ok.' Sarah walked over to her bedroom window and watched as he emerged from the building. He looked up when he got to his car. He scanned the building looking for her windows. She thought of ducking back, but instead she blew him a kiss and bent forward to give him a flash of her breasts.

She tore into the bottom drawer, finding the things she'd wanted to hide earlier. She had what amounted to two other outfits. One was the tiny bra and g-string, the other was a see-through white lace bodysuit with had a matching robe. She'd save that one for the morning, she thought, as she pulled the little nothings out of the drawer.

Her mother's voice tried to fight it's way into her consciousness, but she beat it back. She looked at herself in the mirror, this outfit was nice, made her look like a sex kitten, but somehow it lacked the authority the other had possessed. Besides, she needed to trim her pubic hair if she was going to wear it. She put the first outfit back on and went back into the living room.

Sara was lying on the couch composing a song in her head. "When times are good - you forget the bad. And when they're bad it feels like they never were good." Sarah was tempted to take a glass of wine from the bottle they'd not quite killed the night before, but restrained herself. There'd be plenty of time for it later, besides she wasn't the one who was nervous. That was another first.

She thought about him running around the supermarket trying to decide between Cool Whip and the spray on kind. She wondered what kind of fantasies he had. It would be an interesting measure of him. She looked around the town idly, one of the houses on the other side was known to be where a man with fifty dollars could get some satisfaction. She wondered if she should take on that personality for the evening. It might allow her more freedom, after all Sara really wasn't all that wild. Well she'd see, if not the semi professional over on Elm Street, there was always the divorcee on River Road. She was the one to use if things got really wild, but of course she didn't think Jon capable of anything too wild.

*****tame version begin

o?"

"Sarah, this afternoon you told me to... to get things for my fantasies." She looked at him, he seemed very nervous and he was speaking very quickly. "Did you really mean that?"

"If I can sit here in an outfit that makes me feel like a French whore, you can do what ever you want."

"but what if you don't like it, what if it turns you off?"

Suddenly she realized that although she had shown him her deepest secrets, she still knew nothing about who he was inside. She grew impatient. "Get on with it, will you, I'm hungry?"

He nodded and without saying anything turned back into the kitchen closing the door behind him.

Sarah took a sip of champagne and savored the feeling in her mouth. It was good stuff. In a minute the door opened, and she almost dropped the glass.

He was dressed in formal evening wear, a tuxedo, no, she thought, it was white tie and tails. In his left hand he held a top hat and in his right a cane. It was really hard not to laugh, he looked so silly. He was trying to dance, but there wasn't much room, and he really

wasn't that good. He stopped after almost crashing into the table, and looked anxiously at her.

"I don't get it." She really didn't. She didn't know what she'd expected, maybe a tarzan outfit.

His face fell, he took a step backwards, but she reached out and took his hand.

"It's silly, I know.", he began.

"No more silly than this," she felt seriously underdressed. "Who or what are you?"

"Oh, I'm trying to be Fred Astaire, or like him. You see when I was growing up I liked old movies, and I thought that Fred and Ginger were the perfect couple. I wanted to be like him. He was always so at ease with women. I know it sounds silly."

"No, it's not silly, it's sort of cute. Sit down and tell me about it."

He sat, "Well like I said. I was always a bumblefoot when I was growing up. It's like I was the opposite to Fred. What ever he said sounded right, whatever i said was wrong."

"So what do you do with it?"

His face reddened, she tried to imagine how being so filly dressed could lead to anything embarassing. "Well, sometimes, I go to the Dance Studios in towns where I'm

working. You know the ones wherre they teach you to dance, but what you really do is buy companionship, or at least that's the way it is in some of them. But what I do more often is put it on in my motel room and dance around."

She tried to imagine that, Fred Astaire in a Holiday Inn, she smiled. "It can't be much fun alone."

He reddened even more, "Well I'm not exactly alone."

"What do you mean?"

"Well I've got one of those inflatable dolls, you know the ones where," he couldn't say it. "But I dress it up, I have a dress for it," he added hurriedly. And we dance."

"That sounds nice, I'm glad you got a dress for the doll though."

He nodded, yes well, sometimes later I take it off, if you know what I mean."

So she wasn't the only adult in the world who played with dolls. Hers had shrunk in size to the point that they were small plastic figures, but his was full size. She understood the depth of his loneliness. "I think I'd better get dressed a little."

His eyes were fixed on her breasts, "I can always take it off later too," she added.

In her room she put on the dress she sometimes wore when she was playing Sara. It was far racier than anything she would wear as Sarah. It was pretty fancy and she thought it wouldn't look too out of place with his outfit.

As she walked back to the table she saw from his expression that she'd made the right choice. He smiled and rose, coming towards her to take her hand. "You look wonderful my dear, shall we dine?"

Dinner was wonderful, between the champagne and the candles, she was able to forget they were eating take out chinese.

He was really into the role. He kept up a pratter about his life as a dancer, going from town to town.

Afterwards he put a tape on her stereo and they danced in her bedroom, the room with the largest amount of free floorspace. She tried to keep from imagining him doing this with an inflatable doll. It was fun, in a strange sort of way, harmless, she thought, as he led her into a dip, lost his balance and they both fell on to the bed.

He started to get up, but she reached up and took ahold of his lapel. "Fred wasn't one to let an opportunity go by, was he?"

"I should say not," he relaxed into an embrace. The one trouble with his fantasy was that it involved a lot of clothes which had to be removed, she thought. but then he surprised her, no, "don't take them off I like to wear this."

She let him lead on, felt him lift her dress and pull her panties down. She got only a glimpse of his penis as he unzipped his fly and mounted her. It was strange wearing clothes, She wanted to touch him and feel skin instead of cloth. His hat fell off about half way through and he spent a minute maneuvering so that he could retrieve it.

He tried to sing along with the music on the tape, but had a lousy voice, and didn't really know all the words. She began to drift, maybe Sara could find a way to enjoy it.

Sara too found it hard at first, but then thought of a fantasy. This man was important to her. They had been apart for what seemed like ages. They had met as they were each going into an awards dinner, and their compulsion had reached up and grabbed them. There wasn't much time,

they were in a little cramped room from which they would soon emerge and take their seats in the banquet hall. She was not expecting to win any of the awards she'd been nominated for, not this year, not the first year she was a nominee, for her it was enough just to be nominated.

Theirs was an illicit love, he was married, and could not leave, they would not see each other again for months, and in a way it was symbolic that their mating be this way.

She felt him shudder and moan, and then quickly pull out.

She had not felt that much, but that wasn't the role he played in her life. He was her first connection with the big time, and that would probably give give him fucking rights for a while. One day it would end, and that would be all. She pulled on her panties, and smoothed her dress the best she could, then she led him out of the room ducking into the banquet hall from behind a well placed potted palm.

Back at the town, she tried to remember where the various threads of the story had left off.

Sara was going to have a concert, to see if she liked it enough to try going on tour. John was out in the audience, she looked at him and saw that he was having

trouble concentrating. "What is it? You're not in the mood for this?" Sarah waved her hand to indicate the town.

*****tame version end

*****KInk version

Chapter 21

It got wild, but not in any way Sarah had expected. When Jon did not return in half an hour she settled in to play in the town. She decided a quick visit to the area she called Peyton Place would keep her in the mood, so she visited the apartment complex which was populated by an assortment of students, young single professionals and an assortment of hangers on who wanted to associate with a swinging crowd. She didn't even bother to try and keep the names straight; the men were referred to as hunk1, hunk2, smooth talker and the like, while the women were known as the blonde, the drunken redhead, and Ms STD. A group congregated at the hunk(1)'s place. There was lots of drinking, and enough drugs to sedate half of Beirut, and when the characters themselves forgot their names they slithered out of their clothes and abandoned them selves to the call of the aroused organ.

When Jon did finally arrive, he had so much stuff he had to make two trips to his car. While he went to get the second load Sarah took a peek inside the bag. There was Champagne (at last), two kinds of whipped cream, enough chinese food for two days, and a bag of fruits and cheese. She didn't have long to wonder about what else he'd bought because he was back in a minute with two large shopping bags. He ordered her out of the kitchen telling her dinner would be served in fifteen minutes. When she protested, she wanted some cold bubbles now, he got forceful and closed the door on her.

She went back into the living room, but found she had no interest in being a voyeur to imagined sex. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him emerge several times from the kitchen to set the small table in the foyer. When he has done it sported a tablecloth, two tapered candles, and an air of elegance.

Then there was silence from the kitchen for an extended period, and she occupied herself by fussing with the town. Move a tree here, plant a shrub there but her mind wasn't on it. She was ready, and when he called, "Sarah, you can come now," she quickly got to her feet and walked to the

table. He had disappeared back into the kitchen for a moment, and returned holding out a tulip shaped glass of bubbly for her. She took it. He moved over and pulled out a chair for her. She waited for him to sit, but he stayed off to her side. Was he waiting for her to say something? "Jon, this is really beautiful, why don't you sit down too?"

"Sarah, this afternoon you told me to... to get things for my fantasies." She looked at him, he seemed very nervous and he was speaking very quickly. "Did you really mean that?"

"If I can sit here in an outfit that makes me feel like a French whore, you can do what ever you want."

"but what if you don't like it, what if it turns you off?"

Suddenly she realized that although she had shown him her deepest secrets, she still knew nothing about who he was inside. She grew impatient. "Get on with it, will you, I'm hungry?"

He nodded and without saying anything turned back into the kitchen closing the door behind him.

Sarah took a sip of champagne and savored the feeling in her mouth. It was good stuff. In a minute the door opened, and she almost dropped the glass. Now she knew why he'd been nervous. He was wearing an outfit as ridiculous as hers, but not the leopard spotted mini-briefs she half expected. Around his neck was a leather collar from which a chain dog leash dangled. And that was all. In his hand he held a briefcase which he set down on the edge of the table. 'What ever you do, don't laugh,' Sara admonished.

She looked at him, she wasn't sure she'd ever seen anybody so scared. She was stunned, never in her wildest dreams had she seen her self as a dominator. She'd spent her life as a victim and the thought had never been more than a vague fantasy. But now that it was here, it did have a certain appeal. She had liked being in control this morning, she remembered.

She reached out and took the end of the leash and pulled him a little closer. She tugged downward and said, "Aren't slaves supposed to kneel?"

He almost fell to his knees, as a look of relief spread across his face. What should she do now? She was hungry, she needed time to think. She took another sip of champagne, stealing a glance down at him. "The food is getting cold, serve me, better yet, feed me." She sat back in the chair. He rose to his feet and began piling food on her plate which he set in front of her. She pointed to one item, "That first."

He dipped a fork in the food and delivered it to her mouth. It was good, but her sensation of taste was overwhelmed by an incredible feeling of power which was much stronger than the wine. He withdrew the fork and she pointed to another item and again he fed it to her. This selection was bland and had a texture she didn't like. She grabbed his other hand and spit it out into his palm. He looked shocked, she took a sip of the champagne to wash the taste out of her mouth.

"Don't just stand there, prepare me a fresh plate." He nodded rapidly and scurried into the kitchen. When he returned the offending item was no longer on the plate and had been replaced by another.

She found no fault with his new selection and leaned back farther, imagining herself as a Roman Noblewoman, the wife of a Caesar perhaps, being fed by her slave. Once he dropped a small bit of something onto her. It fell onto the top of one of her breasts, and he started to reach down to wipe it away. She stopped him, "are you clumsy or are you looking for an excuse to touch me?"

She'd had enough for now anyway and she wanted to see what was in the briefcase. She stood, "Refill this glass, and bring it and the briefcase to me." She moved away from the table. Where should she go, the town didn't call her, but the bedroom seemed premature. The bubbly was sneaking up on her, she was beginning to think that this whole thing was normal. It had to be the bedroom she decided, there just wasn't enough space in the room which contained the model town. She saw his eyes brighten as she saw him enter the bedroom. He handed her the glass, and set the briefcase down on the bed. She nodded at it and he opened it and began to set its contents out on the bed.

It was quite an assortment. Many things she could figure out, the handcuffs, the leather strap, the gag and blindfold, but there were other things. She looked at herself in the mirror, she did look like a woman who could get a man to do anything for her.

"You'd better tell me about this. Start from the beginning, tell me everything. If I get bored I'll tell you to move on."

She moved to the head of the bed and sat in a lotus position with her back against the headboard.

He nodded and sank to his knees. He kept his head bowed as he spoke, "I don't know how it started. My mother never beat me, I was a good student, but when I was bad I never got punished." He paused for a moment, "I never was any good at anything except school. I had about two dates in all of high school, and both of them were disasters. In college it was pretty much the same, until in my sophomore year I went out with a woman

who got drunk and then got verbally abusive. She told me I was a wimp, and that I didn't deserve to go out with women. She was pretty pissed off at men in general, and she told me there was no way I ever was going to touch her. I found that I was getting excited by that. I didn't like her saying that to me, but in a way I did, you see she was paying attention to me. She told me what she'd like to do to a certain man who'd been a shit to her, and I wanted her to do it to me. I never saw her again, and I even found another woman who was as shy and awkward as me. We dated some, but I just really wasn't interested. Then one day I went to a porno movie, and it had a man being tied up by a woman who was dressed in black leather. She humiliated him, she beat him, and I was really turned on. It also made me feel like a freak. I always knew I was different, but now I really had proof."

"After college I got this job, and it was good because I moved around so much I never had to get to know anybody. I used to go to topless bars and imagine the women there were teasing me, and, for a few dollars, they would. Then one night I was in this place in New York, and this woman picked up on me right away. She told me she'd do what I wanted, but I'd have to pay her," He looked up briefly, then swallowed and started again. "After she got off work she took me to her place where she made me take off my clothes and dance for her. Then she tied me to a hook set in the wall and she proceeded to tease me by rubbing gently against me. When I got hard she started cursing me and got out a strap and beat me."

"It's funny, it hurt, but it felt good at the same time. The more she hit me the harder I got until I thought I was going to explode. Then she stopped and told me to get dressed and get out."

He looked longingly at the glass she held in her hand. She was tempted to give him a sip, but instead took a drink herself. Sarah found herself wanting him to lick a few drops of wine off of her foot, and she followed her instinct. She poured a little on her foot, "You can lick this off."

He practically leaped at the chance, and would have licked her far longer than necessary except that she pulled her foot back.

"Go on."

He went back to kneeling, "Yes mistress, I went back to the bar every night for two weeks. I gave her hundreds of dollars. I bought her presents, and every day she treated me worse. When I told her that I had to leave town the next day, she really let me have it. She did all sorts of things to me,"

"What sorts of things?"

He looked up, he was blushing, at last he answered, "She put something up my ass, she pissed on me, she pinched me, then at the very end she let me masturbate in front of her. I never touched her."

Well, if you have to be a whore, that's certainly the way to do it, Sarah thought.

"I found women like her in other places, once one woman locked me in a closet for a whole weekend except when she wanted to do something to me. Then on Sunday afternoon she opened the door and there were three of her friends outside. She told me that she was going to let them beat me. When they were done I was told to get dressed and shoved out the door." That time was almost too much, but I liked it more than I didn't"

"I laid off for a while after that, I've got porno videos, and books that I use in my room at the motel, but it's not the same."

He paused, "When was the last time you did it," Sarah asked?

"That time, about three months ago. It's funny I think I would have done it this weekend if I hadn't met you."

"That's why you liked it so much when I was on top of you this morning."

"Yes, I liked that. It isn't that I don't want to have sex, but the women who will do the other things I like won't. So to get what I want I have to accept that and then go home and do it my self."

"You mean masturbate?"

"Yes."

It was amazing. she'd never talked with a man about sex, let alone weird sex, like this. "You like to be beaten?"

"Yes... I know it sounds bad."

"Enough of that. All I want now are yes or no answers."

He lowered his eyes, "yes mistress."

She reached out to some things that were attached to a chain, "what are these?"

He opened his mouth, but didn't answer, she realized she had told him only to say yes or no. He took them and clamped them onto his nipples. It must have hurt because he grimaced some. She pointed to another chain item. He took it and fastened it around his penis, which she saw was becoming erect.

"But you like to have sex too?"

"Yes, mistress."

"But maybe you want to have to earn it, is that it?"

"Yes, yes mistress."

She pointed to some leather rings, and he slipped them on his wrists and ankles. She saw how she could tie him up with almost no work. There were some video cassettes in the case too. Sarah decided she needed lessons. "Pick out a video put it on, then go clean up dinner."

He hurried to comply, she was getting used to how funny he looked. She needed time to sort this out. She wasn't ready to actually do anything to him yet.

The video was a revelation. She knew that s/m existed, even had included it in her fantasies some, but had never suspected it was this elaborate. The man in the video was being tormented by a woman who was wearing an outfit like hers, except that it was made of black leather. There were no special effects in this movie, she was really beating the bejesus out of him. She made him crawl around, she made him bring her the whip, then attach himself to the chain. Parts of it seemed very extreme to her, but other parts excited her. Especially the part where she had him tied on the bed and she teased him by touching his penis first with a feather then, lightly, with a strap. If it had been her she would have put his penis inside her at the end instead of ignoring it.

By the time he got back she had convinced herself that she could do some of it.

He hadn't thought to bring fresh champagne or the fruit, so she sent him back for it. She still felt funny about hitting him, so she said, "Are you sure you want me to go on?"

"Yes mistress, please."

"What exactly do you want me to do to you?"

"What ever you want, but I want to be beaten. I've been a bad slave. I deserve to be punished."

The bedroom was on an outside corner of the building, and she was sure nobody would hear them, but she put the gag in his mouth to be sure. She put on the television to create some background noise, and then had him help her tie him up.

On a whim she put the blindfold on him and spent a couple of minutes looking at him. He was trembling, she watched television for a minute, then with no warning slapped his rump hard.

He jerked against the restraining chains and she saw his member was very hard.

"So you like that?"

He nodded.

She'd taken the clamps off his nipples earlier, and now she put them back on. It was a turn on seeing him helpless before her. It opened up

large new vistas for her. In her limited experience she'd never had a man give her oral sex. Suddenly she saw that if she brought a chair into the room she could sit on it and he could do it from the position he was chained in. Later she'd have him trim her pubic hair so she could wear the leather g-string.

She left to get the chair thinking that even Sara would be amazed at this evening. For the first time ever Sarah had eclipsed her secret self.

When she returned she put the chair in front of him. "Would you like to earn the privilege of giving me oral sex?"

He nodded rapidly. She picked up the strap. "How shall you earn it?" she swung the strap hitting his ass. "Like this?"

He nodded again. "How much should I charge? How does five strokes for a minute sound."

He nodded, "No that's too cheap. We'll make it ten."

She just wanted a minute's worth to see if she really liked it. She meant to not hit him too hard, but she found it was easy to get into it. She liked the soft muffled moans, the way his body strained at the chains, and the way his ass was starting to get red. She ended up paying him for three minutes before she stopped.

When she took the gag off he said, "thank you mistress i deserved that."

It was a little uncomfortable on the chair so she released him and lay on the edge of the bed. "Do you know how to do this?" She asked just before he began.

"One of my mistresses trained me."

Although there was nothing to compare it with, he had been trained well, she thought before she slipped into an envelope of pleasure. She had meant to keep track of how long he did it, but that notion slipped far from her mind.

After another historic orgasm, she told him to stop. He was really into it and it took him a moment to slow and stop.

He was still erect and she thought about having sex, but decided she wanted a drink first.

She made him fill her glass and then took it and drank it as quickly as you could drink champagne.

She wondered if she was doing it right, but a look at him told her that she was. He was kneeling, with a look of devotion in his eyes, and a smile on his face. A real mistress would beat him for that, she thought. she didn't want to, but she needed to keep control. After all that was what he

wanted wasn't it? She needed to pee, in the movie the woman had done it on the man, but it had turned her off. She leaned forward and stroked his cheek. "You've been a good slave, so I'll forgive you looking at me." She left him and went into the bathroom. There she gathered up scissors and a razor. She wanted to wear the leather g-string, it would turn him on.

Lying there while he trimmed her pubic hair was utterly bizarre. It wasn't sex, exactly, but it excited her having someone else do something to her which was so intimate that she was embarrassed to do it for herself.

When she looked at her self in the mirror she was amazed. It was by far the sexiest move she could have made. He'd taken off a little more than was needed to keep it from showing when she wore the g-string, but it looked good. It was wicked. She liked being wicked. She stood close to him as she pulled the leather up over her sex and then lightly rubbed it against his face.

She decided she wanted a massage, and unfastened all of his chains. He alternated between rubbing her back and feeding her grapes. It was too much of an effort to sit up and drink wine, so she let it go, besides she didn't want to get drunk. For the first time ever sex didn't require it.

While he rubbed her she made him tell her all the things the other women had done to him and how he had liked it. Some of the women really sounded sick, she thought, but then she reminded herself she was being massaged by a man who responded when she called him "Slave".

Since she had taken off the too tight bustier when he 'd given her the massage she decided it would not be a bad time to have her way with him.

She spanked him again, then tied him down to the bed. She spent a long time in foreplay, having him eat her, and teasing him with the strap. The nipple clamps really gave her control of him and as she swung her leg over him she realized it was sort of like riding a horse. She took it slow, she made it last for a long time, giving pleasure for a moment than taking it away. If he thrust trying for more she jerked on the clamps, and he'd fall back. In the end it was she who gave in, she wanted him filling her and plunged down onto him, and in a moment they were both crying out in the wordless sounds of biological function at it's peak.

In the morning he made her breakfast and she had him wash her when she took a shower. When she was done with that she was a little tired of his puppy dog thing, so she told him to quit being a slave. He put on his clothes and was getting ready to leave, but she stopped him. "You don't have to leave yet. I just want to be Jon and Sarah for a while."

He started to bend his knees, then realized he didn't have to kneel. She realized he'd thought she was sending him away. "Unless you want to go," she added.

"No, I don't want to go. I was afraid that you were tired of me."

"Tired of the slave but not of you, does that make sense?"

She was dressed in jeans and a loose shirt and noticed that it felt a little funny to be wearing clothes.

He nodded. "Yes, but I've got to tell you that this weekend has been the best that ever happened to me."

She nodded, "me too. I'm amazed at how we trusted each other with our secrets. It was pretty scary - and," she paused this was something she'd been thinking of off and on all morning, "There's something else a little scary. What about tomorrow? I mean should we talk about that?"

"Yeah, I guess we ought to. It wouldn't be good for people to know that we're doing what we're doing," he caught an alarmed look on her face, "no I don't mean the specifics, but even that we're friends outside the office."

"Yes, there would be a lot of talk, especially about my promotion."

"I don't think it has to be a problem. The way I've been thinking about us this weekend is that here we're like characters in that town, and there we'll be ourselves."

"I think you have it backwards. Right now I feel more like myself than I ever have, at work I feel like a made up character."

"Maybe, I don't think it's important. I feel good now, but when I'm at work I've always felt more in control. Maybe it's a character, but it's a character I'm good at. I don't think I've ever been much good at being me, I guess it's like I'm a different character here."

"Are you embarrassed at what we did?" She had no idea why she asked the question, and wondered how she'd answer it.

It took him a minute too, "In a way, I mean I would never want anyone else to find out, but I don't feel ashamed that you know."

That was pretty close to what she felt, but something was nagging at her. "I know this will make me sound like a slut, and we just got our clothes on, but do you think we could make it again this afternoon, but this time not have to be drunk, or dressed up in costumes." She paused, "you see, before yesterday I was always drunk when I got laid. Last night I wasn't drunk exactly, but it wasn't really two people just making love." His eyes took on a hurt look, she continued quickly, "It was fun, I really enjoyed

my self, but I want to well, round out the weekend, if you know what I mean?"

He stepped closer and took her in his arms. She remembered how Sara had felt on the beach a week ago. Maybe their souls would shed their clothes too.

*****end kink version

Chapter 22

Jon left at six, Sarah got up fifteen minutes later and spent half an hour deciding which suit to wear. After a quick shower she foraged breakfast from the sizable pile of leftovers in the fridge. Then, when she could avoid it no longer she got dressed in what she decided was simply a change of costume and headed for the bus stop.

There were going to be a lot of new people to get along with. She wondered if she'd be able to resist a bully any better than she had Mr. Smith. That had been a mistake, she now saw, there had been no reason for her to have taken his abuse for the past three years. She knew she couldn't let the Axe start off intimidating her. She didn't know how she could avoid it, but she knew she had to try if she had any chance at surviving.

This morning she ordered her coffee to go, and got to the office fifteen minutes earlier than normal. The gnomes had been at work, her name was painted on the glass of her outer office, and there was a pile of paper on her desk waiting for her.

Actually she was glad to have something specific to do. It took her an hour to answer three inquiries which Smith would have turned into a full day's work. Then she turned her attention to the request from McCormick to write up a detailed step by step account of how she prepared the report.

It turned out to be quite an undertaking. Every time she thought she was finished with a section, she would remember a couple of exceptions, or other things that had to be looked at. At ten thirty she got a call from her new supervisor, Ms Phillips.

She'd always been able to pretty much avoid Ms Phillips who everyone referred to as the axe. She was reported not to trust others to do anything, and was constantly looking over your shoulder. And, it was said, never gave second chances and fired people as quickly as a rattlesnake struck.

She had an office which was about twice the size of Sarah's and she felt as though she'd walked into the insides of a gigantic Swiss watch. The Axe was on the phone and waved for her to sit in a chair in front of the desk. As she sat Sara peeked around the desk and saw that the woman's chair was on a low, raised platform. She'd heard about that. It was a way of intimidating the underlings forcing them to look up slightly to her. Sarah was very glad she'd gone out and bought good clothes.

"Sarah, it's good to meet you. I see you're wearing a new suit, that's good because appropriate dress was a point I was meaning to bring up with you." She crossed something off of her pad. "Now, we've got a big job ahead of us, and I want you to know how I operate." She locked her eyes on Sarah, who had to fight being transfixed by the gaze. "I don't put up with any foolishness. I'd been telling them to get rid of Smith for a year now, but they did not want to hear it. I told them a halfway competent secretary could do his job as a part of her other work, and you know I'm right." Sarah felt obliged to give a little nod. She didn't like the way this was going at all. The woman took a breath and continued, "Now I don't want you to think that I have anything against you, but I must tell you that I argued against your promotion. I don't think your position requires managerial status. They told me they would add some responsibilities to the position, and all I can tell you is that it is going to be a very busy three to six months for you."

"Don't let me scare you, I am fair, and if I think you are doing a good job I will have no problem ending your probation." Probation, this was the first time anyone had mentioned it, but Sara was not surprised.

"You will be reporting directly to me. I want you to understand how I work. I want you to come to me if you have a problem or if you are making an assumption that is not based on facts. One reason they are in the mess they are is because they made assumptions which proved to be wrong. Second, I will expect your work done on schedule, but if it is delayed I want to know about it before it comes due." Sarah realized she'd probably find it easier to put in a lot of overtime than have to tell her that something was going to be late. She waited for Sarah to nod, then went on, "and finally, as I said, I do not tolerate sloppy, lazy work. I will hold you responsible for those who will be working under you. You tolerated a lot from Smith, I think you should have reported him, but you were not required to do so because he was your boss."

"It is completely different with people who work for you. You'll have to be a tough boss. Maybe you can do it, but if you can't stand having some people hating you, and can't stomach firing people then you'll never make it working for me."

"In fact," a crafty look crossed her face. "when you get the new people for training I'm going to include a couple I was getting ready to fire myself. It's going to be a test to see if you can figure out which ones they are."

Bitch, what a cold bitch she is, thought Sarah.

"You don't like that, I can see it on your face, well that's fine. I don't think there's any room in business for friendship. We're here to get a

job done. If it means that you hate me, that's ok. But before you go out of here in tears, I want to assure you that I don't have to like you to recommend that you be kept on, and that you've already shown some good sense."

"Personnel told me you wanted to wait before hiring a secretary, that's good, because I don't think you'll need one. A lot of people would have asked for one because of the status or because they are lazy. I take that as a good sign. I may be pushy, but I pay attention to what's going on around me." She pushed back her chair, "anyway, believe it or not, you are getting the easy version of the 'welcome to my department speech.' If you'd come in here dressed like a secretary I would have blown you out of the water, dress is very important, you know." She smiled and checked her watch, "I've got six minutes, let me tell you a story, maybe it'll make you feel better."

"One time they assigned a young man to my division. He got here on a Friday and by the end of day had hired a secretary and an administrative assistant. He'd put in an order for new furniture, including carpeting." She shook her head, "he was a charming man, he dressed well and was pretty bright, but I wasn't having any of it. On Monday morning he sat in the same chair you're in and heard me tell him he was history. He made the mistake of asking why and I told him. When I was done I'd gone fifteen minutes into the next appointment, and he left without another word."

"I can believe it."

"So you're not afraid to talk, that's good. Oh, one last thing, never contradict me in a meeting. Never. If I say something that is incorrect it is because you didn't tell me what was right beforehand. If I make a judgement call you can take it up with me later, if you dare. Any other questions?"

Sarah was determined not to go out of there cowed. Sara told her that she needed to show some spunk or this woman would make her life miserable. "Just a couple. First, because I like to take a nap after lunch could you make sure that I'm not scheduled for any meetings between one and three? And second, about the company car, I'd like it in pale blue with a white interior."

She stood, "Thanks." She watched the woman's face. For a moment it began to get red and she'd taken in a deep breath, but then she'd stopped.

Slowly a smile, a faint one, but definitely a smile, spread across her face. After a moment she nodded, her eyes still locked with Sarah's. "Very good, you know, I think there may be hope for you after all."

Sarah nodded and left the office.

The secretary was staring at the door as she emerged,

"What," asked Sarah?

"There was an office pool about how long you'd last with her, and if you'd come out in tears."

Sarah smiled, "no tears, but then I used to wrestle grisly bears in a circus."

The woman laughed, but looked scared, wondering if The Axe had heard. Sarah left the office and made her way back to her own, she didn't care if she'd been over-heard.

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The prospect of working for this dinosaur seemed like a quick path to destruction. There was no way she would get through six months with her without making a mistake. The humor had been a last ditch effort at maintaining some semblance of sanity, and she wondered how it would work in the long run.

She wondered what made that battle axe tick. She wondered what secrets lay behind her impregnable exterior. People were full of surprises, but she was sure sex didn't figure into this one, unless, no that would be too much. Maybe she raised orchids, or plants that ate kittens.

Sarah didn't really care, but she suspected it would be interesting whatever it was.

She worked on the documentation on the report for the next two hours until her stomach told her it was time to go and get something to eat. It was later than she usually went out and the salad bar held rather slim pickings. On a whim she went into the small Italian Restaurant across the street and ordered a piece of Lasagna. It was a lot more than she normally ate for lunch, but she deserved it, especially since she passed on the wine, an act that she thought virtuous until she realized that she could never ever let The Axe smell alcohol on her breath. She tried not to think about her knowing it just would make her nervous. Instead she thought back to the weekend and basked in the knowledge that under her suit there was a woman, a woman who could be a sexual tornado if she chose to.

By four thirty she had the report more or less under control. There were things she couldn't put in, like to call one office in the morning because they took long and liquid lunches and the afternoon figures were usually more closely related to the number of martini olives in a jar than what she was after. She also couldn't put in that you should ask Mary Anne about her daughter, who had been sick and a few other things that made that part of the job human.

She was running a copy of her draft off when the door to her office opened and The Axe walked in. Sarah waved and bent back to make sure the paper was feeding properly, "Hi, what can I do for you?"

"I want the report that McCormick told you to write."

"I'm printing it off now, it's only a first draft I'm afraid." This must be one of her tests, barge in and ask for an assignment that didn't even have a due date. Trying to catch her goofing off, she guessed.

The woman stopped, did she look a little surprised? Sarah decided to follow it up, "I did it after taking care of this correspondence." Thank god she hadn't mailed them off, ""Would you like to review them?"

The woman took the letters from her and read them quickly. Her eyebrows went up, "Is this the kind of thing Smith sent out?"

Sara paused, what could be wrong with the letters, she wondered? "Not exactly, he had a way of wording things that usually meant they had to write back for a clarification. I changed some of that."

The woman nodded, "Very well, would you mind if I took a look at the other."

The printer was still spitting out pages, "Of course," Sarah pulled out the sheets which were already printed and handed them to her.

The Axe settled into a chair and began to read. Sarah couldn't resist watching her out of the corner of her eye while she did some unnecessary things on the computer. The printer finished and she pulled the last two sheets off waiting for the woman to request them.

About half way through the third page the woman looked up, "What's this here, you say that the information about the renewals is off by as much as 50 percent. That can't be."

"I said that the data is incorrect about half the time, and that the amount it is off is usually under ten thousand dollars. That is about 5 percent of the total. Sometimes less."

"How can the data be wrong half the time?" She was obviously upset, after all it came from her department.

"That's easy, you collect the data for the month and report on the first, right?"

The Axe moved her head slightly. "The checks from the customers arrive throughout the month, but most at the end of the month, because nobody is ever in a rush to pay an insurance bill. With the mail what it is checks often don't arrive until after the report is in. The trouble is they aren't included in the next month's tally either because the policies didn't fall due in that month." She paused, "if I call around the fifth I can usually get them all. There is one problem though that happens all the time."

"What's that?"

"Well according to Pauline, usually a few checks bounce each month. If we deduct them from the amount and they clear in the next go

round, it will probably be too late to include them in the report. I've been sticking them in the next month's tally, so the year end totals are more or less correct."

"More or less correct isn't good enough for me."

"The way I see it, you've got an endless stream of checks coming in here. There are bound to be problems. Sometimes people put the check they wrote for the phone bill in our envelope. Did you know that sometimes we miss things like that and so do the banks, and we end up with really odd balances on the accounts."

"I didn't know that."

"I only knew because Mr. Smith had me try and sort out a complaint letter. You know. one of those that starts, "I have sent three letters to your damned computer, is there anybody there?" Anyway, I tracked it down and found out that this guy had put the check for his phone bill in our envelope, and our check in the electric company's envelope, and they had all cleared. He sent a photo copy of the canceled check, but it said Mountain States Electric on the back. It was a merry chase, but we eventually got it sorted out."

"Someone should have told me about this sort of thing."

"Do you really think anyone is going to come to you with bad news if they don't have to?"

"What do you mean? I have a standing order that I am to be notified on all problems."

Sarah was tired, "I would expect that any sane person would find a way to avoid that. You do tend to scare the hell out of your workers, especially those who don't want to get fired."

The Axe was angry, her face was getting red, Sarah wondered what her doctor said about her blood pressure. "And you think you can talk to me this way?"

"You told me to bring all problems to you. I am doing that."

"I also told you that I didn't take personality into account when I fired someone."

Sarah reached into her purse and pulled out her makeup case. She flipped it open, "Take a look at yourself, talking to you can be like having a cook out at a volcano. Who wants that?"

The woman brushed the mirror away. "Don't think humor is going to solve this one. You've got to take this out of the report."

Sarah understood now, the woman was sure it would make her look bad to McCormick.

"I can change the wording some, but so long as the current procedures exist I have to include how the report meshes with them."

"Those procedures will be changed in the morning."

"Are you going to send in your report on the tenth rather than the first?."

"No, the report is due on the first."

"So what are we going to do about the checks which are sent in late? We can't ignore them."

"They're late, we don't have to accept them. We'll send them back."

Sarah shook her head, "Look, you aren't thinking straight. You don't want to do that either. You'd have a real mess to sort out then."

"Don't you dare tell me how to do my job. You never should have been anything but a secretary. In fact..." there was a knock on the open door, McCormick, followed by Jon entered the room. Sarah saw that there was a small crowd gathered outside the office. She hadn't even noticed the door was open and she realized they had been pretty loud.

"I just came by to see how you were getting along, Sarah."

Sarah wondered how much he'd heard. She nodded, "Thank you, I've been working on assignment you gave me about the report."

"So I gathered, Jon would you mind waiting in my office, and closing the door on your way out?"

When Jon left Sarah saw a mixture of rage and fear in The Axe's eyes.

The president turned to Sarah, "So how are things going?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid."

He turned to The Axe, "Do you agree with her assessment?"

The Axe puffed up, "Yes. As I'm sure you heard me say, she should have remained a secretary."

"Do you agree with that Sarah?"

"If today is a true example of what being a manager her is like I would say so."

"You don't think it was a fair test."

Sarah gathered up the paper, and handed it to him. "It's only a first draft, but I'll let you be the judge of my output."

The Axe bristled, "We were discussing parts of that, you shouldn't read that yet."

"I'll be the judge of that," he started reading, walking over to the window as he did so.

It took a few minutes, Sarah used the time to make a copy on a floppy disk. The Axe was capable of coming in and destroying her data, she was sure.

"I knew it was a mess, but I didn't realize it was this bad." He turned to The Axe and asked, "What problems do you have with this?"

"The part about my department, it is misleading. She refused my suggestion to change the wording."

"It didn't sound like a suggestion to me. You said, 'take this out of the report.' did you not?"

"She provoked me."

The man smiled at that, "That would be a first. Ms Phillips how many people have you fired in your employ in with us?"

"One hundred fifty seven."

Holy shit thought Sarah. The man nodded, "and because you've gotten good productivity out of your group, even with the high turnover, we've not said anything to you about it, have we?"

"No, my evaluations have been positive."

"Except in one area."

"I've told you my job is not to be liked. My job is to see that the job gets done. I do that."

"I used to think so, but I am wondering about that now. You see I think Sarah may be right, nobody would dare tell you about a problem, because they are afraid you will fire them. I wonder how many things have gone unreported and ignored because of that?"

"There are no others."

Sarah didn't know if she should breath, let alone interrupt. She handed him the final two pages of the report. He stared at them and then began to read. After a moment he started to read aloud, "The figures for the northwest regional office are always incorrect in June. One company with which they have a large contract has a strange fiscal year. Because of book keeping requirements they issue no check after the fifteenth, instead sending it in with the payment for July. The branch does not include it in their June report, but can not include it in the July receipts either because it would indicate a surplus of payments over receivables and because it is payment for a previous month. However, since there is no way to re open the June records once the report is generated and distributed, it is never actually posted."

"Does this mean the check is never cashed?"

Sarah answered, "No, it's cashed, it is just never entered in the journal."

"That can't be," the woman stood up and reached for the paper. Sarah walked over to her files. "I'll show you on your reports." She pulled out a folder, "see I have it marked with a red tab. Here's June, it shows outstanding collections of two hundred thousand dollars. The company accounts for most of that, the rest are delinquent payments of one sort or another."

She pulled out the July report, "this shows outstanding collections for the month at thirty five thousand, that's about correct. But you will note that the year to date figure is thirty five thousand too. When we roll over to the fiscal year we start fresh here. Since the June figures are already in the published year end there is no way to correct them."

"I never knew about this."

Sarah had her cold on this one, but she hesitated to go for the kill. It just wasn't something she was used to doing. Sara gave her a little push, 'you got to go with what you got. If she survives she'll find a way to fire you inside a week.' It was true, she felt a bead of sweat run from her armpit down her ribs. She shook her head, "I wrote a memo from Mr. Smith to you about this two months ago to inform you that this problem was going to occur again this year. I used a lot of text from the one I wrote the year before when we discovered the problem."

"That's a lie."

"You can check in that drawer over there, A copy will be in a folder with your name on it."

The woman took two steps towards the filing cabinet, then stopped. "So it's the old write a memo, keep a copy, but lose the original trick is it? Well he won't fall for it."

"I'm afraid there's nothing to fall for. I remember something about this now. In June I got a call from the manager of that branch. He said he had tried to explain it to you, but you had become abusive, but there was nothing he could do about the problem at his end. I told him we were going to revamp the system and would try to eliminate the problem."

The Axe did not react immediately. She was looking at the ledger sheets intently, Sarah guessed she was trying to think up a new plan of attack. She felt good about holding her ground, but was sure her fate was still up in the air.

The Axe took a deep breath. She moved closer to McCormick and started speaking. "We go back a long ways. I don't think I have to remind you that I know where all the skeletons are buried. You used me to be your enforcer, and I went along with it because it conformed to my feelings on how this place should be run. I'm sure that I kept copies of

everything. I'm sure you know what I can do to you and this company if some of that ever came out. I never thought it would come to the point where I had to actually make the threat. So think about that, before you go siding with a secretary who got promoted above her head."

Sarah really wanted to say something, but before she could come up with the right way to start, McCormick looked at her and said, "Sarah, would you mind leaving now, I'll talk with you tomorrow."

Sarah was more than glad to get out of there. She wondered what she would be coming in to tomorrow.

Chapter 23

She hadn't been home more than twenty minutes when the buzzer spat out its greeting. She wondered if Jon could tell her anything, as she waited for him to come up.

He appeared a little hesitant as he came in, and she immediately thought the worst. When she asked, he replied, "No, I don't know anything. He never came back to the office so I left."

Sarah's relief allowed her to take a deep breath, "I was worried because you seemed nervous when you came in."

"I guess I am. I don't know who I am right now. I mean I spent some time today thinking about the weekend, and the more I thought the more confused I became. On Friday we were a drunken coupling, and I liked that. On Saturday it turned into two people acting out wild fantasies, and I was in seventh heaven. Last night we were just two lovers, and as much as it was something that I have to say I never had before, and spent most of my life wishing I had, it made me nervous. I was afraid you wouldn't want to see me. I was afraid you would want to see me too much. Sarah, what I'm saying is that when I'm not talking about or working on computers I'm a geek. Maybe that's why I like my job so much. I just felt like I was an imposter, like I was out of place. Going to a woman's apartment isn't something I'm used to doing."

Sarah smiled, "I've got some of those feelings too, you got to remember I'm not exactly together myself, but you want to know something strange, with all of the things I had to do today this is easy. I felt really out of place sitting in that office. Do you know what helped, this will sound crazy, but I thought about the Sara from the town a lot. She would have been able to handle it I knew, and so I listened to myself I guess when she gave me advice. Now who's the crazy one here?"

She moved to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of wine. "I'll tell you one thing, I know that I need a couple glasses of this to get me relaxed." As she poured she continued, "Maybe it would be easier if we went back to the town and pretended we were people who didn't have to worry about being able to have a relationship."

He brightened at that. "I was thinking that, but I guess I was afraid to ask."

She poured him a glass too. "The first thing I'm going to do is have The Axe get involved in something real messy. Maybe a car accident, and the police find out she's been drinking and toss her in jail. There's a real

tough whore in the same cell, maybe like one of those women you went to, and when she gives the whore some shit." She moved out of the kitchen, "Yeah that sounds kind of good, what do you think?"

Chapter 24

Sarah enjoyed watching as The Axe watched her orderly world fall apart. The policeman, who had, six months ago lost a sister to another drunk driver would not have cared if she'd been the queen of Sheeba. She was his second bust of the night and the back seat of the squad car was still slick from the vomit left by the previous occupant. They'd booked her for DWI and made sure she understood that there would be other charges depending on the severity of the injuries to the people in the other car. Sarah had debated injuring her too, but decided that it would be better if she was unscathed until she got inside the cell.

The Axe was going to be in the cell at least overnight. Her lawyer was out of town, and she couldn't think of anyone else who would come to her aid at that hour of the night, if ever.

The guards had taken an instant dislike to her and her attitude, and spent some time deciding if she should go in with the leather clad biker's mama who was coming off of a night of drugs, and was in a foul mood because her old man had put a young blonde thing on the back of his bike and ridden off into the sunset. She'd been arrested after destroying her apartment with a sledge hammer and then driving her car through the front of the bar which served as a clubhouse for the bikers.

The other choice was a woman who had been arrested for blasting a video store into small plastic pieces with a shotgun, and who claimed to be on a mission from god. She had the added bonus of being able to shriek in a very high pitched voice for extended periods of time.

In the end they compromised, they put The Axe in with the biker, but moved the screamer to a position across the hall from them.

It was unfortunate that Ms Phillips closely resembled the biker's mother, a woman against whom she had enough unresolved issues to keep a team of psychiatrists busy for a decade. It was also unfortunate that Ms Phillips was unable to keep herself from sneering at the woman the moment she was shoved into the cell. She compounded it by shouting, "You'll be sorry, I'm an important person," at the back of the departing jailer.

"Oh, so we have an important person here, do we. Well maybe you would like the bottom bunk."

"I should say I would," she said as she moved towards it. The biker waited until she was close, then kicked her in the stomach. The Axe folded like a jack-knife and was only dimly aware that the other woman had gotten off the bed.

She noticed though when she was grabbed by the hair and slammed face first into the wall. "well you can't have it."

She turned to face the other woman, and saw her own sneer returned. "Hey Miss Important Person, you've got a nice set of duds there. Please allow me the privilege of checking out that jacket." When The Axe was slow to comply the woman moved a step closer. Wordlessly The Axe complied and handed the jacket to the other woman. The woman tossed it onto the bed without looking at it. "Thanks. Say that's a nice watch, I don't suppose you'd like to trade it for mine?" She held out her arm on which there was a cheap plastic watch. Then with a lightning fast move she grabbed The Axe's wrist.

In a reflex move The Axe swung her other hand and by luck slapped the biker on the face. That woman ignored the blow and delivered a counter punch to the nose which broke and bloodied it.

All resistance was ended by the pain, and she hardly felt as her watch was stripped from her wrist. Nor did she feel the kick by a booted foot which slammed her head into the wall and ended all contact with reality.

In another part of the jail Greg was waiting anxiously for his lawyer to get back to him. He'd been denied bail because they were actually charging him with murder, and he was finding the conditions as bad as The Axe was.

Some of the cops had thought that the charge was kind of funny, but they also recognized that he was the kind who had enough lawyers to keep him from doing serious time. They derived a certain satisfaction from seeing that some justice was served, and decided it would be poetic to put him in a cell with a man who had the same sexual proclivities as he did, except he didn't care which sex he was humping.

Greg was worried about AIDS now, and about how often the man liked sex. He'd doubted the man's claim that he could do it five times a night, but after the third assault he wasn't so sure.

He was also worried that his attempts to blackmail Stewart, Sara, and the bimbos into changing their stories wouldn't work. He'd already seen his future crash into a mountain of screaming headlines and explode in a ball of flaming press releases. If his agent had called, which he knew he wouldn't, he knew he would learn of a dozen canceled deals. He already knew his wife had filed for divorce and that his bank accounts had been frozen by her attorney. He knew that because his own lawyer had asked how he was planning to pay for his defense.

He did not share the conviction of his jailers that he would not be found guilty and sent up for a long time.

One message his lawyer had delivered told him this. If he didn't agree to his wife's proposed settlement, she said she would be most agreeable to testifying about his sexual proclivities.

He lay on his stomach, defenseless against his cellmate/lover. It was the only position which did not send sharp stabbing pains up into his gut, and listened to the screams of a woman on the next floor up. If he survived, and if he ever made another film, he knew it would be a masterpiece. All he had to do was communicate one tenth of what was going on around him and it would be the most intense movie ever made.

John listened patiently while Sara told him about what she'd heard from the jail. He confirmed the stories and had added the delicious desert about how The Axe had woken to find her self stripped naked and in the midst of a lesbian rape.

Sara had liked that, she had wondered if she would like it, but realized that John needed some attention too.

He readily accepted the transition to the role of two lovers and within a couple of minutes they were in each other's arms.

Chapter 25

On the ride into work Sarah tried not to worry about what lay in wait for her. She did not expect to be working for The Axe, that much she was sure of.

Her office held no clues to what might have transpired after she'd left the night before, and she settled in uneasily to wait for the summons which she hoped would come for McCormick rather than The Axe.

There was less than an hour's worth of routine work, but she stretched it out and made it last until eleven. She wanted to call someone to find out if The Axe was in, but somehow it didn't feel right. When the phone at last rang she jumped, and listened to the summons from McCormick's secretary.

"I'm sorry about your baptism by fire." He began, "I'm sorry you were exposed to some of our dirty laundry." He's nervous, she realized, "Oh god, the bitch queen won, and I'm history."

She was as startled as he was to hear herself speak the words.

"Oh, no, not exactly. Unfortunately Ms Phillips is indispensable at this point, otherwise, I assure you her behavior would not be tolerated."

"I can't work for someone who is looking for an excuse to fire me."

"That won't be necessary, I am going to have you report directly to me for the immediate future. After that the plans are still a little up in the air, but I expect that you will be moved to a position in MIS."

That made Sarah feel a bit better. But she was still quite nervous, that woman was out to get her, and she knew she had tentacles which stretched into other departments.

"Don't worry, I'll guarantee you that you won't be fired, in fact I told personnel to wave your probation. Yesterday was enough of a test."

"Now, what I want you to do is finish the project you began for me, and then tomorrow morning I'll have the consultant come see you before he leaves. He'll give you a list of other processes which need be investigated and written up. He should have them for you tomorrow, and they will be due when he returns in a couple of weeks."

"He's leaving?" she hoped she hadn't given anything away.

"Yes, he needs to wait for us to provide more information before he can continue, so he's going off to another project for a while."

She nodded, not trusting her voice to be unemotional.

He stood, signaling the meeting was over, and she walked back to her office, unable to appreciate the victory of sorts she'd had over The Axe.

"Why the hell didn't he tell me?" Then she stopped herself, and answered, "You never asked, and, in a relationship as strange as the one the two of you are having, what makes you think that tomorrow is an issue?"

That didn't help much, nor did the flowers he brought when he came to her apartment after work. She had decided to play it cool, Sara had told her that possessiveness would scare a man away faster than anything except a tattoo which read "property of Satan's Messengers Motorcycle Club."

"I wanted to tell you, but somehow I never got around to it, anyway I'm only going away for a couple of weeks. I'll be back then."

"For how long?"

"a couple of days, but a week or so later I'll be here for a month."

It was probably good, she thought, she needed time to think. She needed time to figure out what this man meant to her, besides, he didn't have to be THE ONE, she stopped herself, realizing this was her last chance to be with him for a while.

"So what should we do, do you want to go out for dinner or something?"

"I'd rather do something, I want to leave you remembering me." He paused, "Would you like it if Fred came over to dinner?"

The idea appealed to her.

. She thought about asking him to leave it here, but decided it would seem pushy and possessive.

Besides, she asked herself, what would I do with it?

Later, at work he outlined the work which she needed to do. It involved checking out the sources of information for a number of other reports and seeing if there were problems there too. She knew she was heading for trouble, because a couple of them involved The Axe's department and she doubted she would get much cooperation. Well, she could leave them for later, she thought.

When he stood up to leave she came out from behind the desk. Glancing at the door to make sure it was closed, she lifted her skirt to show him she was wearing the leather g-string. "You know what's waiting when you get back." He smiled and looked embarrassed. She kissed him, but he pulled away before it got intense, and, telling her he had a plane to catch, slipped out of her life.

It made her feel lonely, and it was a different kind of lonely. Before it was a dull numbing ache and was something she hardly noticed, but less than ten minutes after he'd gone she felt it much more sharply.

Chapter 26

Sarah had always been pretty good at compartmentalizing her life, and now she turned to her work to take her mind off her reality.

This assignment would not go so easily, she realized, because she was dealing with things she knew little or nothing about. Still she could use her first report as something of a template. She remembered Jon telling her that the thing to remember was that people, for the most part, liked to talk about their work. Sarah picked up the phone and scheduled a series of meetings which would, she hoped, provide her with enough information so that she could understand what it was she was supposed to be writing about. It was strange scheduling meetings for herself, asking people to come to her office, telling their supervisors that she was working on a project for the President and hearing their opposition evaporating.

She had always felt that people who brought work home were working too hard, but now she was one of them she realized as she pulled some papers out of a briefcase. She became so engrossed in a particularly complex report she did not realize that the person sitting next to her on the bus was a rather attractive man until he commented, "that report looks like a humdinger."

"What? Oh yes, it's got more twists and turns than a good murder mystery."

She looked out the window and saw that they were getting close to her stop. She folded it up and put it in her bag. He noted this, "maybe we're neighbors, I'm getting off at the next stop."

"We might be." She took a closer look at him, "I don't recognize you, and I thought I knew most everybody on this bus."

"I just moved to this part of town, I've only been taking this route for the past week."

She nodded, what do you say next, she wondered? Sara prompted, "So how do you like it here?"

"It's pretty nice, I was living over in Ridgewood and the commute is a lot easier." The bus slowed and they both got up and moved down the aisle. "Let me ask you, I haven't found a laundromat near by. And," he laughed, "it's starting to get serious."

"There's one a couple of blocks away over on Webster, that's the closest, but if you go a little farther there is a much nicer one on Eisenhower Drive near the Metro Mart."

"I know where that is, you say it's better?"

"I guess so, it's cleaner and got more machines, and room to fold your laundry without bumping into somebody."

"I'll keep that in mind," The bus sighed to a stop. Outside he stuck out his hand "I'm Mark Foster."

"Sarah Bloom nice to meet you." She imagined he would walk away, but they fell in step together. "I guess we are neighbors after all."

"Yeah I live in the complex over there," he pointed to the buildings across the street from her building.

"Well I'll see you on the bus I guess," she said, "I live over here."

"Ok, well I've got a laundromat to find. I'll see you." He turned to go.

Sara said, 'are you going to let him go that easily?'

Sarah said, "listen I've got a laundry that needs doing too, If you want I'll show you where it is?"

"That would be great, shall we meet here with in half an hour?"

That would give her just enough time to change and get a laundry together. She'd been looking forward to a glass of wine, but that was the old Sarah. "Ok," she looked at her watch, "half an hour."

CHAPTER 27

While the dryers went round and round, and her companion had thankfully run out of things to say about himself, Sarah filled herself in on the developments in her town.

Stewart stood on the deck looking out over the bay. Up until today he had only occasionally thought of himself as being lucky. If asked he would have ascribed his successes to hard work persistence, and no small measure of his own genius.

He turned and looked up the coast, there was a spot a quarter of a mile to the north where the road ran along the beach, and as he watched he saw the lawyer's blood red Porsche moving swiftly as it took him back to the real world. It was an appropriate car for that shark he thought. It was fast, nimble enough to slide through thin loopholes at high speed, and emblematic of the power the man wielded.

Bad luck, that's what the whole thing was. For all the times he had been in the right place at the right time with the right people, the party had been a major wrong place, wrong time, and wrong people event. That and some bad judgement. His own lawyer had assured him he wasn't going to be in serious trouble with the law, but it wasn't the law he was worried about. The lawyer hadn't mentioned the law once, he was operating on a plane outside the law, on a plane where there were no juries and no rules for defendants.

"Greg asked me to tell you that if he goes down the tubes, he's going to take a bunch of you with him."

Stewart had known what that meant, but he felt a need to confirm it. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"From the few details he told me, I can only guess, but I'd say it'll be tough for you to get work again. He claims he's got a list of things which will keep you on the front page of the Enquirer for months."

"So what do you want?"

"I don't want anything. In fact I'm going to terminate this conversation now because I am quite certain that I do not want to be a party to any discussions you and Greg may have. If you feel the need to communicate directly with him - visiting hours are from ten to four." With that he'd given Stewart a smile which would have turned a real shark's blood to ice and had let him self out.

Stewart leaned against the weathered rail and cursed his luck again, and the excesses which he'd always worried would come to haunt him.

He had always been able to rationalize them, explaining most of them as filling the needs of his creative mind. A boring person was able to live life without much deviation from the center line in what society called normal, but he was blessed, or cursed, with a mind which constantly needed new stimulation, a propensity for trying things which excited him.

He tried to figure out what things Greg knew about. The party with the very young girls, certainly. After all, it was Greg who had brought them. He'd thought that fact would keep him safe, but now that Greg had nothing to lose, the information wouldn't do him any more harm. The drugs, the powerplays, the sex for a part in a movie trick, that was pretty much common knowledge, but it would make good reading for women with their hair in curlers as they waited in line at the supermarket.

There was one thing in his past though. Something which he tried not to think about, and he wondered if there was any way Greg could have an inkling about it.

It was funny, he had no memory of the actual event. But he remembered, as if it was yesterday, the sun pouring in through the windows of the boat which lay rocking gently. It was anchored in a secluded cove he'd been to before, but couldn't remember getting to this time. The pain in his head, and the fire in his gut told him he'd been very drunk. When he was able he slowly sat up and had set his bare feet into a pool of mostly congealed blood.

After vomiting, he'd looked around and seen a young, pretty woman lying on the floor of the cabin. At least she had been beautiful before what ever had happened to her. One side of her face was still pretty much intact and he did not recognize her. Beside her was an imported, cast iron omelette pan which looked as though it had been used to kill her. He searched the boat, there was no one else aboard, the dingy was still tied to the deck, and try as he might he could find nothing that might have belonged to the woman. No purse, no id in her discarded clothes, nothing.

It took three tries before he could get some vodka to stay down, then he changed out of his blood splattered clothes and repaired to the flying bridge to try and remember and to figure out what he had to do next.

She probably was a spur of the moment pickup. No one was around, he realized he had to write a script. Getting rid of the body would be easy, there were a lot of lose ends that he couldn't control though. He could dump her overboard, and tell people she had drowned or something.

He could set fire to the boat, that might be better, it wouldn't do to have a drowned woman wash up with her head bashed in. Of course he would have to make sure her body would be consumed in the fire. At that point he remembered stopping and thinking about what a cold blooded bastard he was. He wasn't scared of getting caught so much as he was of what he'd done and the fact he had no feelings of guilt or remorse. She was, after all, one of the thousands of throwaway starlets, the ones with the prettiest face in hometown usa, a good body, and a strong desire to be rich and famous without doing any work. They came to Los Angeles like moths to an arc lamp. At least she wasn't going to turn into a bitter thirty year old might have been. If he thought about it long enough he might have even been able to tell himself he'd done her a favor. He remembered finishing the bottle, and wondering what it was she had done to push him over the edge.

It could be done, his first wife had done it, and he had hit her, though not with a frying pan. It would make a great movie, but he knew he could never do it. He'd spent enough time around special effects to know how to make gasoline ignite somewhat safely. He checked the depth of the water, he didn't want it to be easy to recover the remains of the boat. The meter read twenty feet, not deep enough. He raised the anchor, started the engines, and headed out of the cove. He was still planning on blowing the boat up when he spotted the giant supertanker headed down towards the marine terminal. Those things had always scared the hell out of him, once he'd come closer than he'd liked to one and had realized just how devastating a collision with one would be.

That was the answer. He'd steered a course that would take him to a position in front of the tanker. Next he set about trying to figure out how he would survive the collision himself. He would have to jump off at the last moment. He would have to explain how she'd frozen, and how at the last moment he'd jumped to save himself. Maybe he should put her on the deck, as though she was sunbathing, that way she'd be thrown clear and if any wreckage was found... He realized he wouldn't be able to do that in the time left. It had to look as though he had the boat on autopilot and was asleep. He couldn't be seen moving around.

He wondered if the tanker had seen him, probably not, His wasn't that big a boat, and they were only looking for things that could do them harm. They knew everybody knew enough to stay out of their way.

It happened so quickly he almost missed his chance to escape. He surfaced in time to see he'd aimed perfectly, the steel wall towered above then rode over the boat as though it was a toy.

He'd expected the crew to see them and rescue him, but the ship passed by without slacking its speed or a shout from the decks. After it passed its wake smoothed the sea, and a few pieces of debris bobbed gently about fifty yards from him. He was miles from shore. He hadn't thought it out clearly, he realized. After fighting off a few moments of panic, he swam over to the debris, found a life jacket, and waited. It had taken hours before a fishing boat came along and plucked him from the water.

He hadn't mentioned the woman when he was rescued and no one had ever inquired about her so he had let it ride. He was worried about it now only because Greg had on a couple of occasions hinted that their relationship was cemented by some deep secrets. Was it possible that one night when drunk he'd told Greg about it?

He shook his head, he doubted it, he'd been able to put that memory into the deepest vault of his mind. Still, he realized he would have to go to see Greg.

Chapter 28

It wasn't like in the movies, he realized. He'd expected little cubical with glass between him and the prisoner. He'd expected to have to use a phone, but Greg was sitting on the other side of a long table. He waved as Stewart came into the large room. "Stewart, how good to see you."

Behind the forced joviality Stewart saw that Greg looked like he'd been through hell. He pulled out a chair and sat. "I had a talk with your lawyer and he said you'd been asking to see me."

"Yeah, it gets rather boring in here, and I was working on my memoirs when I realized I needed to check out a few details."

Stewart was glad Greg wasn't beating around the bush. "Go on."

Greg took a quick look around, well you know how it is, the only way I can pay for a decent lawyer is to sell something." He swallowed, "Look Stewart, I don't like having to do this, but I got to watch my own back now."

"So what do you want?"

"When you testify, I want you to say you saw her go into the bedroom with someone else. I also want you to keep the two bimbos quiet, better yet get them a movie that's filming in Greenland."

"I can't do that. The police already have all the statements."

"If they aren't there the statements aren't worth shit. And you'd better try, or else you'll be seeing some interesting things in the tabloids."

"Like what?"

"I know how you like your sex, those papers love it when they can write about whips and chains and blondes. And don't forget the night you played with the young girls."

"You told me they were eighteen."

"So I lied, and then there's the usual shit about drugs, drinks, and the casting couch."

Stewart smiled, he was sure Greg didn't know anything about that night."

Greg was sweating, "There's something else."

Stewart felt the smile evaporate.

"Does the name Susie Maitland ring any bells?"

Even if it had he would have denied it, Stewart shook his head.

"I didn't expect it would. You were pretty drunk, when I introduced you to her, you said, "forget the name I'll call her tits."

That rang a bell, dimly. Stewart didn't think he let it show. So?"

"Susie was like a thousand other girls, she wanted to get into the movies. She thought a cruise on your boat might end up with her docking at a gate that would lead to success." He smirked, "does that bring back any memories?"

"I must have had a thousand girls on that boat and all of them could have been nicknamed 'tits'."

"But only one of them didn't come back from the cruise."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do, the night you went out on your boat and came back with the story that you got run down by a super tanker."

"Oh that night." He actually was remembering now. "After you left I told her to take off her clothes, she didn't want to and then she started crying and said I was a drunken pig. I told her to go home to Iowa, marry a farmer, have a litter of kids, and she took off like a shot."

"I decided to go out anyway, you're right I was pretty drunk, and maybe that's why I got run down. I can look pretty stupid, but that's all. Actually, that night I acted pretty well."

Greg didn't look like he believed him. He bit his lip, "Why didn't she call me? I left messages on her machine."

"Maybe she did. Maybe you consoled her the way you took care of Karen?" It was time to get a lick in himself. It didn't have much effect.

"No. I never heard from her again. A month later I went by her place and there was another hopeful starlet living there. She said she'd never heard of Susie."

"Look Stewart you've got to help me, I can make it bad for you. I can tell that story anyway. Do you think they'll listen to your side of it?"

He had a point, Stewart could see the headlines now, "Producer's Parties - Events To Die For."

"I can't change my testimony."

"You can say you were pretty drunk, don't remember clearly, all I'm looking for is a shadow of a doubt. And It would help if you gave a fund raising party to pay for my defense. That way I wouldn't have to talk to the guy from the Enquirer. Did I tell you that he's coming by tomorrow?"

Stewart didn't like it. Association with this case was the kiss of death. He might survive it, but giving a party would be going beyond the unwritten rules. This was going to cost him cash he saw. "How much do you need?"

Greg smiled. "Well, the lawyer wants a hundred grand right now. With a trial it will be two hundred more. But I need some publicity too that's why I want you to give me a party."

"Don't push it. I'll talk to the lawyer, but that's all you'll get from me."

Greg nodded, "Ok, I understand. You got to understand I'm just trying to survive in here."

Stewart guessed Greg wanted to tell him about how bad it was, but he didn't want to hear it. "I've got to get out of here if I'm going to get a check to your lawyer today."

Greg nodded, Stewart stood and walked out of the room without looking back. Before he got to his car he'd on his response. When in doubt, twist the knife. He had a contact at the Enquirer himself.

"How about this, Accused Cocaine killer tries to blackmail his friends?"

"Go on," there was a bit of static on the mobile phone. "I just came from visiting Greg in jail. He said he was going to talk to one of your reporters tomorrow. He threatened me. He asked me to forget things, and change things a little."

"That's interesting. What else?"

"He wanted money too, and there was something else, but I think I'd better go to the cops with it first."

That got the man's attention, in a big way. "Tell me."

"Well I guess it's ok. He reminded me of an incident and said a woman had disappeared from a cruise on my boat, but I remember that night too, and she left with him. What I'm wondering if Karen was the first victim of what you called the 'murderous member' in your last issue."

The man laughed, "I thought that was a good euphemism. What was her name?"

"Susie Maitland, it was about five years ago. That was the weekend when my boat got run down by a supertanker. That's why I remember it so clearly."

"We'll get on it right away, any other details?"

"No, I saw them together the night I went out. She said she got seasick and left with him."

He slowed and looked for a parking space near the police station. The editor said he'd get someone working on it immediately, Stewart had the feeling Greg wouldn't be getting any visitors for a while.

Chapter 28

Sarah had decided her new neighbor was both a bore and an ass after half an hour of listening to him tell about his glory days in college. Early on he had mentioned that he moved here because he'd broken up with his girlfriend a month before, and the rent was too high where he'd been. Immediately he'd launched into what amounted to a commercial for himself, and she found herself repulsed. It had taken a while though, she was unused to the attention of a man who was obviously trying to get her interested in him. It was kind of flattering, and she was lonely, but Sara came to the rescue. 'You got to watch out for his sort. He's a little like Greg, he's gotten along on his looks and charm, but underneath there isn't much to look at. Besides, you've got enough going on in your life as it is.'

She declined an offer of a drink and left him watching as she carried her laundry into her building. 'He's going to be something of a pest, for a while. He smells your loneliness or something.'

She half expected Jon to call, but knew he wouldn't. After eating a nuked frozen dinner she went in to the town and began to catch up on what had been going on.

The detective, John, was out of town following up a couple of leads. Stewart was frantically trying to get an assignment which would take him out of the country during the trial, and Greg was about to break.

He had acceded to his wife's divorce demands, which he thought would buy her silence at the trial. If Stewart didn't come through the case would be taken over by a public defender who was straight out of law school, and who had never handled a murder case before.

The cellmate who had loved him had been moved to another prison. He'd been replaced by a man who spent the nights talking to himself and giggling. It was a reprieve, but not much of one as his new companion delighted in telling stories about all the things that happened to you when you got to what he called real prison. This man showed him how to make a shiv, all the while telling about what a man's guts looked like when they spilled out of his belly. Greg went to sleep while thinking over his cell mate's goodnight message. "Look at it this way if you live long enough to die of AIDS you'll be doing well."

Chapter 29

Alone in her apartment, putting away her laundry while the radio twinkled softly in the background, Sarah realized she had broken new ground. Something had changed and whatever it was it had removed that invisible barrier that kept men from approaching her. Additionally, she had just learned she didn't have to get involved with a man just because he showed interest in her. For the first time in her life she had an assurance that there would be another who would come along sooner or later.

So much of her life she had allowed herself to be caged by a set of invisible bars. The bars around Greg weren't so invisible, but the compulsions which had led him to his cell had been made of the same invisible material.

He was being interviewed by a psychiatrist after the jailers found him trying to construct a noose out of his shredded bed sheet.

The opportunity to talk to someone who wasn't trying to assault him, and the full realization of his position combined to make him spew his guts like a sluice gate at the Grand Coulee dam. When he'd seen the article linking him to Susie Maitland, he realized just how deep was the shit he was in was. He'd been out fucked, his new lawyer was eagerly looking forward to his first murder trial, and the guys in jail had given him the name "killer cock."

"Like I said I always had to be the best. I really liked being the star. I wasn't the quarterback on the football team, but I was the intellectual equivalent in high school. There was a lot of sex going on there and I loved it. I found that sex made me powerful. I found that being known as a cocksman got me more girls. I studied the mechanics of making love, and learned that if I did things that turned them on I could then do almost anything I wanted to them."

"The thing I was most afraid of was getting a girl pregnant and then getting trapped into a marriage, so when I learned about anal sex I thought it was the perfect answer. The trouble was that girls didn't like it so much. I loved it also because it made them totally powerless and there was something much more dominating about it than regular sex."

"I found that if I did them orally first, and if I made sure they had enough to drink I could do it, and some of them got to like it."

"Later when I got successful, and had access to toot and the money to pay for it, I found that it gave me a power over women. They

would do anything for it, and I used that to get off the way I liked it. It was good for me and a lot of the women claimed they'd never felt anything like it. Coke's an anaesthesia you know, so it gave them a rush and numbed them out at the same time."

"Don't you see doc? When I was little I never had control over anything. I ate what my mother put on the plate. I wore what she told me to wear. I did what she told me to do, and when I grew up I had to do what I wanted to do." His voice rose. "I'm an artist, I can make people share my feelings, I can take a script and a bunch of actors and give them characters and make it so real that an audience will leave the theater believing it actually happened. I love having that power, and it spread to all of my life. I made my wife understand that I needed more sex than she could give me and it was ok with her. My other relationships with women were purely physical things and she accepted that. I didn't hurt anybody. I used them and they used me to get their careers going. Maybe it's not the way the rest of the world works, but the film industry has its own rules."

He looked down at his dark green, prison issue overalls, and plucked at the fabric. "I guess that's what makes this so hard for me. I can't believe that it is happening to me. This isn't supposed to happen to people like me. Especially not the things that have happened inside the cells. All of a sudden I was turned from the dominator to the one who was having a cock shoved up his ass. I can't take it doc. I can't believe the industry is going to let me suffer like this. Lots of people in the industry have little quirks like mine, some of them make me look like Snow White, but you know I haven't gotten one letter from any of them since I've been in here. It's as though I never existed. It's like I'm a disposable item that's been used up and now it's time to toss it away. That's what it feels like, like I'm in a great big garbage can." He stood up awkwardly because his hand was handcuffed to the chair. "You can watch me, you can take away my shoelaces and my belt. But you're not going to be able to take away my power over my life. I'll find a way, sooner or later, I'll take the power to torment me away from all of you." He was screaming now, and the doctor pushed a button which brought two guards into the room immediately.

"Take him back to isolation, keep him on suicide watch, and make sure the word gets to all shifts that they have to be extra careful about this one. He really means to kill himself."

Sarah felt a touch of pity for Greg. He was certainly enduring a monstrous hell even if it was of his own making. She wondered if that meant that he deserved it? If he did - did that mean that she had deserved

the strange hollow life she'd led for at least the last five years when her mother was dying and then when she was pushed out alone into the world?

Greg was going to die, she guessed, she didn't like a lot of dangling plots in her town, but she decided he was going want to postpone it until after his trial when he'd have the chance to drag as many people as he could through the same mud he was wallowing in. His lawyer didn't like that tactic, but Greg was adamant. It was, he figured, the last chance he would ever have to get his licks in.

Chapter 30

Like in a Perry Mason show Greg had decided to make his stand at a preliminary hearing. He wanted to strike while the press was still panting for juicy details. He wasn't sure he was going to be able to survive jail until his case came up for the formal trial, and it would make that waiting easier if he knew he wasn't alone in his suffering.

Stewart would have to tell about the evening, he would have to talk about drugs and kinky sex and about the deal he'd made with the two broads. With luck something would surface about the missing ex-cheerleader from Iowa and maybe give him an edge.

The bimbos were going to have to talk about drugs, kinky sex, and watch their budding careers droop faster than a pair of breasts with faulty silicone implants.

Sara was going to tell the world what a wonderful lover he was and was going to provide him with an alibi for most of the evening.

He would tell them about a brief liaison with the woman, but how he left her very much alive, about how she'd been snorting coke as he got dressed. So he'd had sex with her, so what? Sodomy was no crime in this state. He'd tell how he saw another man enter the bedroom just before he left to go out onto the beach with Sara.

He'd decided to ask the court to allow him to plead his own case. The little runt the public defender's office had provided wasn't up to drawing blood from a witness.

Sarah had scheduled the hearing for Saturday so she could be there. It would be a weekday in her town of course, but those kinds of details were easily bent when necessary.

She spent the evening with Sara and John who were speculating on what would happen the next day. After a while Sara had gotten tired of that and had asked John to use his many skills as a lover to help her put it out of her mind.

"Are you sure? I want you to be ready, I have the feeling he's going to try to put you through the wringer when you're on the stand."

"Then do something so wild to me that it'll be all I can think of tomorrow. Make me into a shameless hussy, so I'll have nothing to be embarrassed about."

As she lay in bed playing out the fantasy, she wished Jon were there. It was a lot better than doing it herself.

She got up early the next morning and forced herself to do a little of the work she'd brought home while she waited for the clock to crawl to nine thirty. She didn't mind, she liked working for McCormick, but he expected things to get done quickly. She wondered how Smith had been able to get away with goofing off for so long.

At nine she poured herself a large mug of coffee, put on her most conservative suit and went to court.

Outside it was bedlam, reporters and news crews clogged the steps and the lobby of the building. She saw Stewart trying to run the gauntlet and followed in his wake.

Inside the court she looked around, she almost didn't recognize the bimbos with their clothes on. Stewart actually looked worried, she thought of going over to talk to him, but decided against it.

After putting John on the stand to describe how the body had been found, the prosecution started with the one of the boobsie twins and had her recite in graphic explicit detail the evening's events. It was strange watching a woman who looked as though she should be home with her children, asking detailed questions about anal sex. To Sara's surprise Greg's lawyer objected to nothing, then Greg stood and began asking questions.

"Were you doing drugs and drinking that evening?"

"Yes, I suppose so, it was a party after all."

He made her admit to doing cocaine, grass, and drinking a lot of vodka. "And you are sure you were seeing things clearly, and that your memory is ok?"

"I remember the entire evening."

"Do you remember dancing naked on the coffee table with your friend?"

He didn't wait for her to answer. "Do you remember going into the room with the supposedly dead woman and doing a line of coke on numerous occasions?"

She started to deny it, "I remind you that you are under oath. I am sure we can find witnesses who saw you popping in and out of that room all night long."

Sara could see her thinking. Trying to remember. She really was as dumb as she looked. "Ok, so I may have gone in there, so what?"

"And we're supposed to believe that you took drugs in a room with a corpse and didn't notice she was dead?"

"I thought she was passed out."

"Where were the drugs in the room?"

"Next to the bed, I told that before."

"Did you sit on the bed when you took the drugs?"

"No, I...I stood up."

He looked at her, "Come on now, you expect us to believe that you stood up while snorting the coke? He took a mirror out of his pocket and placed it on the rail next to her. Could you demonstrate how you did that?"

She stood up and tried to bend over, but it was clearly awkward, "So maybe I did sit."

"Next to a corpse?"

"Next to a woman I thought had passed out."

He'd made his point. It was time to move on. "Could you tell me about the work you've had since the party?"

The prosecution objected, Greg grabbed the opportunity, "Your honor, there are a lot of things people would like to hide about that night. I want to establish a link between this woman and the host, Stewart Gardner. I want to show there is a good possibility of collusion between them."

The judge didn't like it, but he allowed it. Greg elicited the details of her most recent roles. Then he had her go into the exact nature of her deal with Stewart. "Remember I was there, he showed me the polaroid photograph of the two of you. He told me about how he tied you up and spanked you." This was a guess, but he'd been to enough parties to know how Stewart liked his sex.

Her face crumbled, she'd never be able to make it as an actor, Sara thought as she watched surprise, then fear which turned to panic cross her face. He didn't wait for her to answer, "Do you know that Stewart has a hidden camera set up in his bedroom?"

"Oh, no!"

"Tell me, can you remember things clearly enough to remember how much of your testimony was made up in his bedroom? How much of it was created while you were tied up and being beaten, even if it was only for fun?"

"It wasn't fun. He really hit me hard, he liked hurting me. When he was doing it to Melody I could see him grinning."

"What I want to know is how much of what you told the court earlier was what you saw, and how much was suggested to you when you were drunk, stoned, and having kinky sex? You say you have a clear memory of the night. Don't you?"

"I don't know."

He looked up at the judge, "I assume I can call her back if I have questions later?"

The judge nodded, "And I am going to declare a recess. During which I want to see the prosecutor and defense attorneys in my chambers."

The reporters ran for the phones, Sara went over to John, "So what do you think?"

"I think he's going to get off, he's good, no jury in the world is going to put much weight on that broad's testimony. The judge knows it too."

"What about taking the corpse to the ocean and dumping it in? What about putting coke up her ass?"

"The autopsy isn't going to be able to prove it was that particular dose that killed her, at least I don't think it will. As for the other charges, yeah we got him on that. I'm willing to bet he'll plead guilty to them and they'll let him out in another six months."

The judge re entered the court room. He nodded to the prosecutor. She next called the medical examiner. "How did the victim die?"

"She had a heart attack caused by the ingestion of a very large amount of cocaine."

"How was this cocaine administered?"

"She probably sniffed some of it, but traces of a large amount was found inside her rectum."

"Her rectum? Why?"

"Her nose was pretty much ruined by extensive drug use, and there was evidence that the cocaine in her rectum may have coincided with anal sex."

"Did you find semen there?"

"Yes."

"Were you able to do genetic tests on it."

"We tried, but the sample was small and was contaminated with cocaine and fluids from the victim."

"Was this the cocaine that killed her."

"I would say so. It would have been absorbed by her body very quickly. Her nose was in such a state that the amount she could have taken in that way was limited."

Other questions were asked about the time of death and then Greg stood. "If she had taken more coke up her nose after having sex would that be the coke that killed her?"

"Put all together it killed her. It doesn't matter which grain took her over the edge."

"Oh but it does, maybe not to her heart, but it does to me. I'm here trying not to go on trial for murder. So I'll ask again, can you tell which dose of cocaine killed her?"

The doctor scowled. "When her heart stopped her body stopped absorbing the drug into itself. There was still enough traces of the drug in her rectum to substantiate the theory that it was that administration which took her over the edge of what her heart could tolerate."

Greg clearly didn't like that answer. He shook his head. "You used the word theory. Is that different from proof?"

"Yes a theory is a way of putting a number of facts together to explain why something happened."

"Could another theory also state that she was killed by another dose administered after the sex was over?"

"Yes, but it was, as I said, the totality of the doses that killed her. Without that dose she'd be alive today."

"I don't think so."

"What?"

"How can you say she'd be alive today? I think you can say she would have survived the party, but only if she hadn't found a way to keep stuffing herself with the drugs. She had lots of drugs, she was the courier who delivered them to Stewart."

There was an objection and Sara's mind wandered. Greg was clearly fighting for his life. From what John had told her he had been broken by his time in jail, but she could see no evidence of that now.

At the end of a huddled discussion with the judge the doctor stepped down. And she heard the prosecutor call Greg's soon to be ex wife to the stand.

First she stated her willingness to testify even though she was not required to because she was still technically married to him.

Then they got to the good stuff. She related in detail so graphic that it was almost pornographic about Greg's favorite sex trick. "He called it his blast-off fuck. He got quite a reputation for it. It was one of the reasons I left him."

Greg couldn't resist the opportunity to attack his ex wife. She denied ever liking it. She said it made her heart feel like it was going to burst. She claimed that he had forced her to submit to it. The hatred which passed between them was awesome. "Admit it. You used to beg for it."

"You lying bastard, you raped me."

Sara was riveted to the exchange, but felt somehow a voyeur. He asked her about other things but an objection shut that off.

When she left the stand the courtroom seemed to give off a collective sigh of relief.

They broke for lunch, Sara knew she would be called and asked to describe him as a gentle lover. She wasn't sure how she was going to handle that one. She hated him on so many levels, but she'd seen some of the magnetism which had drawn her to him on display this morning.

But it didn't happen. After lunch Stewart was called. He reluctantly, and haltingly recalled how Greg had volunteered to take the body to the ocean. Greg attacked asking about his connection with the victim and her boy friend, the dealer. He also bore in seeking details of the deal he'd struck with the bimbettes when the prosecution objected again and they all huddled around the desk. Sara was thinking of other things and didn't realize how long the conference was taking.

The bang of a gavel brought her back and she heard the judge say, "The defense motion for dismissal of the murder charge is accepted, and the court is ready to hear a change of plea on the counts of illegally administering drugs to the victim and unlawfully moving a corpse."

Greg stood, "I am willing to plead guilty to moving the body. I also plead nolo contendere to the drug charge."

"You understand that you will not be able to appeal this," the judge asked?

"I understand."

The gavel banged again, the judge spoke again, "The court accepts the plea. The court also believes that you acted in an irresponsible matter, but that proof of your culpability in this unfortunate woman's death can not be proven within the limits of the law. The crimes you have pled guilty to are felonies, and this court feels obliged to give you the maximum sentences allowed in the guidelines. In this case that sentence comes to two years, however, there is a section in the code which requires that a first offender be offered the option of being sentenced to a drug rehabilitation facility in lieu of the penitentiary. I now offer you that option."

"I accept that option." Sara heard just an undercurrent of glee in his voice.

"Very well. You will be remanded to such a facility as soon as an opening occurs."

The gavel banged and Sara rose with the rest of the audience. The reporters tore out of the room knocking people out of the way in their eagerness to spread the word. She waited until the room had more or less

emptied before leaving. In a way she was glad for him. She hoped that someone there would be able to put some sense in his head.

She also was glad she hadn't been subjected to his questions, now she could get on with the rest of her life. She wondered if it would include John now that they didn't have this to bind them together.

Chapter 31

Sarah found she was actually looking forward to work, for the first time ever it was really interesting. She had learned a lot in the past few days and she knew she was going to learn a lot more today.

She'd avoided the projects which would bring her into direct contact with The Axe until now, because she wanted to establish a track record with McCormick, and had wanted to get a little more practiced and polished before venturing into the lion's den again.

She still wasn't quite sure how it had happened but The Axe had managed to get the meeting held in her own office, so Sarah knew she would not be on her home turf. She also had scheduled it for early in the morning, and Sarah had acquiesced to that too. But she had prepared, she'd done her homework, she had a list of questions written on a yellow pad which she carried in a leather folder bought especially for the occasion. She also had Sara with her, and that was going to be a big help.

The Axe tried to control the meeting from the outset remaining behind her desk, but Sarah foiled the ploy by not passing her a packet, which she instead left at the vacant spot at the conference table. The woman gave her a cold stare, but said nothing as she moved to the table.

The Axe also had two very scared looking flunkies attend the meeting, but they obviously were under orders only to speak if they noticed Sarah making a mistake.

It was about power. She who controls the data has the power to make people look good or bad. She who controls the data can pass information to those who she wants to have it. Sarah knew that the final outcome of this project would be to make the information more accessible to everyone, and she knew how opposed to it The Axe was in principle, and that wasn't counting the hatred she was sure the woman felt towards her.

The Axe pulled no punches. She opened by saying, "Can you speed this up we have work to do?"

Sarah retaliated by presenting a very detailed flow chart to The Axe. "Could you look at this and tell me if it is correct."

She knew it was, she had copied it from the system specs, but she was pretty sure that the woman didn't know how to read it. She had several more she would throw at her, but she was holding them in reserve. The Axe looked at it, frowning. "What is this?"

"Oh I thought you'd recognize it. It's the process flow for accounts receivable."

The woman looked at the forest of diamonds, circles, squares and rectangles. The connecting lines looked like spaghetti. Sarah guessed she smelled a trap, she pushed it aside. "I'll have to get confirmation from my people."

"I'll need it by two."

The woman glared at her but said nothing.

Sarah then produced a document which had taken her the best part of a day to produce. "This is a simplified data dictionary which lists all the current fields and the validations needed for each of them at the point of data entry. I'd like to go over it with you, but if you're pressed for time I'll tell McCormick that you'll get it to him when you complete checking it."

She paused briefly as she passed the sheaf of papers to the woman, made a note on her pad and said, "Next I'd like to go over the various levels of security in your department."

"That's none of your business. I deal directly with the head of MIS on that."

"I understand that's how it used to be, but according to what he told me, he doesn't have a current set of passwords for your system, and he asked me to remind you that that was contrary to policy."

The Axe looked as though she wanted to blow. She took a deep breath then said, "Of course, I'll call him this afternoon."

Sarah let it pass, but made a note on her pad. "Now, here it says that your supervisors must get a manager's approval and authentication code before allowing the operators to make a correction. I understand that can slow things down considerably."

"It keeps them from making errors."

"It just might keep them from reporting errors, in fact, when I looked at last month's report it shows several figures which seem to be way out of the normal range."

The Axe reached across the table. "Where did you get that report? I haven't released it yet."

Sarah put the report down. "I found it in the garbage, which I might point out is another serious breach of security. The head of security is

quite upset about it. He claims the data on this report could be of significant interest to our competitors."

"You had no right."

"My job is to find flaws in the current system and help propose solutions to them." She flicked her finger at the paper, "This report is a good example. First the system is constructed so that errors are allowed in, and, second, it compounds the problem by making it difficult to correct them. Third, copies of this report must be produced and circulated for checking and correction, this increased dramatically the potential that one might fall into the wrong hands, and, I might also say, adds at least three days to the time required to produce this report."

She started to put the report back into her briefcase when The Axe stood up and grabbed it.

"I'm not sure why you're doing that, I've already had a copy made and it's included in my preliminary report."

The Axe did not give the report back, but she sat down. Her flunkies looked like they wanted to get word that world war three had started so they could enlist and get out of there.

That was when The Axe made her first mistake, "I'll get you for this."

"I don't think that's a particularly constructive thing to say, especially since I'm doing a project for the company president." Sarah replied, thinking, ok, if that's the way you want to play it. The Axe turned bright red. "Don't you dare be condescending to me." She was really mad, Sarah wondered how long it had been since anyone had stood up to her. She continued, "Let me tell you, you don't scare me. He doesn't scare me, because he knows that I'll tell everyone about the time I saw him dressed in women's clothes in a bar."

She saw at once that The Axe had misplayed her trump card, but there was something else. There was something about the way she said it that Sarah picked up on. It reminded her of something,*** an interview on cable she'd watched once. The woman in leather had spoken that imperiously. Sarah made a quick guess, he wouldn't have worn such an outfit to a very public place, could it be that The Axe frequented some of the dark bars in the warehouse district? "And what were you wearing at the time?" She replied, hoping to give a knowing tone to her voice.

The woman went rigid. "That's none of your business," she answered through clenched teeth.

"I'm sure you're right. I really don't care if you were wearing black leather and carrying a whip, but I'd think you wouldn't want to force him out because your blackmail might not work with his successor."

One or more of the points got through, Sarah didn't know how many. "Look, your personal life is of no interest to me. Making your department operate more smoothly is."

Suddenly The Axe realized that her two flunkies were sitting there - wide eyed and absolutely motionless. Their mouths actually hung open. Sarah didn't think she'd ever actually seen that happen to anyone before.

"You two. Get out," she screamed, and they fled.

"How did you know?" She asked, her voice softening from its previous level. There was a different look in her eyes.

Sarah took a moment before answering. "It's hard living with a secret, especially one nobody else would ever understand isn't it?"

The woman pushed her chair back and walked to the window. "I never could figure you out, that's why I knew not to trust you. I spent a lot of time checking you out, and never found your vulnerable spot. I knew I had to grind you down, because if I didn't I knew you'd figure it out somehow."

When she turned from the window she was actually smiling. "Well I had a good run, I'm guaranteed a good pension, but I'll miss this job."

Why was she giving up so easily? "I don't see why you have to leave?"

"Don't you?" Sarah shook her head,

"Maybe you're still young enough to be naive about such things, and maybe times have changed enough that you think it wouldn't matter, but when I let it slip about seeing him, and you told them about me I knew I'd never have any authority over anyone in my department again."

She shook her head, "brought down by a secretary, tell me did you ever see me there?"

"No, it was a guess."

"Well you were right. It's my secret pleasure. There's no way I can keep this job if my subordinates know they can come to a certain bar on Saturday nights and see the other me."

Sarah understood that, she nodded.

Ms Phillips, the title, The Axe, no longer seemed to apply. She shook her head, "I can see that you're totally puzzled by this. Do you want to hear a story?"

Sarah nodded, "Sure."

"When I was young, younger than you I fell in love with a man, in those days we got married, that was the normal thing to do. It turned out he was a drunk and he beat me. I stayed with him, I don't know why, and after a few months I got pregnant. I thought being a mother would make everything ok, but it didn't, he beat me more and one day he hurt me so bad I lost the baby."

She turned and walked over to a file.

"That must have been crushing."

"I don't want your pity." for a moment it seemed like The Axe was back, but she stopped herself. "No, I'm sorry I didn't mean that. What is it about you that makes people trust you?"

Sarah shrugged, nobody had ever said that to her before.

"You said crushed. That's putting it mildly, the doctors saved me but they told me I could never have any children. I got a job here, and worked my way up. You may not believe this, but I was pretty then too. Anyway I soon realized that men held no interest for me, and the more I thought about it the more I hated them."

"I made it my hobby to catch them at things. I sort of fell into it when a married man kept asking me out. I played along until I had him in an embarrassing position, then I read him the riot act. He was my boss, I got a raise, and he never said a sexist thing to me again, of course we didn't have that term in those days. Anyway I got good at it and caught lots of them cheating on expense accounts, having affairs, selling client lists to the competition, drugs, alcoholism - you name it. Like I said it was a hobby, and as a part of it I used to follow various men when they left work."

"One day I followed a man to the warehouse district. He went in an unmarked door and I followed. Back in those days being homosexual was really thought to be bad, and there he was kissing a man on the lips."

"Well, you can imagine my information got me more than a few promotions and other perks. The one cloud over it all was that I knew that sooner or later there would be someone along to try and take it from me. I made up my mind that I wouldn't fight it, I know too much about the art of blackmail to think I could survive it."

She took out a thick file and dropped it on the desk in front of Sarah. "This is your inheritance. The ones in the front of this folder are almost all dead or otherwise long gone, but the ones in the back were my uneasy power base. You'd be surprised how many people try their hand at embezzlement, and how very very reluctant the company is to let any news of it reach the light of day."

She wiped her hands together, as if to dust them off, and continued, "Anyway, back to the story, I took to hanging around the district because it was proving to be a mother lode, and one day I went into a joint and found the speciality which became my release. You don't need all the details, but let me tell you it was as much a torment as it was pleasure. It made me vulnerable. A couple of times I almost got caught, but luckily I saw them first and they were all so scared they didn't think to ask why I was there to have seen them."

She took a deep breath, "anyway I found that I enjoyed being in control, and I suspect I went a little overboard with it. But being in this job it seemed appropriate, and I got away with it for a long time."

"I don't know, but somehow it feels good that it's all over. In a way I've been waiting for this day for a long time." She shook her head, "But never in a thousand years would I have guessed it would be you who would pull the plug."

Sarah started to say that she was sorry, but the woman cut her off, "Live by the peccadillo die by the peccadillo. I've got some plans. It's a new era out there, I've got enough money stashed away that I can buy a seedy bar somewhere and not have to worry too much if it makes money or not, but I suspect it will. You'll have to come and see it some time, and bring that computer consultant of yours, I have the feeling he'd get a real kick out of it." Sarah took in a breath, but had no response.

She took some papers out of a drawer, straightened a couple of things on her desk, and started for the door. Halfway there she stopped, "Are you too young to remember Watergate?"

Sarah nodded, "Well there was a man named Halderman, he was an administrator, and in one book they have him saying that he felt that the highest mark of a working man would be that if he got hit by a truck, someone else could come into his office the next day and be able to take over exactly where he left off." She looked around the office, "I suspect he would have liked the way I left things."

She opened the door and said to her secretary, "Mary, type a letter to McCormick will you?"

The woman inserted a piece of paper in her machine and waited.

"Put the date on the top then write, 'I am retiring effective immediately.'"

The woman typed it before the words registered. The Axe reached over, pulled the paper from the machine, and signed it.

She handed it to Sarah, "please see that McCormick gets this, will you?"

With that she turned and headed for the elevator. Sarah thought of following her, but stopped herself.

Instead she went back into the office and picked up her papers. She frowned at the file for a moment, then tucked it under her arm and headed down the hall towards the president's office. As she walked she heard the secretary start speaking into the phone. "You're not going to believe this..."

Sarah wondered if she really did.

Chapter 32

Initially Sarah had been tempted to give the file to McCormick, but at the last minute she detoured into her office and stashed it in her desk. She wasn't quite sure why, it was more than just curiosity. She wanted to see what it was that made the underbelly of the company tick. She also wanted to see just how this woman had operated.

She had the feeling that McCormick was wondering about that file when he asked her to recount the events that had led up to the letter.

"She said she'd decided it was time to retire and pursue other interests. I think she realized she wasn't going to be able to adjust to the new technology."

"Is that all?"

"Not all, some of it was pretty personal. She said she had enough money saved up."

"She ought to," he started to say something else, but stopped and eyed her warily.

Sarah hadn't grasped the full meaning when Ms Phillips had called the file an inheritance, but she was beginning to. She was sorry she hadn't brought the file in, but then in a way she wasn't. What would Sara do? She knew what Greg or Stewart would do, and she was on that road.

McCormick asked more directly, "Did she give you any files."

Sarah nodded, "Yes she gave me a bunch of stuff. We were working on the invoice procedure."

He moved towards the door. "I think I'll go down and take a look at her office. I'd like to make sure there are no confidential files lying about."

Sarah nodded, and, feeling slightly guilty, went back to her office and immediately retrieved the file from her desk.

It was much more detailed than she thought it would be. There were photographs of McCormick wearing a wig and a dress with a plunging neckline. They weren't good photos, but his hawk like nose was unmistakable. There was also a sheet of paper which listed some dates, beside them there seemed to be some sort of code, and she was sure it was the details of some form of blackmail.

She slipped the photos and papers into a large envelope, and sealed it. Then she thought about and tore it open. She took another envelope from her desk, and went out to her office and typed "McCormick" on it. Just as she was about to seal the second envelope she reached inside

and took out one of the photos. The idea of having some insurance was attractive, but in the end she put it back and sealed it.

She'd claim to have found it mixed up with the other papers. Maybe it was an explanation for her resignation, she'd ask. She took a quick look through the rest of the file and began to feel dirty. She was tempted to give it all to McCormick, but something told her that somehow he shouldn't be trusted with it. It was, she realized, her cross bear to domesticate. Not too big a price for having ridded herself of an enemy.

Chapter 33

McCormick was rooting through The Axe's files like a pig after truffles. Sarah said, "You said you were worried about confidential files? Well, I found this envelope mixed in with the things she gave me. It says confidential on the outside."

He moved quickly towards her. "Let me see that."

She handed it to him, and saw him check to see if the envelope was sealed. She was glad she'd waited to let the glue dry. He shot a quick look in her direction, "do you know what's in here?"

Sarah shook her head, "no, like I said it was in the middle of some other papers." He gave her a long hard look, then said, "If you find anything else like this would you bring it to me?"

She nodded, not happy about lying, but glad that her distrust was confirmed. What would he want them for anyway?

He nodded then went over and closed the door to the outer office. He hefted the envelope in his hand, "I suspect you're curious about this."

Sarah nodded, "I guess so, I suspect I know in general what's in there. Remember, in my office, I was there when she said she knew where all the skeletons were, or something like that. I guess that's what that is. Just some old bones."

His expression went from frightened to relieved. "Just some old bones, that's all." He slapped the envelope against his hand, and Sarah thought he was going to say something more, but he walked to the door and opened it. "Well, I've got some things to do," he said and walked out.

Sarah stayed behind for a moment and then made her way back to her own office.

The news didn't take long to circulate through the office. Her phone was ringing when she got back. For the next hour and a half she fielded a series of calls from people who wanted to know the details of what she was to learn they were calling the battle of the titans. Other calls were different. These people spoke in quieter voices. They wanted to know if their name had come up, had anything been left for them? The callers were universally male, and many sounded nervous, but there was an edge of elation discernable just below the surface of their voices. By noon she had fifteen offers to go to lunch, and eight for dinner.

She had hoped to be able to get some time alone, but there was a man waiting for her in the lobby. "You don't know me," he began, "but right now you're the most important person in my life."

Sarah took a better look at him. He was, she guessed, in his fifties, he was dressed well, she remembered having seen him at a couple of meetings in the executive offices. For a second she thought he might be trying to pick her up, but then she realized he must be in the file. She decided to play it as though he was trying to pick her up. "That's an original line. And on what do you base this fascination with me?"

He smiled slightly, "Can I take you to lunch?"

She was about to accept, but then she hesitated, things would change the second she took anything at all from any of The Axe's legacy. Still she was curious, "Ok, I make it a policy to pay my own way though."

That surprised him. "Fine, where would you like to go?"

"The place across the street has a good lasagna."

"I was hoping to go someplace a little more private."

She nodded, that made sense. "Ok, lead on."

He hailed a cab and took her to a place several blocks away. It was quiet and quite nice. When she saw the menu she realized she was going to have to pay for her moral righteousness.

"Do you know what they're calling you?"

"No," he had a way of getting her interest.

"Well some are calling you David, you know from the bible, and but Dorothy, because you killed the wicked witch of the west, is gaining in popularity." He took a sip of water, then continued, "Anyway, there is much rejoicing in many offices there. Do you know why?"

"She was a bitch to work for, and she was blackmailing some others."

"I figured that you knew about that. I would have loved to have been there when she fell."

Sarah smiled, but felt uneasy, it felt a little like dancing on a grave. She decided to leave him with the initiative for the time being.

"I guess I'd like to tell you a story, would you mind?"

She shook her head, "no go ahead."

"Once upon a time there was a rising young executive who worked very hard. He was very ambitious and thought of himself most highly. As I said, he worked very hard and as a consequence he thought that entitled him to party very hard. He liked to run with a fast crowd when he partied, and one Friday just before a weekend that he knew was going to cost him three or four hundred dollars to celebrate in style, he found that he was

tapped. On a wild impulse he took some money from work, intending to pay it back, of course."

"He never got the chance, because on the day before payday the next week, the woman known as The Axe called him and asked him to come to her office."

"She had all the evidence she needed to have him fired. She had enough to have him arrested. She told him that he was a very silly young man, and she offered him a solution. First, she would fix things so the loss would never be detected. Second, she told him that if he listened to her she could make his career move quickly. Thirdly she offered an easy payment of the debt he would owe her." He took another sip of water, Sarah tried to imagine him as a young ambitious man sitting in her office while she applied the screws.

"She didn't want cash at first, what she wanted was information. It didn't seem so bad, he got her his boss's savings account number. He reported gossip. And then one day his boss was gone. Fired. Quicker than a lightning bolt fells a tree. And the next thing he knew he was getting his boss's job. She waited for two days and reminded him of his indebtedness, and she hit him up for ten percent of his raise. By that time he had cut down his outside life some and he had the cash."

"She was real good, every six months or so she'd ask for something, but to sweeten the deal, she often give more than she got. Once she had him sign a requisition for some office furniture. It never came, but he got an envelope that contained five hundred dollar bills a couple of weeks later."

"He'd like to say that his rise in the company was due to his own ability, but it wasn't. She didn't put in the fix for him or anything like that, but he always seemed to know when to be in the right place at the right time with the right solution. That information came from her."

"It's been a terrible burden, the man has been living in fear, he hasn't been able to take a good look at himself in the mirror in the mornings. He's been on the verge of starting to drink again because she had again come to him, and this time she wanted him to help her sabotage a man who was a friend of his."

"This man was scheduled to meet with her this afternoon. He was hoping he'd have the guts to stand up to her, but wasn't sure he did. When he got to the office and found her secretary in the middle of a crowd of cheering clerks, he asked what was going on. That's when they started singing 'ding dong the witch is dead,' and he joined in."

"Later he decided he needed to talk to you. What the hell, I don't know why I'm using the third person here, I've got to tell you how grateful I am."

She nodded, she hadn't realized how bad the woman had been.

"Can I tell you about a problem I have myself?"

He nodded, she took a sip of water and wondered what was keeping their lunch, "Well, it was an extraordinary meeting to say the least. She actually said she'd been waiting for it to end, and she seemed glad, sort of. Just before she left she gave me a folder, she called it my inheritance."

He nodded, she couldn't read his face. "I have no intention of using that information, but I've kind of got a dilemma on my hands. I've already given some of it back to one person, and I'm sure it's the right course for the most part, but something tells me that I'm in over my head as a manager, and I would sort of like to know what I'm up against."

He smiled, "You've had a rough introduction. I think with her gone things will get a lot calmer."

"Yeah, I hope so, but let me go on for a moment. Say she's got evidence some one is gay or uses drugs. That's none of my business, but what about someone who really stole big, or maybe was involved in a hit and run accident, I don't know what it could be, but I'm sure she would use anything."

He nodded, "that she would."

"Well I don't want to use anything against anybody. But suppose there was evidence that somebody was a child molester. I don't think I'd like to give him his papers and say Merry Christmas."

"I can see your point."

"The other thing is that if I give them the papers I'm sure they will wonder if I kept a copy or if I'll ask for something later, it makes me real uncomfortable thinking about it."

"What would you do if you found something like child molesting."

"I don't know, something like that I'd probably go to the police. Other things, I don't know."

"Looks like you're going to have to play God some."

"There's another problem, but I've got to ask you to keep it between us."

She stopped as the waiter brought their food, then resumed.

"McCormick asked me to bring any files I might find to him. He was talking about this I'm sure of it."

"I can see why he'd like them. What did you tell him?"

"I told him I hadn't found any yet."

He nodded, "but you're afraid if it got back to him that you were giving the files back he'd do something."

"I guess so, I don't like lying."

He had no answer for that and they both began to eat. What she needed was for there to be a fire in her office, she thought, but dismissed the thought.

"What you need is for the building to burn down while we're at lunch."

"I'm afraid someone is looking for them right now."

"Did you hide them?"

"Yeah. But did you know I got a lot of calls this morning from people who were kind of asking around a lot of things?"

"I'll bet, listen, I don't think you have to worry about McCormick. I suspect he'd understand if you decided to give them back. He's also can't be sure there aren't any copies.

She agreed, but immediately saw that this whole thing was going to be very complicated. She'd have a lot of people grateful to her, but their gratitude would be lined with fear.

Chapter 34

Sarah spent the evening going through the files making sure she wasn't pardoning any child molesters or rapists. She tried not to pay attention to any names, but in spite of her good motives she found herself whistling and shaking her head every so often. She'd taken home a box of large manila envelopes into which she put the completed files. The idea of giving them back personally held some attraction, but she had pretty much decided she'd talk to the man who was the head of the mail room, who she now knew acted as a on-the-job bookie, give him his file then make sure the others were delivered anonymously.

There were parts to the plan she didn't like. He could intercept some of them. He could try and get credit for being the person who was returning them. She put another envelope on the pile, and picked up the next set of papers. It was the record of the man she'd had lunch with. She was glad to see he'd told the truth and had left nothing out, she put his envelope on the side, that one she'd deliver personally.

When she was done she found that the pile she had decided to deliver personally was pretty big. Of the ten there were four people she knew well enough that she felt an obligation to pass it on in person. There were four others who she thought needed to be told that she thought they needed help, with drinking mostly. The other two had stolen a lot of money. Both of them she was going to have to work with in the future, and she wasn't comfortable with that. She'd come to the conclusion that it would not be wrong to ask them to resign.

In the end she decided that she would tell McCormick what she planned to do, then she'd go around and deliver all the envelopes herself.

He hadn't liked it, but he had eventually nodded his agreement. "Don't be surprised if you get two more resignations in an hour or so," she said.

"Wait, what are you doing?"

"Look, I'm trying to end this mess for once and for all. Two of these envelopes contain information which I think says that the individuals involved should not work here. I know you don't like publicity and aren't likely to prosecute. In any case, it's policy to audit the work of people who quit isn't it?"

"Yes, and you knew who used to do that."

Sarah nodded, that had been ironic, and probably was why she'd gotten away with it for so long. "I've given this a lot of thought, and I think this is the best way to end it."

He looked at her, "maybe you're right, I was just hoping to get some control back, after all I'm the president."

"I'm asking you to trust me. I have no intention of following in her bloody footsteps." She didn't admit that there was an aspect to having all this power that was tempting. She didn't say that delivering the packages would enhance her standing with these people, she knew that and wasn't about to throw it away.

He nodded, "Ok, it's probably the best way."

She turned and went out to play Santa Claus.

Amazingly one of the men to whom she suggested resignation fought back. "Who the hell are you to tell me what to do? Are you the new Axe?"

"I'm telling you I don't want to work with someone who's this big a crook. If you can convince me you were set up, then we can talk. But that picture of your fancy boat and the copies of your bank records, tell me differently. If The Axe was anything she was thorough."

The man was going through the papers now. She watched him and saw him come to the realization that she was right. "How long do I have?"

She didn't like the way he asked it, he had something in mind. "Thirty seconds, enough time to pick up your family's pictures." The wife on his desk wasn't the woman pictured on the sleek powerboat she noted.

He started to bluster. She stopped him, "You want to take it up with McCormick? He's in his office. I told him a couple of people might be in to see him."

It was like watching a balloon slowly lose its air. He picked up the pictures, put them into his briefcase. Then he picked up the envelope. "I was wondering what would happen when The Axe left. I imagined she'd sell her information to someone who would want something. I thought I could work something out. I never expected to come up against fucking Joan of Arc. I never thought I'd ever get my hands on this," he held up the envelope. "But if I ever did I told myself everything would be ok."

Sarah wondered if he was trying to tell her he would be honest from now on, but she knew it was too late for that here. He'd get that chance somewhere else.

He slammed the case closed, signed the sheet of paper she held out to him and stormed out of the office.

The other one tried a different tact, "Oh you don't know how glad I am that it's over. You wouldn't believe the things she threatened me with if I didn't keep on doing it."

So far as Sarah could tell The Axe hadn't had anything to do with the first time when he awarded a contract to his brother in law and got a ten thousand dollar kickback. "Look at it this way," she said, "This golden goose got wise to your act. If you want to work here and are willing to have three auditors sitting at your desk, I suppose it could be arranged."

He got the idea. He signed the paper, "What about my last check?"

"I see that it goes to a deserving charity."

He nodded, walked out, and left without bothering to say goodbye to his secretary.

The woman looked at Sarah with a bit of fear and a lot of disbelief. Is she thinking that I'm the new axe, Sarah wondered? Am I?

After that, the day turned into something of a celebration. Some of the people seemed highly embarrassed, others offered things to her. She kept it simple. She got the person alone, handed him the envelope, smiled and said, "this is yours." Then she turned to leave. Most of them stopped her. Some had to be reassured that there were no copies.

She gave the envelope belonging to the man who had lunched with her to him last. "Sin no more," she said.

He broke into a grin. "You got that right." She didn't bother going back to her office, instead she went out to lunch directly. It was then that she realized she hadn't thought of Jon in the past day. He was due back soon. What was she going to do with him? Were they going to take up where they had left off? Could they? She certainly wasn't the same person. And knowing that she shared a sexual kink with Ms Phillips gave her some pause in that area. She had a lot of thinking to do about the whole concept of control.

When she got back from lunch she found her office was almost filled with flowers. A delivery man was coming out as she walked in.

"What's this?"

"You Sarah?"

"Yeah."

"Sign here please."

"What's this," she repeated?

"Damndest thing. A guy comes in and tells us he wants to fill someone's office with flowers while she's at lunch, can we do it?"

"I said sure, how do you want the card to read?"

"No card," he said. It took most of the flowers I had in the store. Somebody likes you lady."

It was insane. They had taken the order literally. There was a path to the desk, but that was all. In places larger plants rose over the sea of flowers which covered the floor like a carpet that was two feet deep. The tops of the files were covered with a spray of roses which cascaded down to the floor. The scent was so strong she wondered if she was getting enough oxygen. She was glad somebody had done it. It was ridiculous, wasteful, yet she needed it. She sat back in her chair and began to play with the pile of tulips which covered the desk.

There was a knock at the door she had to sit up straight to see over the pile. It was Mary, The Axe's secretary. She was having trouble focusing. "Hello Mary."

"Oh hello, I was coming by to tell you that the people in our division were wondering if you'd like to come by in a little while."

Sarah stood up knocking a bunch of flowers off the desk.

"When should I come?"

"In half an hour, would that be ok?"

"Yeah, that will be fine, listen do you think we could get a company van to take the cut flowers to a hospital or someplace. They're great, but I think I'd like to be able to find my phone tomorrow."

"Sure, that will be easy, who sent them?"

"I don't know, I guess I've got a fan club."

Chapter 35

The party had gone with the Wizard of OZ theme. It was clear that they were as happy to be out from under her thumb as were those whom she'd picked on more specifically. Some of the flowers from her office had found their way there and their petals carpeted the floor. A banner which read, "WELCOME DOROTHY" was stretched across the hall. Sarah felt funny about it, but she could understand. She'd felt like this when Smith had been fired not long ago.

She was asked about the last meeting, "Waterloo," they called it, but she demurred and referred them to the two others who had been there.

They gladly recreated the meeting as best they could, but they took considerable license, "So Sarah stood up and said, 'I don't know what your problem is lady, but I'm not taking any of your shit.'"

Then The Axe stood up and started to huff and to puff, but Sarah stood her ground. The Axe threatened, but Sarah stared her down. Then with a snarl they came together and for a moment there was a ball of flying fur, and we were afraid, but when the dust cleared Sarah was still standing. Half an hour later The Axe was gone!"

There was a cheer, and some one suggested that Sarah speak. At first she didn't want to, but then she realized she had something to say. "I understand your joy. To say that Ms Phillips was a difficult boss to work for is like saying that it's a bad idea to keep full grown alligators in your bathtub." That got a cheer. She held up her hand, "but I spent some time alone with her before she left and found that she was a very human person. She had some hard times in her life and I can see how they helped make her the person she became. I guess what I've learned from this is that we probably have more choices about how we live our lives than we think. It's sad that she spent so much energy in anger." She looked around the crowded reception area, and thought she saw Jon in the back of the crowd, was he due back today?

They were waiting for her to continue. "I guess the thing I liked the least about her was my perception that she would kick a person when they were down. The thing that makes me uncomfortable now is that I know we're coming pretty close to doing that. I think she probably wouldn't mind, she'd probably expect it, but I find it's a little too close for my taste. So why don't we see if we can enjoy ourselves without hating her?"

There was a tear in her eye she stepped down from the chair. She thought it was a wimpy speech, but it was one she could live with. They were quiet for a moment until someone turned the music back on. She left shortly afterwards, stopping in her office to gather a bundle of flowers before she caught the early bus home.

Chapter 36

Sarah put the flowers in water and danced through the apartment trying to decide where to put them. She wondered if maybe it was Jon who had sent them? No, she decided, there were a dozen more likely candidates. She placed the vase in the room that contained the town. It changed it somehow, made it look lived in by real people.

She was glad she'd left early, she needed a few minutes to try and figure out where things were going.

She still hadn't a clue when the buzzer rang a while later. Something seemed different, it was almost as though he was shorter, or something. She realized she was seeing him through new, much more capable eyes, but there was something about him too. He was always subdued, but it was almost as though he was acting like he wasn't glad to see her.

"I'm ok, it was real busy."

She thought she smelled alcohol, "well come on in, some things have been happening around here too."

"Yeah, I've been real curious about Greg and Sara."

Oh. She'd meant her own life. She hadn't had much time for the town lately. "Well, let's see. When you left Greg was planning to bring as many of them down with him as he could right?"

He nodded, he seemed a little better, she thought. Why don't we get a glass of wine and go into the other room?"

He was particularly interested in Greg's time in jail, and asked a lot of questions about the hearing. When he was satisfied he asked, "So what's happening next?"

"I don't know, I haven't had a lot of time lately, things have been pretty busy at work." As she said that she realized it had been three days since she'd played in her town.

"What about John? Is he still going to see Sara?"

Maybe that's why he's so nervous, she thought. "Yes, I think so, but he's got to get over being so shy."

"Do you think John could have a secret? Something he doesn't want her to know?"

"I think that would be great, but what will happen if she finds out."

"I think it might change their relationship. Right now they've got a lot of roles. He's the big brother, the gentle lover, and when she wants to get wild in bed he's her sex toy."

"Right." She had no idea where he was leading.

"Well let's say John has just come back from doing some investigation somewhere else, and he comes to see Sara, and she sees that he's nervous."

"So John, do you want to tell me about your trip."

"There's not much to tell."

"I think there is, you're nervous, you haven't even kissed me yet."

"I'm not sure you'd want to."

"What's wrong with you?"

He stood up, "I'm sorry, this isn't working." He turned to go to the door.

"Hey," she called, "Wait just a minute." She got up and followed him catching him in the hall by the door.

"You're not getting out of here until you tell me what's going on."

"I missed you," he began, "I missed you a lot, and one night I was so lonely I went out for a drink and ended up in one of those bars where the women dance topless." He looked as though he was about to cry.

"Go on," Sarah said, not sure she wanted to hear the rest. "Well there was a woman there who was dressed in bits and pieces of black leather, and I started remembering the things we'd done together, and I felt ashamed of my desires. Anyway she must have spotted me as being weak and she came over and got me to buy her some drinks. I didn't know what it is but they can spot me a mile away it seems." Sarah nodded thinking about Ms Phillips assessment. "Anyway, before I knew it I was back at her place begging her to whip me."

"Did she?"

"Oh yes, she was an artist. When you were doing it to me the last time I knew you were holding back because you were afraid of hurting me, but she didn't care. She did it just the way i like it, and then she tied me to the wall and..."

He unbuttoned his shirt and showed her his chest. A thin gold ring ran through his nipple. A short length of chain hang from it ending in another ring. "She clipped a leash onto this," he said fingering it, "and she led me around by it."

"It must of hurt."

"It did the next day, it still does a little, but at the time I was loving it too much to feel it."

Sarah took a step back. This was not what she had envisioned their reunion would be like. Her rational side told her she had no claim on this man, but her emotions shoved that thought sprawling.

"You're angry," he observed.

"You bet I am. I thought we might have something. It was just getting started and you had to go off and do this." She reached out and pulled gently on the chain. At least she'd intended to pull gently, but it came out as a sharp tug and she heard him gasp and saw tears come to his eyes.

She almost let it go, but there was something exciting about holding the chain. "Did you bring your bag of sex toys?"

"It's in the car." His eyes had that hopeful glint she'd seen before. It confused her - punishing him was like a reward. Still she was horny, and bird was in the hand - so to speak.

"Go get it. Then you'll learn what happens to little boys who disappoint me."

While he went down she went into the bedroom and changed into her tough sexy outfit. He got back before she was done, but she didn't hurry, it would do him good to be kept waiting.

First she made him take care of her needs. Then after showering and eating dinner she went back into the bedroom where she'd kept him kneeling in a corner. "How much did you pay her?"

"Five hundred dollars, mistress, please punish me, I deserve it."

She really wanted to, she really wanted to take her anger out on him. She wanted to take him past the point where he stopped liking it. But she felt it stirring up something inside her that she didn't like. She wasn't sure what it was she was becoming, for the most part she was pleasantly surprised at what had emerged from the shell, but there were other things there too. There was ambition, she'd found herself wondering if she had a chance to take over The Axe's position. It would be an enormous position, but a part of her told herself that she had earned it.

She wanted a man, but she found she was already tired of this man who wanted to run back into his shell. She had the feeling she could coax him out of it, but wondered if it was worth the effort. She was also afraid of her other darker desires. She'd seen them mirrored and magnified in the Axe. She'd felt them when she was holding the chain. Anger and hate were tricky emotions, some people couldn't handle them the way some people can't stop after one drink. Was she like that she wondered? What would Sara do? 'Dump the loser.'

She thought about it for a couple of minutes then reached down and hauled Jon to his feet. She used the chain to guide him out of the bedroom and into the central aisle of the town. She left him without a word and went into the kitchen and found the bottle of cognac and returned to the town.

He was kneeling, staring at the floor. She selected the car she'd used for him and took it off the board. She held it where he could see it. "John has been away tying up some loose ends on the case, and now he's on his way back. He's been drinking, because he's got a guilty secret. While he was there he got involved with one of the bimbettes. He realized his love for Sara didn't mean anything." She put the car on a road near the wall and slowly moved it down towards her house. She looked at him he was watching it, good. She opened the bottle and took a swig, it burned, but felt good.

She poured out a capful of the liquor, and he must have thought it was for him because he leaned forward.

She ignored him and then as the car came to an intersection, she poured the dark liquid over it, flipped it over and touched it with a match.

A blue flame sprang up forming a ball about the size of her fist. She poured out another capful and poured it on the blaze. The burst of flame was quite impressive. Jon gave out a cry, but she ignored it. "There was no one there to hear John as he lay trapped in the car, as it burned around him."

The fire licked at the lichen trees and started to spread. Sarah let it go for a while, she let it start to consume a model of a store before taking the flowers out of the vase and pouring the water on the blaze.

"John's dead," she announced. "Sara will never see him again, but she'll get over it, after all she's got the rest of her life to lead."

She unfastened Jon's hands, pointed to his hastily discarded clothes and then to the door.

COULD THIS BE THE END 12/30/90 ???