Bearding the Lion: A novel (Original writing).

Julie Stoyka

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BEARDING THE LION

A Novel

by

Julie Stoyka

A Creative Writing Project submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research through the Department of English in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of Windsor.

Windsor, Ontario, Canada
1998

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To those who brought forth the keeper of the lion - forever grateful
To those who glimpsed the lion’s eyes only briefly - friends forever
To those who supervised the offspring - no thanks are enough
And for he who tamed the beast - the bravest heart will conquer all.
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Date: Sun, 16 Nov 1997 13:59:03 +0000
From: Jeff Maize <diggers@bconnex.net>
To: stovka@u windsor.ca
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Dear Julie - Re: Even When You Fall

We would be pleased if you used the lyrics from the subject song in your thesis. Two conditions:

1) proper credit should be accorded - the song was written by Andy Maize and Josh Finlayson, the music publisher is Skydiggers Music

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We would be very interested in reading a final copy of your work or at least the chapter in question. Would you please send us a copy to:

Jeff Maize
RR1, 3077-4th Concession
Shanty Bay, Ontario L0L 2L0

Many thanks.

Jeff Maize
Manager
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Becoming The Lion - Dedication** ................................................................. 1
**Becoming The Lion - Acknowledgments** ................................................... 11
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 1** ................................................................. 1
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 2** ................................................................. 6
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 3** ................................................................. 21
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 4** ................................................................. 36
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 5** ................................................................. 53
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 6** ................................................................. 67
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 7** ................................................................. 90
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 8** ................................................................. 103
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 9** ................................................................. 112
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 10** ............................................................... 125
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 11** ............................................................... 152
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 12** ............................................................... 170
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 13** ............................................................... 184
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 14** ............................................................... 198
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 15** ............................................................... 221
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 16** ............................................................... 233
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 17** ............................................................... 263
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 18** ............................................................... 278
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 19** ............................................................... 301
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 20** ............................................................... 315
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 21** ............................................................... 346
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 22** ............................................................... 366
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 23** ............................................................... 375
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 24** ............................................................... 395
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 25** ............................................................... 411
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 26** ............................................................... 420
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 27** ............................................................... 432
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 28** ............................................................... 444
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 29** ............................................................... 455
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 30** ............................................................... 478
**Becoming The Lion - Chapter 31** ............................................................... 493
**Vita Auctoris** ..................................................................................... 503
Eventually the calendar always worked its way back to December. Forward through the months, but always back to December. December was the end and the beginning. He flipped to the last page of the calendar, and as the glossy sheets slipped through his fingers he felt the void. His life always worked its way back to the void. Every day the void grew bigger. Every year the void got larger. It was supposed to shrink; the pain was supposed to melt away. Everything was supposed to get easier with time. Instead, the void fed off itself and firmly tugged the walls of his stomach, his chest, his skull until his body was stretched into a gaping hole. The outer limit of emptiness. One day soon, he would wake up and feel nothing. But would the nothing be gone, or would it be so big that he would be numb to it? Ironic, to be numb to the numbness. Either way, the pain of nothing was unbearable.

He sat moving only his upper body, slowly fitting the next compact disk into its slot on the living room shelf. At first he only felt a faint, dull ache in his knees. But slowly, a tingling sensation worked its way down to his ankles, jabbing tiny spears into his calves. After an hour or so the pain became intense. A throb under his veins, pulsing between ankles and knees. He concentrated on the pain, holding each heartbeat in his legs. He concentrated on the pain, because it locked out what he couldn’t locate. Concentrated, because all too soon it was over. His legs became numb. Then the whole apartment was silent; still.

He no longer concentrated on his legs. Only on Melissa Etheridge, then later the Indigo Girls, and much, much later R.E.M. The Skydiggers’ “Even When You Fall” played over and over, stuck on repeat. Somewhere after Yaz he breathed shallowly and tried to get up. The pain returned, stabbing his legs in sharp searing jabs. Not pins and needles. Hypos and splintered bamboo. For two minutes he submerged himself in the pain, and swam freely through the void. And the music drifting into his head:

*Ninth of December*

*Sky filled with blue*

*I don’t remember the last thing I said to you*

*But remember, I’ll always love you.*

As quickly as it fell upon him, it was over. As the spasms subsided, the void took control. On his feet, he took the first few steps to the bathroom tentatively, then gaining momentum, crossed over the marble threshold. The bathroom was enormous, with mirrors covering the entire length of two opposing walls. He stood at the sink and turned on the tap. The water gushed out, cold at first, then slowly hissing a stream of burning heat. He placed his hands under the tap
without flinching. He was immune to the heat. He rinsed his face in the scalding water and then turned the tap back. The water dripped to a stop as he groped for a towel. After drying his hands and face, he neatly folded the towel in half, hung it over the rack, and looked passively into the mirror. He saw his reflection in the glass, and behind it he saw his reflection reflected back. In the mirrors he saw his face a thousand times, a million reflections. He looked deeper into the mirror. His face hung on the wall infinitely. He couldn’t count all his faces. Each layer of reflection was greener and darker than the one before. He wondered how many layers there were before the glass turned them green. How many layers he himself contained before he turned green. Jet black hair went green. Broad shoulders oozed green. Green eyes became green, infinitely. He watched his reflection in the mirror, as it undressed his body. A million arms peeling pyjamas from his skin, pulling them over a million heads wearing the same bored expression. A sea of bed-clothes falling around the room, landing with one small whoot. He picked up his pyjamas and tore them into even shreds. He began cleaning the bathroom with swatches of plaid, until the two mirrors were reduced to naked glass. Until the chrome shone and the marble gleamed. Until his body ached and burned white hot against the cold porcelain of the toilet. His stomach rumbled and his face flushed. He felt pangs of hunger growing inside his belly, and he fought them. He refused to eat. Refused to drink the cool water gushing from the tap, spraying the clean counter with film. The hunger pangs beat into his sides, and he contracted his muscles to fight the pokes of pain. Food couldn’t fill the void, only pain could fight it.

He shut the bathroom door behind him and stepped into the open space. With the suck of the vacuum as background noise, he moved the machine in precise lines across the thick carpet. His naked body flowed with the movement of the vacuum. As the sucking died in his head, he tried to make sense of it all. The pictures over the mantle were no help. They mocked him, as if they were trying to tell him something, but knew he could never hear. He ripped the cord from the wall as,

"You can’t escape it Aaron."

Aaron turned to the mantle. His sister’s face searched his own with furtive, darting glances. Elaine looked young in the picture. Younger than he remembered her being the day he took the photograph of her, twirling on the beach. Only five years ago, but now she was old and gray at twenty-five. Bitter, acidic. It made him feel even older. Ancient at twenty-eight. Washed-up. His mother smiled from the other side of the mantle.
“Aaron honey, it’s no use letting the past eat you up like this. Why don’t you go out and find yourself a nice girl to take your mind off everything? You deserve it. You work long hours, pay your bills, pay your taxes. You deserve a little fun. Don’t listen to your sister, she’s a cynic. Oh, and Aaron, put some clothes on, before you catch cold.”

Aaron gently dusted his mother off, then put her back on the mantle, her face turning away from his nakedness. “Aaron honey, listen to me, I’m you mo-” her words cut off by the wall.

Aaron continued cleaning the apartment as the Skydiggers sung on.

Starting over just like you’d want me to
Remember I’ll always dream with you

The kitchen was easy. Too easy. Too apparent he cooked for one every night. Among the smells of oil and spices, his own scent lingered in the cupboards and on the dish-towels. Loitered in the hallway, buzzed through the lights and wafted from his bedroom. His smell was thickly quilted in his duvet. No trace of perfume on his pillow; only his male scent burrowing in his single bed. How many nights had he rolled over, searching for a warm body in the darkness, and woken up with one arm thrown over the edge? Into the void. Four years into the void. Four years of nights spent in darkness, hearing the voices of his family in his mind.

“Aaron, don’t just lie there, do something.”

“Get on with it.”

“You don’t have to be alone.”

Fragments of his family, falling to the floor. His mother’s soft voice telling him; ordering him with her silky enunciations. His sister’s words were blunter. Naked. Only his father’s voice remained absent. Instead, a nodding head, expressing what he could never say. Aaron fell asleep to the words and nods. They comforted him. Filled his head up and covered the hole like palm leaves. In the morning before he was fully awake, he still felt a sleeping pulse somewhere within him. A flicker of hope burning through his veins and brain. He woke up with the same thought every day: “Today it will happen.” But of course, it never did.

It wasn’t like he never saw girls he could like. He did, but they were always one step beyond his reach. They eluded him. He wasn’t interested in the women he met through work. The girls at the office were stiff and rigid. One simple layer that peeled away like nail polish dripped on too thickly. The girls at work were cultivated and efficient. Robots. He could carry on conversations mechanically, without feeling nervous. It was like talking to a screen with eyes. Civil. Every so often they would invite him out, then nod knowingly when he calmly responded he
was busy. After a while they gave up, most of them thinking he was gay, not disinterested. There was nothing to them.

The girls his mother introduced him to were worse. Always happy and polite. They clung to his every word and giggled no matter what he said. He was repulsed by them; repulsed by their puppet reactions. Aaron didn’t want happy. He wanted chaos. He wanted a human whirlwind. Sometimes on his way home from work, or on a Saturday shopping trip, he saw flashes of the tempest. Standing in Aisle 2, looking through the breakfast cereal he caught a glimpse of her, scanning the soup cans. He saw wild eyes through the slits of the shelves, and heard fingernails scratching over tin. Or he walked through the turnstile at the station and a woman rushed past him, going the other way. He turned back and watched her through thick steel bars. He never said anything, just let her fade away. Even when he was so close. On weekends he went to bars with friends, or by himself. He went where the music was loud. He tried to lose himself in the sound. He stood near the back and took large sips of Guinness, if it was on tap. Just stood, listening. Eventually, he felt someone’s eyes brush his body from afar and turned to find the face. The faces were always different, but they always came with two starved eyes. Predatory. He met the eyes in an attempt to gauge the depth of depravity. The eyes turned away meekly from his, or his turned away in disgust from their hungry stare. His friends couldn’t understand it. Refused to understand his reluctance to follow it up. To bring it home. To slowly undress a beautiful woman in his massive apartment. To slip inside her in the shower and push her up against the cold tiles, thrusting his body into hers, again and again. To have her run her tongue over his chest and gasp as hot water ran slippery across their bodies. To carry her naked, through the living room, into his room. And then lay her across his bed like drapery and -

And what? Throw her out the next morning because her eyes still had the sly, hungry look of a predator. He didn’t want that. He wanted the whirlwind to sweep him off his feet. When the eyes of the storm met his own, he would know. So, he waited. Cleaned his apartment and waited.

\textit{I've been standing here for hours by the door}

\textit{I've been waiting for you to come back to me}

\textit{Even When You Fall}

He crossed to the window, and rolled the curtain rod in his hand. The vertical blinds turned and exposed the naked city to his eyes. He watched the string of street lights down University crackle once and then spring to life. He closed the blinds and moved over to the computer. It sat silent, waiting for him, but he couldn't think about work. Not on the anniversary
of the day she left. But next year… maybe next year he wouldn’t take the day off. Wouldn’t have to.

*I can never return the life he took from you

*But remember. I’ll always stand for you*
"Fuck!" Kathrin yelled as she hastily withdrew her newly burnt arm from the oven.

The cookie sheet of canapés clattered to the floor, sending sausage rolls bounding over the linoleum. Jen, watching the spectacle, rushed over from the kitchen table and bent to retrieve the bits of smashed meat and pastry.

"What should I do with these?" Kathrin asked, clutching her seared arm with one hand and trying to gather flattened sausage rolls with the other.

"Put them back on the tray and run your arm under cool water."

Kathrin dropped the hors d’oeuvres onto the righted sheet and walked over to the sink.

"You’re still going to serve those?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Really?"

Jen shrugged. "Who’s gonna know? My floor’s clean."

Kathrin smiled. The kitchen was immaculate, as usual. Clean enough to eat off the floor. She turned the tap and water rolled over a bright red welt swelling out from the soft white flesh of her forearm. The curved shape of the oven element had clearly etched itself into a well defined ‘j’ on her skin. She shook her head disapprovingly. "I don’t know why we insist on holding these Christmas parties so early. Christmas is still two weeks away. Why bother?"

Jen pulled a serving platter off the counter and began plumping the sausage rolls. Discreetly, she blew a hair off one. "Might as well get it over and done with. And I don’t recall a ‘we’. You’re just hired help."

Kathrin flicked a few droplets of water at Jen. "If you weren’t my sister, I’d get upset about that comment."

"Oh come on! The only reason you’re here is to scope out any and all of my available male friends."

Kathrin’s eyes twinkled mischievously. "Well then, why do you invite me?"

Jen grabbed some napkins off the table and laid them across the tray. "That’s the only reason some of them come."

Kathrin pulled her arm out of the sink and turned off the tap. "See? It’s mutually agreeable!"

She grabbed a sausage roll off the tray and inspected it for dirt. Slowly, she began nibbling the pastry off the sausage and then put the uneaten meat back on the tray. Jen plucked the shell-less meat off hastily. "Really Kathrin! That’s disgusting!"
Kathrin grabbed a towel and dried her arm, chewing thoughtfully, then opened her mouth to expose the contents. Immediately Jen reached for the other dish towel and snapped it at Kathrin.

“Oh! I’m so scared!” Kathrin mocked as she jumped out of the towel’s way.

She launched into a war dance and let out a few whoops for good measure, while closing in for the kill.

A loud cough interrupted the affray. The two women turned to the kitchen door. Their mother stood akimbo, the door behind her swinging slightly on its hinges. A small smile was spreading over her face.

Kathrin straightened up, dropping the towel nonchalantly on the counter. Jen moved both of her hands behind her back. “Hi mom,” they chorused.

“Hi yourselves. Give me a hug.”

The girls moved towards their mother, Kathrin entering into the extended arms first.

“How’s my girl?”

“I’m fine,” Kathrin responded.

“A little too skinny,” her mother retorted.

“It’s the in thing.” Kathrin mumbled under her breath, as her mother turned to her other daughter.

“Jenny.”

“Mom! It’s Jen.”

“Oh sure! Little towel snapping Miss Mature won’t let her mother call her Jenny!”

Jen hugged her.

“Where’s your other sister?” she asked.

“Andria couldn’t make it. She just called. Danielle came down with a bug, so the three of them are staying home.”

Their mother sighed. “Well, I suppose I knew that when you girls grew up you’d have your own families to deal with. I just didn’t think it would happen so soon.”

Kathrin laughed. “Oh God! Jen, get the Kleenex. I feel a big, mushy group cry coming on.”

Her mother huffed. “Oh sure, make fun of your poor mother.”

She turned to Jen. “And where are my other favourite grand-kids?”

Jen smiled. “Around. Call them.”
Their mom pushed open the kitchen door, and leaned into the living room. “Rufus! Cassi! Come see Grandma!”

Rufus darted in through the open door, trailed by Cassiopeia. The two spaniels threw themselves onto their Nana with relish. She in turn cooed and petted them, kissing their little noses again and again.

“Do my little babies want a treat? Have we been good puppies?”

She reached over and pulled two sausage rolls off the tray. Gently, she placed them on the floor. Kathrin stifled a giggle. The dogs sniffed the rolls tentatively. Grandma grabbed another roll and stuffed it into her mouth.

“Mmmm.” She nodded appreciatively.

Kathrin burst into laughter.

“What?” her mother demanded.

“That is so sick,” Kathrin gagged.

Jen threw Kathrin a warning glance and quickly handed the tray to her mother. “Why don’t you go make the rounds?”

Their mother huffed again. “No one’s here yet... still, I can tell when I’m not wanted.”

She stepped over the uneaten sausage rolls and marched out into the living room, followed closely by the dogs.

Kathrin scooped to pick up the untouched rolls and shot them into the garbage. “I can’t believe she ate one!”

“So did you!” Jen pointed out.

“I cleaned mine first.”

The two giggled again, and Kathrin wiped her eye. “Thank God she’s gone.”

Jen smiled. “She’s not that bad - for a mother.”

Kathrin rolled her eyes. “Yeah, if you’re a perfect daughter like you and Andria are.”

“C’mom.”

“Puleeze,” Kathrin whined, as she placed her hands on her hips, “you guys make me look bad. My younger sister is married with the first grandchild. My older sister is married to a man whom she loves more than anything, raises a brood of cocker spaniels and owns a house without a mortgage.”

“And the middle daughter?” Jen asked.
"The middle daughter," Kathrin said mimicking her mother’s, "rejects every traditional role and value, every suitor..."

"And every word of advice from her mother!" Jen finished.

"See?"

Jen crossed to her sister. "Yeah I know what you mean. Sometimes I love her to death."

"Yeah, something like that." Kathrin agreed.

They stood silently for a moment, then Jen grabbed the freezer handle and opened the door. She pulled a few boxes of appetizers out. She and Kathrin extracted some more hors d’oeuvres and put them on the cookie sheet.

"Try not to burn yourself this time." Jen warned.

"Thanks mom!"

"I don’t think that’s a compliment."

Their mother, as if on cue, stuck her head back inside the kitchen. "People are coming down the street."

"We’ll be right out." Jen told her.

"Well, you better hurry. There are some attractive men out there," she said, closing the door behind her.

Kathrin threw up her arms. "What was she doing? Plastering her head to the window?"

Jen smiled and shrugged.

Kathrin looked at her and grimaced. "I didn’t know you were looking for another man."

"I don’t think she was talking to me, but we better get out there."

"Yeah. Before she gets to them!"

Jen popped the sheet into the oven. "Drink?" she asked.

"Whatever you’re drinking, but a double."

They headed out into the living room as a few people entered through the front door. Their mom greeted everyone, took coats, and incessantly repeated that every person there should call her by her first name. Jen took a step towards the front room, then backtracked. "Oh, I forgot. I have something for you."

She plucked an object off the living room bookshelf and handed it to Kathrin.

"An ashtray?" Kathrin asked.

"You have my permission to smoke in the house."

Kathrin smiled slyly. "Just when I was going to quit. What about your husband?"
“Scott’s O. K. with it.”


“We figured you might need a metaphorical blanket.”

“Why?”

“Well,” Jen fumbled, “I know I should have told you this sooner…”

“No,” Kathrin mumbled, almost inaudibly.

“Kath.”

“You invited him?”

Jen coughed. “I couldn’t not.”

“Jen!”

“Shh! People will hear you.”

Kathrin took a deep breath and clutched the ashtray tightly. No wonder she hated Christmas. Of course she should have expected it. It was only natural, him being Scott’s closest friend and the best man at the wedding. And the break-up hadn’t been that bad - from her angle. Actually, it had been civil. Almost perfect, if such things could be. And it had happened a million years before, or so it seemed. So why was she so nervous all of a sudden?

It was a territory thing. Jen’s house was Kathrin’s territory - her stomping ground. Well, she resolved, just make the best of it. She forced herself to concentrate on the party at hand, as Jen handed her a drink. She bit down on her lip as the gin flowed into her mouth and sucked at her face. She braced herself and took a bigger sip. More and more people were floating through the front door. She checked out the men. So what if Ken was going to be there? There were plenty of other good looking men around. She moved across the room and planted herself next to Scott. He smiled and placed a hand on the hollow of her back to make her feel more comfortable. When a lull fell over the group, he introduced her to the people he was talking to. They were his teaching buddies and she recalled having met a few of them before. She hung back after the introductions, listening, but not participating in the conversation. Finally, one of the women turned to Kathrin.

“So, Kathrin, what do you do?”

“I’m a graphic artist.”

The woman smiled. “Oh?”

Scott fielded the awkward question. “She’s amazing. She morphs things.”

Kathrin laughed. “Don’t be so technical. Mostly I do virtual reality. I make flat things full.”
The woman smiled blankly. "I see."

One of the men standing nearby interrupted. "Have I seen any of your work?"

"You may have. You know the commercial where the kids are on a bus and the bus turns into a roller coaster? All the kids’ faces stretch and they turn into aliens."

The man waved his arm excitedly. "The one where the last kid ribbits?"

"Yeah." Kathrin smiled, pleased to be acknowledged. "I did that."

"Wow. That’s amazing."

"Amazing," the woman echoed.

Kathrin blushed. "Well, really I can’t take much of the credit for it. Mostly it’s a lot of hours hunched over a computer."

"Still, at least your work is out there. In my field there’s no way to get any credit for your work. Right guys?" The man jabbed another teacher in the ribs.

The rest of the group nodded and murmured their assent. They began to dissect their profession and gradually Kathrin’s attention was diverted to other things. She glanced around the room. Everywhere she looked the space was packed with guests, and more people were filtering through the front door. Her mother was in heated discussion across the room, apparently enthralling the three men who surrounded her. Kathrin shook her head.

Jen was standing near the entranceway to the front room, talking to a petite brunette Kathrin had never seen before. Jen caught Kathrin’s eye, and smiled sheepishly. Kathrin relented and smiled warmly, then turned back to her sister’s husband, but he had disappeared from the group. Her glass was near empty and she finished the remains of the gin. Not wishing to return to the academic conversation, she made her way over to the makeshift bar she and Jen had rigged up earlier in the day.

A shorter but slightly more muscular version of Scott grinned at her. "Can I get you a drink, Kath?"

She leaned against the wall. "Do you have anything stronger?"

Andrew pulled a bottle of gin off the counter. "’Fraid not. Unless you’re interested in your brother-in-law’s brother."

"Stronger - not scarier," she countered.

"Ouch."

He passed her a full glass. She stirred the contents with her finger. "So,” she paused to take a drink. "how did you get roped into bartending?"
“It comes with the family, I suppose.”

She scanned the room from the bar. Off in the corner her eyes found him talking to three women and a man. Kathrin looked at him and a wave of panic hit her. She watched him shift his weight and felt queasy. She drained her glass and plunked it down on the counter. “Bartender, a refill.”

Andrew looked at her in surprise. He had never seen her perturbed before. “Easy partner,” he stated, “a few more of those and you might actually take me up on my offer.”

She smiled wickedly as he poured her a much smaller serving of gin and tonic. “Who knows? I might,” she said and turned away.

She crossed the room and turned down the hallway to the bathroom. Once out of sight, she gripped the wall and found that her breath was coming in short spurts. She darted into the bathroom, and fumbled with the door lock. When the lock finally clicked, she relaxed a little bit and placed her drink on the back of the toilet. Damn!

She hadn’t seen him slip in. Somewhere in the last half hour she had let her guard down. In consequence, he had affected her. Even Andrew had noticed. It wasn’t like her to lose her cool.

It had been a long time. He looked good. She wondered if he had seen her, and quickly ran her fingers through her long blond hair. The mirror left her panic stricken. Of course the curls were way too frizzy. Damn weather.

“Kathrin,” she said out loud to the mirror, “you dumped him, remember? Why are you worrying?”

Because he looked so damn sure of himself. Because he had lost weight and gained muscle. Because, for the first time ever she wanted to fuck him. The thought threw her off for a moment, then she realized it was true. For the first time she was actually attracted to Ken. She grabbed the drink and took a large swallow. Maybe she’d already had too much to drink; it was possible. Or maybe she was just lonely. Or horny. Or all of the above. As she blotted her lipstick with a piece of toilet paper she contemplated her feelings. It had been a long time since she had seriously been with anybody. Only a few three-date stands since Ken. Sure she liked to look, but she hated to make an effort. Every guy over the age of twenty-seven was looking long-term. She just looked. She shopped. She looked.

She looked into the mirror. “You’re starting to get wrinkles.”

For the first time in a long while, she inspected her face. Small lines cracked around her eyes. Wrinkles at twenty eight. Underneath the etching, dark pools of flesh appeared bottomless.
Her mouth, which she once considered so European, seemed too fleshy; small indented trails stemmed down in linear paths from her nose, pinching around her lips. She questioned youth in one definitive glance. Where did it go? Most often she felt as if she was still sixteen. When people asked, she became flustered initially and had to count up through the twelve years since she’d gotten her driver’s license. Looking in the mirror she realized a million clichés. *Time flies*, she postulated, *then it falls like gravity.* Hard.

She thought of Andria and Jen. They were so happy. So settled. And she was her mother’s worst nightmare. She could vaguely imagine herself with child; suckling her own creation. Yes, she did want that. But in the family portrait of her mind there was no one placing his hand on her shoulder, no one teasing her into the smile ready-made for the photographer. Would there ever be? She chastised her reflection. There already had been.

It was time. Ken had wanted a commitment she couldn’t give to him at twenty-six. But now, now maybe she could. She flushed the toilet for good measure, and grabbed her drink. Then she took a deep breath and went out into the hallway.

She eyed the party eagerly when she emerged into the living room. Scott was standing near Ken, and she swallowed. *It’s now or never.* She crossed over to Scott. Both men stopped talking as she approached. “Hi,” she said tentatively.

“Hi.” Scott replied.

“Kathrin.”

She turned in measured elegance. “Ken.”

He smiled warmly. “Long time. You look beautiful.”

She smiled back. “You look great.”

Scott clucked nervously. “I should go see how Jen is.”

Kathrin and Ken didn’t respond as Scott excused himself.

“So,” she said after a moment, “how are you?”

“I’m great.”

“Business?”

“Couldn’t be better. I’ve seen some of your ads. Your name keeps coming up in the industry.”

Kathrin sipped her drink. “I’ve been doing all right.”

Ken shook his head as his smile broke into a grin. “You never were one for compliments. You’re a hot commodity.”
"Only in work," she replied, looking directly at him.

"Well, I’m sure in other things."

Kathrin was about to respond when she felt a slight tap on her shoulder. She turned to find her mother looking up at her. "Mom, you remember..." she offered.

"Ken," her mother cooed, brushing past Kathrin, "how are you? It’s been so long. My, don’t you look handsome?"

"Thanks Ingrid." Ken said, smiling in the manner of a boy scout.

Ingrid turned to her daughter. "Hon, would you mind getting me a refill? I just have to talk to Ken!"

Kathrin took her mother’s glass and walked over to Andrew. He took the glass, and sighed in mock romanticism. "Mother stealing your boyfriend?"

"Shut up Andrew!"

He laughed. "A little bit touchy, are we?"

He poured two drinks and gave them back to Kathrin. She took a sip of hers and then leaned against the wall, watching her mother flit around Ken. Her mother had always hated him. So why was she so interested in his life all of a sudden? Kathrin didn’t want to know.

She put her mother’s drink down and grabbed her cigarette package from her coat pocket, and pulled out a smoke. Her hand dipped back into her coat, and her fingers searched for a lighter or matches. She couldn’t find either, so she turned towards the bar. She came face to face with a lit silver Zippo. She popped the cigarette into her mouth and inhaled. "Thanks."

The tall redhead smiled. "No problem. I’m Melissa."


Melissa frowned. "Really? I never would have guessed. You two look completely different. That’s so odd."

Kathrin smiled sweetly. "Different fathers."

Melissa looked down and away. "Shit. Sorry."

Kathrin covered her mouth and giggled. "Sorry. That’s not true. It’s just that I hear it so much, I have to get inventive. Jen and Andria look like our mother, and I am supposed to look like our dad."

"Supposed to?"

"I’ve only seen pictures."

Melissa swallowed. "Did I really just put my foot in my mouth, or..."
Jen, who was still talking to the brunette, glanced over. She excused herself politely, and crossed over to Kathrin and Melissa.

“Hi Melissa! How are you? It’s so nice to see you! Listen, I need to borrow my sister for a few moments. I’ll bring her back.”

“No problem.” Melissa smiled.

Jen steered Kathrin into the kitchen, mindless of the drink sloshing over the carpet, and the cigarette burning between Kathrin’s fingers. Kathrin turned on her as soon as the door swung shut. “That was a little abrupt!”

“Sorry, but I need to talk to you.”

“What?”

“About Ken.”

Kathrin sighed. “I was talking to him. Jen, I don’t know what I’m thinking, but I have this feeling about him. He didn’t approach you about me, did he? Oh, I don’t care. All of a sudden I saw him, and this weird feeling came over me. Is that strange?”

Jen stared at her sister wide-eyed. “You mean to tell me, that after that whole fiasco, you’re finally attracted to him?”

Kathrin frowned. “I don’t know. It’s just that something is happening inside. I think I really want a relationship again. A real one. No more of this fooling around business.”

“Not with Ken you don’t.”

“Why not?”

Jen threw up her arms in exasperation. “Need I remind you of how little you cared for him? How you walked all over him? How can you want that? You’re nuts!”

Kathrin stood silently, taking in all of her sister’s comments. Jen brought her hand to her head. “I’m sorry Kathrin, but I’m your sister. I know you better than you know yourself sometimes. Find someone who is perfect, not someone who’s just in the right place at the right time, and convenient.”

The oven timer buzzed. Kathrin looked at her sister plaintively. “God I hate it when you’re right. But why not have a little fun, even if it doesn’t work out?”

Jen turned away and pulled on two large oven mitts. “Because,” she said, “there are more people involved now.”

“More people? How do you mean?” Kathrin asked, then realized the facts, “Oh, my god!”
Jen sighed, and started to speak, but Kathrin stopped her. "God, she must think I'm a complete idiot!"

Jen grabbed her hand with her oven mitts. "Well, I bet she feels even worse. She doesn't even know who you are."

Kathrin frowned. "You mean he never told her about me?"

"Aren't we high and mighty?" Jen scoffed, "Well, I imagine he must have mentioned an ex, but I don't think they met until after. Don't get mad at her, it's not her fault."

Kathrin opened the oven door, and pretended to stick her head in. "Ready."

Jen grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the oven. She placed an oven mitt over the rack and began pulling out the cookie sheet. Behind her Kathrin muttered, while looking out the back window.

"Well, she is good looking, but a little tall I would think."

Jen turned. "A little tall?"

"Well Ken is only 5'11."

The tray clattered to the floor. Kathrin whipped around to see Jen staring at her.

"What?" Kathrin asked.

Jen opened her mouth, shut it, then opened it again. "Miscommunication. Melissa's not dating him."

"What do you mean, she's not dating him?"

Jen covered her mouth with her hand, then cleared her throat. "I mean, she was the one who introduced them."

"Who?"

"Ken and Jill."

Kathrin looked at her sister intently. "Who's Jill?"

"His fiancee."

Kathrin's jaw dropped. "His what?"

"Oh shit."

"He's engaged?"

"To Jill."

"Who's Jill?"

Jen sighed. "The brunette."

"The tiny one?"
“Yes.”

“Oh shit.” The inch long ash on Kathrin’s cigarette floated lazily to the floor. “Wow.”

“Kathrin, I’m sorry. This wasn’t how I intended to tell you.”

“No. Obviously not.” Kathrin stated as she threw her cigarette into the sink and turned on the tap. “Shit, I should just kill myself now.”

Jen laughed meekly. “Don’t get over dramatic. Nothing has been done that can’t be repaired. Right?”

Kathrin shrugged. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Good. Now, help me pick up these mini-quiches.”

The two girls bent down, and looked at each other over egg tarts. Suddenly, they both began to laugh uncontrollably.

“I am such a bone-head!” Kathrin spluttered.

“That’s why we love you.”

They cleaned up the rest of the quiches between mumbled giggles. When Kathrin finally stood up, she felt light-headed and slightly high. Jen’s face was flushed.

“So,” Jen asked, “what are you going to do now?”

Kathrin inhaled deeply. “Get really drunk and hit on your brother-in-law!”

Jen laughed. “Don’t you dare! His girlfriend will kill you!”

The cab pulled up to the house and Kathrin clambered out of the front seat. She tipped the cabbie then watched him drive away, until the tail lights of the cab disappeared around the corner. Underneath the halo of the streetlight she lit a cigarette and fished through her purse for her house keys. Her slightly chilled hand was making no progress, though the alcohol was playing more of a role than the cold. In fact it was a surprisingly mild night for Toronto in December.

She made her way up the driveway, and turned back to see a haphazardly placed set of footprints in the light dusting of snow behind her. I’m wased, she thought with a giggle. God, it feels good. She turned back towards the house, and climbed the stairs. When she reached the front door, by pure coincidence she managed to find her keys.

“Ah! Two triumphs in the same evening. Will wonders never cease.”

The first of course being that she had managed to make it through the night at the party, with some semblance of dignity left. It had been tough for a while, but naturally Jen had been right. That was what was so annoying about her sister. She was always right.
Kathrin let herself in, and then tossed the cigarette onto the front lawn before shutting the door. Her landlord would moan about it in the spring, but that was months away. She could bear it. She flicked on the landing light, and then made her way up to the second floor apartment. When she got to the top, she flicked off the landing light from her own switch, and unlocked her door. Her coat dropped to the floor, and her boots found themselves kicked across the living room. She was too tired to even think about hanging or placing anything in proper order. Better to worry about it in the morning.

She sauntered over to the fish bowl and rapped her knuckles against the glass. “Sorry! Did that piss you off?” she asked as the fish reacted violently in the bowl. Slowly, they regained composure and drifted lazily in small circles, eyeing her passively.

Kathrin stared, unimpressed. “Fucking fish.”

She stumbled through the living room, into the dining room, through the door to the hallway and into the bathroom. Her bladder was on the verge of explosion. She sent the toilet lid flying up against the back of the toilet and heaved down her pants. As she relieved herself, her eyes wandered over the doiled plastic of the shower curtain given to her by her mother. The swirls seemed to float in front of her eyes.

She reached over to pull some toilet paper off the roller but the roll was bare. Her arm reached under the sink on her right hand side and pulled a roll from the wicker basket. She pulled her arm back, snagging her bum in the process. “Oow!” she yelped.

She finished her business, flushed the toilet and then set about to fix up her burnt arm. She rummaged through the medicine cabinet and withdrew a silver tube of antibiotic ointment. The ‘j’ on her forearm had erected itself into a blistering mound. Fluid was gathering under the arm’s epidermis and she viewed the bubbles objectively, as if they were removed from her body - not a part of herself - except for the pain. Like a volcano waiting to erupt. Around the raised skin her arm blushed bright pink, pulling blood from her veins.

She unscrewed the plastic nib from the ointment and pinched the tube, moving the greasy salve up from the silver cylinder’s bottom. The lubricant eased slowly out of the mouth of the tube, making a brief farting noise. It seemed to melt over the crest of blistered skin and ooze into the blisters themselves. It was going to be a fairly large scar.

She capped the ointment and placed the tube on the sink’s edge. Glancing briefly into the mirror, she remembered a previous conversation in a somewhat similar situation. She turned away
to avoid another one. Then she decided that her teeth really didn’t need that much attention, and that her make-up could wait to come off until she felt up to it.

She walked out of the bathroom, and turned left into her room. Her bedside light glowed over the quilt that Andria had made for her last Christmas. It was covered with lush purple and blue leaves, spanning out from the stomach of the quilt. In the lower corner Andria’s initials were embossed onto the fabric. Kathrin approached the antique brass bed, and ran her fingers over the leaves. Sometimes it took her breath away, that her sister could create such works of beauty. Weren’t beautiful things only the workings of nature and gods? Andria had a magic touch: anything she sewed or stitched would turn to gold.

Kathrin eased herself down onto the quilt. She stared up at the ceiling, and then slowly stretched her fingers and toes. It felt good to finally be completely off her feet. A few moments passed before she realized just how tired she was. It had been a long day, and she was glad it was finally over.

Lying there, slowly burrowing herself under the cover of the quilt, she thought about the events of the night. It was strange, how suddenly thoughts and beliefs could change. In the middle of the kitchen she had felt like everything had been taken away from her with a few words. In just a few moments, she had wanted Ken so badly, and then not cared at all. And lying on her bed, none of it seemed important. Why, she asked herself, or how does the mind justify the change of feelings?

It was to save face; to make everyone believe that she, Kathrin was still in control. What a load of shit. Had she ever been in love? No. Because love wasn’t suppose to sway, or move away, or give up. In reality she didn’t really care. Ambivalence does not foster love.

Somewhere in the back of her head, ideas were shaping themselves into a plan. Up until that moment, lying on a shroud of leaves, she had only wanted someone. Not the one, as her mother had often referred to their father. That’s what her plan was: to find the one. Not to look for him, or hunt him down, but to find him. Or be found by him. She wasn’t going to waste time with maybe.

She rolled off the bed, and went to the desk. A small piece of stock card lying on the desk attracted her attention. She realized immediately what it was. An invitation to her friend Alison’s wedding shower. Tomorrow. The last thing she needed was another event to rub someone else’s happiness in her face. She stopped, realizing how petty and childish she sounded. Of course she
was happy for Alison, for Ken, for both her sisters. For everyone in the entire fucking world who had someone. She smirked. God, she was getting old. Old and crabby.

She picked up the stock card invitation and glanced at the gold embossed lettering. So much care and trouble had gone into making the invitation. So much love and tenderness. Funny how a piece of paper could change how one thought of other people. She ran her fingers over the lettering, over the two names on the invitation.

She grabbed a pen from the mug by the window and sat down cross-legged on the quilt, poised the pen over the pad. She had no idea what she was going to write. A recipe maybe, or a list.

A slow smile melted across her face. *What's in a name?* She clicked the pen and wrote out her name in neat cursive. **KATHRIN CONNELLY.**

Then **CATHERINE CONNELL.**
Then **KATHY MC CONNAUGHY.**
Then **KATIE COHN.**
Then **KAY COHEN.**
Then **K. STEIN.**

The last name struck her as abrupt, and without flow. She put her right hand up to her head, and rubbed her temple. As she folded her arm, some of the ointment smeared onto her bicep, and she rubbed the oil from her arm. The initial 'j' formation was now a blurred dike, holding back the plasma in a fleshy bin. She turned her forearm away from her, and saw the burn from the side. The whole inside of her arm was puffy and bloated. She traced the burn with her finger. It would harden into a waxy scarred hook. To hook. To jerk. A lovely lettered reminder of the night she nearly made an ass of herself.

Her face cracked into an open smile, and the plan congealed in her mind.

*What is in a name?* If she played her cards right, the perfect man.
Kathrin slipped into her “Saigon special” mini dress, eased the zipper up over her stomach and breasts, then looped the silken cord through the clasp at her neck. She smoothed the fabric over her thighs and watched the afternoon light pass across the gold and blue threading. Turning slightly, she viewed her body’s profile in the full length mirror. She wasn’t nearly as skinny as her mother had observed.

She pulled her black boots from the closet, and pushed her feet into the moldings. The zipper ed flaps met at the inside of her calves and cradled the loose skin just below her knees, leaving a good six inches of leg exposed. No doubt Alison’s parents would “tsk” their disapproval across the room at her, but she had grown accustomed to their looks of despair when she arrived wearing something completely out of place. Once, Alison’s mom had refused to take them to a school dance until Kathrin removed the fist-sized sequined cross from her neck.

“I will not drive a Lolita in my car!” she had commented.

Alison and Kathrin had no idea about whom she was speaking, but the very next day, there Kathrin was at the library, getting her first taste of the lewd and erotic. And her Catholic school uniform never seemed the same to her again. Of course, all that was before...well, all that was before and after, which was neither here nor there. At any rate, she could count on a reaction from Alison’s over-protective Irish parents, who probably still believed their twenty-seven-year-old daughter was as chaste and as pure as the day she was born.

Kathrin glanced at the invitation, which was simply an extension of Alison’s parents’ controlling nature. She smothered a giggle when her eye caught the words ‘wedding shower’. Wedding shower wasn’t necessarily the best way to describe the event; however, ‘booze’ and ‘bash’ didn’t enter the Morris’ vocabulary. Kathrin had been around long enough to read between the lines erected by Alison’s parents, and those removed by her daughter. What she could anticipate was a dozen or so friends and a few relatives trying to remain relatively sober while gag gifts and mushy, over-processed sentiments were passed around the room. Right under the Morris’ noses.

Then, on the verge of intoxication, anyone who was willing would venture out into the welcoming arms of Toronto’s night life. Alison’s parents would sigh with relief, procure some Bailey’s from the cabinet, and toast the success of their daughter’s upbringing without mentioning just how many of their best bottles of whisky had been consumed.

Perhaps it was for that reason Alison and Kathrin had never become best friends. Their familial climates clashed. Where Alison had to deal with two stern law-makers, Kathrin had
endured only one overbearing mother. Still, Kathrin had always felt like she had the short end of the stick. There had never been any room for compromise.

In any case, Kathrin and Alison had managed to become quite good friends; still, Kathrin had allied herself with Carol, and Alison had befriended Stephanie, although Steph hadn't arrived on the scene until university. And then, the four had become inseparable.

Kathrin had a framed picture of the four of them, from their second year at U of T, when they had moved into a run-down house off College Street. In the picture the four of them were all geared up for a Halloween party. Alison and Steph joined at the t-shirt - smirking identically as a pair of Siamese twins. Both of them wore their long brown hair up in pony tails on top of their heads. Carol posed, poised angularly behind them, her short dark hair smoothed into a flapper doo, with a pink feather jutting upright, acting as antenna to the stars. One of her long thin legs poked out from behind Steph, forming a right angle with her arm, which held a golden cigarette filter spewing thick curls of smoke. Kathrin, on the other side of the twins, grinned ferociously through a mane of golden ringlets and black eyeliner whiskers.

It was Kathrin's favourite picture. Even the photos from Steph's wedding couldn't capture the same vitality. Two down, two to go, thought Kathrin.

Surprisingly, Steph's marriage hadn't changed their group dynamic that much. They still went out for lunch - still went dancing. Of course the competitions had ended. They no longer tried to hit on the same guy and then watch his baffled expression when the woman he finally chose shot him down. Yes, they had been awful. Downright evil even. Maybe tonight will be just like old times. The four of them would dance, while the guys played pool and watched the hockey game. And Carol would point out attractive men, or talk to them, but go home with her 5'2' Jewish lover, Harold. Who, despite his height and religious views, was perfect for Carol.

Kathrin's three friends had long given up trying to find a match for her. As far as they were concerned, she was a hopeless case. And she didn't particularly enjoy their meddling anyway. She wasn't shy, never had been, and had no problem talking if she wanted to. When she wanted to. Usually, she just couldn't be bothered to make the effort. Plus the fact, few men could keep up to her on the dance floor. And those that could - well she questioned their choice of drugs.

She grabbed her purse and stuffed her lipstick, mascara, a package of smokes, some Kleenex and a perfume sampler into the leather folds. Her wallet, amply supplied with business cards, was already tucked into the purse. Just in case. She took one last look in the mirror, pulled her coat from the brass foot board, and headed for the door.
Carol flung the door open before Kathrin had a chance to ring the doorbell.

"So," she asked, pulling Kathrin inside the hallway and briefly kissing both of her cheeks, "how was the party? Any luck?"

Kathrin playfully pushed Carol away. "Let me at least get my coat off!"

Carol took her coat and the gift-wrapped box from her arm. Alison and Steph peeked around the corner, then tag-teamed her against the wall, squealing like little girls.

"So," Steph inquired as she took a step backwards, "how are you?"

"Fine."

"You look amazing," Alison offered, "but my parents are going to have a conniption when they see that dress!"

Kathrin rolled her eyes. "Your parents have a conniption when they see ankles!"

"Too true." Alison sympathized.

Kathrin pushed the skirt of her dress down further. When she lifted her eyes from the hem lines, her friends were watching her expectantly. "What?" she asked.

There was no response.

"What?" Kathrin demanded.

Steph’s hand shot up to her mouth, and she played with her lip. It was always the first sign that she was nervous. "We were wondering... did you see him?"

Kathrin pondered the question, then replied "If you’re talking about Ken, then yes."

Alison smiled. "Did you talk to him?" she asked.

"Yes."

Alison’s mouth oozed into a sly grin, and she put her arm forth expectantly to Steph.

Stephanie glared back at Alison. "Wait," she said turning to Kathrin, "anything else we should know?"

Kathrin, grasping the ideas going through both women’s heads, smiled mysteriously.

"Like what?"

Steph smiled sheepishly at Kathrin. "Like, would a certain male be interested in pursuing a relationship with a certain woman?"

Kathrin nodded solemnly and Alison yelped with excitement.

Steph held up her hand. "Hold on! Did this certain man take this certain woman home?"

The three women waited, breath held, for Kathrin to speak.
“Well,” Kathrin began, “I imagine if this certain woman wanted to go home with this
certain man, she would be very much within her right to do so...”

Alison cut her off. “Ten bucks over here!”

The other two erupted into a volley of laughter and squeals.

“Because.” Kathrin continued, “this certain couple is engaged.”

The noise ceased. “What?” the three asked in unison.

Kathrin looked at their faces, then broke into gut-wrenching laughter. “Ken’s engaged!
Really, you guys should curb your romantic appetites.”

Kathrin ducked around the girls and into the large foyer of Alison’s parents’ house. The
remaining women stood numb as Kathrin’s voice was heard greeting the Morris family. Alison
moved towards the doorway, and Steph’s body shadowed the movement.

“Hold on.” Carol said, stopping the procession, “I believe the two of you owe me some
money...”

Alison groaned. “You didn’t know he was engaged!”

“Tough break ladies, but I still bet nothing would happen.”

She turned and went out into the hall, as Steph and Alison pulled their money out of their
pockets and dumbly followed.

In the living room Kathrin was already perched on the edge of the sofa, her dress hiked up
to her thighs. Alison groaned inwardly.

Mr. Morris was pouring a drink at the bar, no doubt a gin and tonic for Kathrin. She
crossed over to the antique bar, and stood beside her father. “Alison,” he said, turning to her, “can
I make you a drink?”

Alison nodded. “Sure. What are you making?”

“A gin and tonic.”

“Sure, that sounds good. I’ll have one of those.”

Her father stopped stirring the drink and gave her a hard stare, but said nothing. He
deposited Kathrin’s drink into her hand, and then pulled a fresh glass from the table. “Go and
give that to Kathrin. Are you sure you don’t want a glass of wine?”

Alison smiled. “No. A ‘g and t’ will be fine, Dad. Thanks.”

She crossed the room and handed Kathrin the drink. Kathrin smiled up at her and took
the glass. “You know,” she said friskily, “I was thinking...you and Adam should just move in
with your parents once you get married.”
Alison shot her a hard glare. “Fuck off,” she moaned quietly, leaning in so her parents wouldn’t hear.

Kathrin laughed. “Getting on your nerves?”

Alison plopped down on the couch beside her. “Kathrin, if I have to sit through one more memory of when they first got married, I swear to God, I’ll call the whole thing off!”

The two of them surveyed the party. Kathrin sighed, then looked down at Alison. “What do you say, we get this show on the road?”

“What do you say, we just can this whole fiasco and leave now?”

Kathrin stood up, and motioned Alison to stay seated. She clutched her drink in one hand and ambled over to Mrs. Morris. After a couple of minutes of prodding on Kathrin’s part, Mrs. Morris raised her glass. “People,” she cooed, just above speaking level, “I would like to propose a toast.”

There were a few ‘hear ye, hear ye’s’ , and Mrs. Morris stepped into the center of the room. She threw her husband a stern visual command and he shuffled over, passing Alison her drink on the way. His wife straightened his tie as he cleared his throat.

“Ahem! I would like to propose this toast to the happy couple…” he said, as his wife busily whisked Alison and Adam together for the group to admire, “and ask that everyone welcome Adam and the rest of the Tyler family to the Morris clan. We’ve waited six years to hear mention of an impending marriage. It is now my pleasure to announce that I will soon have a son-in-law, as opposed to the sin-in-law my daughter has been shackling up with.”

Mrs. Morris tossed a mortified look to her husband amid a chorus of laughter and cheers.

“And now,” Kathrin announced, “to the gifts!”

As the group descended around the stack of oddly assorted packages, Alison gave Kathrin a light tap of the back. “Thank you. We might actually get out of here before tomorrow.”

Adam and Alison opened the first package to find matching Tarzan and Jane “sleep-wear”, compliments of Carol and Harold. Steph demanded that the ‘happy couple’ don their negligee, but Mrs. Morris’ rapid hand put a stop to any such festivities. She advanced to the next packages and handed them to her daughter. The couple made short work of the unwrapping and opened the gifts rapidly, as if to get to them and through them before their parents had a chance to glimpse anything a little too risqué. As they arrived at Kathrin’s present, Kathrin took a few steps away from the group. She stood squarely next to Mr. Morris, as he was farthest from the gift openers. Alison’s
aim had never been good, so the chances of her pitching the gift and hitting Kathrin were slim. Odd that Alison had, over the years, failed to learn to appreciate Kathrin’s home-made gifts.

Alison eyed the package warily, then turned to her fiancé. “Here honey,” she said, passing him the box, “I want you to open it.”

Everyone laughed, including Kathrin. Slowly Adam untied the bow, then carefully removed the wrapping paper. He shook the box daintily, as if to shake out any demons, but retain the essence. He lifted the lid and reached first one hand, then both into the battered wads of tissue paper and pulled out the contents. Kathrin watched Alison move in to get a better look, and noted the various expressions fleeting across her face. “Oh my God.” Alison finally mumbled.

She pulled the gift frantically from Adam’s hands and held one half of the gift up for everyone to see. A huge, grotesquely shaped smiley-face mask peered out at the audience. It was sculpted out of a thin sheet of clear plexi-glass, and pasted on the inside was a distorted photograph of Alison, bearing an elongated grin, and huge bulbous eyes. The other mask portrayed a similarly disjointed replica of Adam, wearing an equally disturbing grimace. Everyone stared in awe until Carol, in a rather ungraceful motion, fell convulsing with laughter onto the couch. “Oh my God! Those have to go right above your bed!” she screeched.

Alison gasped. “To give me nightmares?” she asked, staring at the masks.

She turned her face over in her hand, and sat looking at her weird reflection. Then a tiny smile crept over her mouth. “Kathrin,” she said, turning fully towards her friend, “these masks are the most hideous things I’ve ever seen… but at the same time, they’re absolutely amazing.”

The masks were passed around the circle, as the objects of various cruel and witty comments. They pouted and smiled in turn, oblivious to any sarcasm. Adam pulled the next present from the pile confidently, knowing the worst was over. He and Alison fought over the bow and Kathrin took the available moment to talk to Mr. Morris.

“So, what did you get them?” she asked secretively.

Mr. Morris acknowledged the question with an equally secretive smile. “Well Kathrin, I guess I can tell you. The Mrs. and I really outdid ourselves. We bought them matching golf clubs.”

Kathrin’s drink rose in her throat, and she fought viciously to keep the liquid from spewing out through her nose. The thought of Alison and Adam - the two biggest self-proclaimed artsies - swinging 7-irons across a freshly mowed expanse of lawn killed her. She took a deep breath.

“Really? That’s so thoughtful.”
Mr. Morris smiled at her, and for the first time in her recollection it seemed genuine. “Kathy,” he said and she decided to let it pass, “Don’t think I’m referring to you, but for the most part I don’t understand why people waste money on gifts that are useless - meaningless.”

Kathrin nodded solemnly. “I’m not offended. Actually, I couldn’t agree with you more.”

Visions of people running and ducking as Alison yelled “fore” again and again filled her head. Mr. Morris looked at his daughter and casually put his arm around Kathrin. He’s had one too many, she thought.

“It’s hard to believe my little girl is getting married. It seems like yesterday I was taking her to ballet class. She used to get so excited when she put on that fluffy skirt. I tell you, it’s going to break my heart to walk her down that aisle.”

Kathrin pursed her lips suddenly, and Mr. Morris, seeing the pinch, took a step back. “Oh, Kathrin. I am so sorry.”

Kathrin’s smile covered up the grimace. She squeezed his arm. “It’s all right. You should be very proud of her. We all are.”

He took a step closer. “I shouldn’t have been so insensitive. But I know that if your father was still alive, he’d feel the same way.”

“That’s if I ever get married,” she joked.

“Don’t say that. You’ll find someone. From what Alison tells me - a lot of men would jump at the chance.”

“Well, we’ll see. Thanks anyway,” she said, draining her glass, “I think I’ll go get myself a drink. Can I get you anything?”

Mr. Morris laughed. “That’s my job. Another gin and tonic?”

Kathrin nodded as he took her glass and moved off towards the bar.

If my father was still alive. Well that was no guarantee he’d be around anyway. Her mother used to say that her dad was a confirmed wanderer. A dreamer. Chances were he’d be on the other side of the world anyway; just like when she was born. Her sisters had been lucky. Their father-in-laws had taken her dad’s place. By the time she got married, she’d be lucky if her husband’s father was still alive. She could do it alone - she was no stranger to that. Who gives this woman? I give myself. Not lonely - simply alone. Kathrin watched the others paw the gifts, laughing together. Alison and Adam had known each other at least six years. Kathrin didn’t know any man she would even consider marrying. It was going to be a long night. Mr. Morris approached her with another drink, and she smiled brightly as she clenched her teeth.
By the time the nine of them left the house, it was shortly before eleven. Alison and Steph tittered quietly on either side of Carol, in the back seat of the cab. Kathrin sat up front, watching the messages on the call board light up. The guys and Adam’s sister had managed to grab a van so they could sit in relative comfort, as opposed to the slick vinyl seats in the ladies’ cab that eased the women into each other’s laps every time the car took a corner. Their cabby didn’t seem overly friendly, so Kathrin had opted out of making conversation. Most of the time she drove the cabbies crazy with her questions: Busy night? Where are you from? Do you have a family? The usual. But she wasn’t in the mood for conversation, no matter how nice the cabby was. Plus the fact, she didn’t think this one had much to offer her in the way of discourse. She just wanted to get to the bar, and have a drink without feeling like eyes were monitoring her consumption. Have a smoke, sit down and relax.

The cabby pulled up in front of the bar and Kathrin paid the fare, then scrambled out. There was no line up, so she proceeded through the door, with Steph and Alison walking arm in arm behind her, and Carol pulling up the rear.

The bar was busy, but Harold flagged them down through the crowd. As the other three went over to where the rest of the group was, Kathrin worked her way through the mob to the bar. She ordered a round of shots for everyone and a ‘g and t’ to chase hers. After carefully carrying over the tray of shooters, and voicing the customary toast, they downed the syrupy liquid and the men drifted like sloths to the TV. Alison, Steph, and Adam’s sister Margaret went to powder their noses. Kathrin cornered Carol and pulled her back to the bar. “Let me pass something by you.”

Carol groaned. “Oh no! I knew that something was up. Here comes another bright idea from Kathrin Connelly. Do I need to sit down?”

“C’mon.”

“What have you done?”

Kathrin gave her a small punch on the arm. “I haven’t done anything yet.”

Carol looked unimpressed. “What are you going to do?”

Kathrin took a deep breath. “O.K., here’s the deal: I want a relationship. But,” she paused, “I want it with the right guy.”

Carol laughed. “Actually, I think you should go for the wrong guy.”

“Not funny.”

Carol shrugged. “I assume you have some devious plan to get Mr. Right.”
“Well, actually - yes.”

“Ugh. I feel a headache coming on.”

Kathrin sipped her drink. “It’s actually very simple. Last night I was sitting at my computer and I realized that there’s a sure-fire way to get the perfect guy.”

“And what would that be?” Carol asked.

“Don’t be yourself.”

“What?”

“O.K. So after this sudden revelation, I made these...” Kathrin put her purse up on the bar.

She fumbled through the leather pockets and slowly withdrew her wallet. She unclasped the leather clip and shly removed a stack of business cards. Carol waited dumbly, then finally said, “Your delivery is anti-climactic. No matter what you show me - it won’t have been worth the wait.”

“Hush! Here,” she ordered, passing Carol the cards, “look at these.”

Carol took the cards, and flipped through the stack. She frowned at every new card and when she was done handed the pile back to Kathrin. “Very nice. I don’t get it.”

Kathrin rolled her eyes. “It’s easy. I meet a guy and if I don’t like him by the end of the night, I give him one of these.”

Carol’s left eye ticked a few times. “I still don’t get it. All the cards have different names.”

“Exactly! That way they can’t call me.”

“So, you spent last night printing up cards that don’t have your name or number, but are real companies and have the correct corporate logos on them?”

“Yeah.” Kathrin said, smirking.

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“Carol!” Kathrin whined.

“Kathrin,” Carol whined back, “have you lost your mind? You’re going to impersonate people who don’t exist?”

“Just tell me if you think it’s a bad idea!”

“A bad idea? Can I tell you anything else?”

Kathrin ignored the question, and reached into her purse to find her cigarettes. Carol stood there shaking her head, as Kathrin offered her a smoke. Carol extracted a cigarette and held it
between her lips as the red flare of the match lit up Kathrin’s face. Kathrin extended her arm and held the burning match up to Carol. Inhaling deeply, Carol spoke. “Listen to me. If you want to meet the right guy, you don’t pretend you’re someone else. You let him know exactly who you are.”

“But, what if I only meet the wrong guys?”

Carol placed her hand on the bar’s edge in attempt to keep her patience intact. “Then you simply say ‘listen it was nice meeting you, but I don’t want to have a relationship, or sex. Thanks. Goodbye.’ It’s not very hard.”

“It is for me.”

“You know Kathrin.” Carol exhaled, “for someone as bossy as yourself, you still lack a shit-load of spine.”

“So it’s a bad idea?”

“I have never seen you like this! You are a wonderful person. You’re smart and beautiful, and any guy I know would kill just to go out with you.”

Kathrin smiled. “Oh yeah? So how come you never set me up with any of them?”

Carol groaned. “Because I have a life now, and I don’t like spending my time consoling broken-hearted men!”

“Well, you may be right, but...” Kathrin started to say.

Carol threw up her hands. “I am right! Here’s the new plan: tonight, you forget about Mr. Right and just have fun. O. K.?”

Kathrin held out her hand. “O. K.”

“Good,” Carol said while shaking on it. “now give me those cards.”

Kathrin withdrew her hand and grabbed the business cards off the bar. “Why?”

Carol laid her palm up on the bar. “Give me them.”

Kathrin slowly released her grip, and hesitantly passed them to Carol. Carol raised them to eye-level. “Kathrin, this is going to hurt me much more than it will you.”

One by one she ripped each card into tiny pieces, while Kathrin gazed on in evident pain.

Carol deposited the shreds into the ashtray and reached for the book of matches lying beside Kathrin’s smokes. “Say goodbye,” she ordered.

“Good bye.” Kathrin said meekly.

Carol patted Kathrin’s arm and struck a match against the book. The match spurted to roaring life and caught the edge of the glossy paper in the ashtray. A small flame shot up from the
tray and slowly devoured the cards, releasing the putrid scent of burning plastic and paper. After a few seconds the miniature fire died out, leaving a clump of dark ashes sitting on the bar. Kathrin sighed.

Carol flagged her arm towards the bar. “Bartender!” she yelled, hailing him like a cab. The bartender ambled over. “What can I get you?”

“Four B-52’s. We’re mourning the loss of a few strangers.”

The bartender shook his head and turned to grab some shot glasses. “Whatever you say.”

By midnight Carol and Kathrin were feeling little pain - which seemed to reflect the state of the whole group. Steph pulled them onto the dance floor and into a decade-old mix of music. Strange that 80’s tunes were all the rage; scarier was the fact that they knew all the words to every song. Kathrin strutted out to the floor while watching a rowdy bunch of university students stumble through the music, boisterously singing only the chorus. She laughed and nudged Steph. “Were we ever that bad?” she screamed into her ear.

Steph giggled. “Worse,” she yelled back as the song drew to a close.

They grabbed another drink then made their way over to the pool table and found their friends. Adam rushed over. “Kathrin, I need a partner.”

He pulled the cue from Alison’s hand and thrust it at her. Initially, she refused to take it, but finally, after much prodding she accepted the stick. Alison feigned hurt. “Oh sure, Adam. I’m only good enough until a ringer appears.”

Adam kissed her. “Honey, I love you, but I need someone to carry my weight. Kath,” he said, coming up next to Kathrin. “We’re high. Your shot.”

Kathrin stepped up to the table and took an aerial view of the balls. She measured a few shots then turned to her two opponents. They were standing on the far side of the table, eyeing her with contempt. She smiled pleasantly. “Combination. Nine off the twelve, corner pocket,” she commented authoritatively and then bent in precise movements over the table.

She failed to notice one of her opponents nudge his friend, who responded with definite eyeball rolling. The cue found itself securely over the bridge of her thumb and forefinger. She moved the wooden shaft smoothly over her knuckles a few times, then with a quick thrust she propelled the cue forward. The cue ball advanced and with a serious ‘thwack’ the twelve ball barreled down on the other ball, and hit it solidly. In retaliation for being seriously jarred, the nine ball headed for the cover of the corner pocket. Kathrin straightened her skirt, adjusted her feet and
then followed the shot with a straight poke, sending the twelve in after the nine ball. The cue ball spiraled towards the centre of the far end then banked and slowly stopped mid-table.

She called a bank shot, and strutted around the table to shoot again. “Straight in.”

The third ball spun off the bank and slowed to a tentative roll. As it approached the corner, it gently nudged a solid ball out of the way, then deposited itself into the pocket. She handed her stick to Adam in dramatic disgust. “Should have called a kiss.”

As she approached her girlfriends, who were standing away from the pool table, Carol cried out: “Oh no. The walk. She’s got the walk.”

Kathrin stopped mid-stride. “Don’t mess, Carol.”

The four women dissolved into drunken laughter. Kathrin’s prowess at shooting pool had more to do with practice than skill or love of the game. During her first year at university she’d acquired a crush on a guy who worked at the campus pub. In order to woo him, she’d spent at least an hour a day shooting pool. By the time she found out he had a serious girlfriend, she was hooked. Along with developing a great game of pool, she’d also attained what her friends termed a ‘pool attitude’.

Steph reached out and tugged Kathrin’s hair gently. “O. K. shark... you gonna kick some ass?”

“They’re fucking dead!”

Alison laughed. “Oh yeah? You’re a big girl when you carry a large stick!”

Kathrin giggled. “You could at least cheer me on!”

They laughingly mocked her, but voiced their support the next time she shot. The effect of their assistance caused her miss the next shot completely. She was walking back to her patrons, with a head hung in shammed shame, when one of her opponents stopped her. “You’ve got a good shot.”

She looked up. “As you can tell from my last attempt.”

He smiled. “Well, your cheering section is a little distracting.”

“You’re telling me. I’m Kathrin.”

He held out his hand. “I’m...”

“John,” his teammate called out, “your shot!”

“I’m John. Sorry, gotta shoot,” he offered as an excuse to remove his hand from her grip.

Kathrin moved out of his way, and walked over to the girls. They were waiting for her reaction. She smiled coolly, until the bottom of her jaw fell out from under her. “He’s cute!”
The other three nodded solemnly. Carol pulled her over. "You go girl!"
Kathrin threw her a look. "Please, you sound like you should be on Oprah!"
"Please, yourself. This is exactly what you’re looking for. Cute, nice body, he plays pool.
Rope him in!"
Kathrin pushed her skirt down, and shook her hair out of its elastic. The curls spilled over
her shoulder, and hung down over her eyes. She was entering forbidden territory, and ruffled her
hair, like the raising of hackles along a wild beast’s neck. An acceptable way of demonstrating her
primitive urges. Not conducive for playing pool, however...

His hands crushed down on her chest, quickly unhooking the cord keeping her together.
She could feel his breath on her neck, and hear the heavy breathing against her ear. It felt good.
She turned her head and her tongue darted quickly into his mouth. His lips were soft, smooth
against her mouth and face, and the prickly scratch of hair on his skin rasped against her. She felt
suddenly alive, as if everything inside of her was rushing for the surface, trying to break through
her skin. Every movement sent shivers down her spine.

He pulled her into an upright position and pushed the tight material over her hips, as her
arms reached above her head. She watched his eyes move over the contour of her body. He
groaned slightly, and his kisses fell onto her chest and then over her belly. She reached languidly
towards him and placed her fingers over the silver buckle of his belt. She reached into his pants
and pulled his shirt out from the waist. Deftly, she snuck her hand up his shirt and felt for the hard
muscles rippling out of his gut and up his chest. He did have a nice body. Quickly, she began
unbuttoning his shirt, until his arms fell out of the plaid. His chest was bare of hair as she ran her
hand over the dense flesh.

He pushed her back down on the bed, and slowly moved his hips until they were directly
over her. Then he began to grind into her, moving her hips against the bed as she began to respond
and move against his own movements. He was breathing directly into her mouth, and she could
feel her cheeks swell as he exhaled, then shrink as he brought the air back into his body. He was
panting slightly and the sound of his desire and need overwhelmed her.

God, just tell me. Just say it. Instead, he pulled off his pants and boxer shorts, swung
over the edge of the bed and quickly extinguished the light on the bedside table.

In the darkness she felt him climb over her body, and pull her thong down from her hips.
He took a hold of the fabric and tossed it to the floor, where it landed with a soft thud. He moved
his chest over her tummy and up over her breasts, pressing down onto her skin. Then he licked her
neck, and brought his mouth to her ear. *Tell me now.* He delicately bit her earlobe, arousing
himself as his breath came faster against her hair. Kathrin moaned and writhed slightly under him.
He took her noise as an invitation and gently eased himself into her body. Involuntarily, she
responded and arched her back on the bed. He moved inside her, and their mouths met silently in
the dark. She could feel his arm reaching for something in the darkness, and turned her hips to
further the cause. He returned over her body, and she heard the rip of paper. Then he withdrew
and fumbled in the darkness. After a moment he plunged into her again, and sent an uncomfortable
spasm of pain up through her uterus. *Something that wasn’t unbearable, but still evident.* She
clenched her legs tighter, to keep him in her comfort zone, and noticed how it affected him. His
breath was coming in shorter gasps now, and she gave up on reaching her own orgasm. It wasn’t
going to happen.

Suddenly she felt herself transported in time. Instead of being with John, she was a Mafia
mistress wearing dark gloves, lying underneath a man of great power and prestige. Beside her she
could almost feel the cold metal of a loaded gun, and hear a thick voice telling her how much she
was enjoying it. How much he was getting turned on. She reacted to her fantasy and began
moving with the rhythm that was offered to her. Slowly she felt herself heated by the energy
around her. She was about to call out when she was roused from her night dream and realized that
the moment was over. John lay silently on top of her, breathing deeply. She sighed as he removed
himself from her, and climbed out of bed to go to the bathroom. Her hands moved up over her
stomach to her breasts, still capped in black lace. *Well, that was far from great.*

She rolled over onto her side, and felt him slip back in under the sheets. His arm looped
over her shoulder, and he pulled her close. “That was really great,” he whispered.

Kathrin murmured something unintelligible.

“&

“So then what happened?” Carol asked.

Kathrin twirled the phone cord in her hand. “That’s it.”

“That’s it? It doesn’t sound very exciting.”

Kathrin sighed, and pulled her coffee mug from off the table. She took a long sip. “It
wasn’t.”

There was a brief moment of static on the other end of the line, then Carol spoke. “Well, I
don’t know what to say. You used protection so that’s a good thing. Is he going to call?”
“He said he would. I don’t really want him to.”

“Why not? You said he was nice.”

“Yeah, sure he’s nice. But he didn’t say one word Carol, not one single word.”

Carol cleared her throat. “So you want someone to mind-fuck you.”

“Well, a little seduction wouldn’t be a bad thing. I mean, he is a nice guy, from the little I know of him, but still I think he could have put out more of an effort.”

The sound of dishes clinking in the background kept Carol silent for a minute. “Well, you did get something out of it.”

Kathrin sighed. “Still, it’s not going to happen again.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want something more than sex.”

“Now, where’s your sense of holiday spirit?”

“Seriously. I’m not going to have sex again until it means something.”

Carol paused. “Shit. My other line just went. Listen, I’ll call you about my office party later this week. I expect you to come.”

“O.K. Thanks for listening.”

“No problem. Just remember one thing Kath: it’s going to be a long cold winter if you keep waiting for Mr. Right.”

“Right. Bye.”

Kathrin hung up the phone. Long and cold maybe - but worth it.

She slept with Carol’s friend Kevin after the office party. Unlike John, he spoke nonstop - about baseball: as she went down on him, when she kissed his thigh, as she draped her long blond hair over his face. He swiped it out of the way and continued speaking. When he dropped her off the next morning he said, “You know I’d really like to take you out. You make me feel like you really care about what I have to say.”

She decided during her shower that speaking didn’t necessarily mean seduction, and later ripped up his phone number and threw it into the garbage. Then she took an aspirin for her headache and swore off drinking for the rest of her life.
She ran her hand over the dusty top of the cardboard box, then pulled at the most creased edge. The flaps held, then suddenly sprang forward from her fingertips. A heavy stench of cinnamon and pine rose up in a cloud of powder from the box, and attacked every corner in the living room. Twenty-eight years worth of dust, wrapping, unwrapping, and re-wrapping Christmas tree ornaments. Still, every year the same warm satisfaction invaded her body at the moment she cracked open the cardboard box her mother had neatly labeled ‘Kathrin’s decorations’. It had been her going away present when she left her mother’s house.

She looked at the open box, and noticed that lying right on the top was a collection of Christmas carols on a compact disk. “How apt.”

She took the CD over to the stereo, and gently placed the disk onto the CD tray. Mentally, she prepared herself for over an hour of gleeful voices. *Well, it could be worse.*

She reached into the box and carefully pulled out each individually wrapped ornament, and laid them in a row across the carpeting. When she had organized the puffs of tissue paper, she pulled the strings of light from the bottom of the box and placed them beside the ornaments. She got up slowly, and began to unwind the first string of lights. She carried the strand over to the Benjamina ficus, and wrapped the lights around the base of the slender tree, working her way up towards the leaves. The ficus base was spiraled like a staircase, and the clear markings of a rod’s precise dimensions were carved into the inside portion of the trunk. She remembered one summer at camp, when they had gone to a pioneer museum. On the group’s walk around the property, the tour guide had stopped them near a huge oak tree and pointed out a bulge in the bark. Peering closely, Kathrin had realized that the tree’s bulge was not a natural formation. Instead, the bark had grown around and over an ancient saw, wedged into the tree. She waited with anticipation as the tour guide explained the reason.

“‘It seems,’” the female guide had explained, “‘that the farmer who lived here wanted to cut the tree down. While he was working away, it began to rain. The farmer sought the shelter of his farmhouse, and due to heavy rains could not return to the tree for days. When the sun finally broke, he came back here, only to find that his saw had rusted from the rain and could not be pulled from the bark. So, here it remains.”

Kathrin had raised her hand. “Why don’t you cut it down, and take the saw back?”

The guide glanced at her with a tight smile pasted to her lips. “Because sweetie, sometimes we have to look at things and learn a lesson from them. Sometimes, God gives us messages in mysterious ways.”
Kathrin had rolled her eyes. At nine she was no stranger to God. She knew about his 'mysterious' ways, and wanted nothing to do with them. Her Sunday school teacher had said the same thing to her when she asked about her father's death. As far as Kathrin was concerned the two weren't nearly the same thing.

She continued hanging the lights until all three strands covered the ficus. Then she rolled the bottom of the pot towards the corner of the room, and plugged the lights in. The tree sparkled in a bath of white light. Unlike her mother's tree, so brightly coloured and tacky, Kathrin had an affinity for almost Puritanical simplicity. It was a grown woman's tree, not a child's tree. Of course, it wasn't really a Christmas tree either, but she saw no reason to go stamping out into the cold to find the perfect pine or fir. She hated boy scouts anyway. They reminded her of Ken.

Kathrin returned to the ornaments and began unwrapping them from their tissue paper. For the most part, her ornaments consisted of small golden pears and birds made out of plastic. A few glass clock-tower bells, some crystal angels, and a couple of golden trumpets, drums and harps. And then, the collection of assorted ornaments her mother had given her over the years: a silver wreath, a velveteen soldier holding a trumpet, a quilted stocking, a pair of glass lovebirds swaying on a swing, a plastic replica of baby Jesus, a dreidle her mother had picked up at a Jewish bake sale, a crystal heart, a clothespin angel with a pipe cleaner halo, a sachet heart filled with potpourri, some small silver bells, a candy-cane made out of bread and coated with shellac, a porcelain Santa Claus face that had no body to go along with it, a Victorian style picture capturing two children skating across a lake, a poinsettia flower made from Italian glass, a knitted piece of mistletoe, a crystal candy-cane, a wreath made from scraps of fabric, a walnut shell forming a bed for a tiny cloth mouse, a golden apple etched with her name and the year, a now tarnished brass horn, a crystal icicle, a silver plaque with the word "Noël" on it, a puffy lamb, made from wool and felt, a calf carved out of wood, and a ceramic ornament of a baby lamb and lion, lying side by side. The last two ornaments that measured her existence were the first two she was ever given. They were sent from her father during his trips abroad. One was a small chime made from battered silver, each link in the chain forged from hand. The second ornament was a large silver bell on a thick red ribbon. Her father had written that it was used to adorn camels in the Middle East. Not a traditional ornament, but by far her favourite. She rolled the bell over in her palm. It was in need of a good polishing, but she didn't want to wear away the intricate details etched into the silver. She eyed all of her unwrapped ornaments, and the one object that was still wrapped in paper. *Save that for later.* Then she got up and hung them, one by one, on the tree. The ficus
branches were fuller and thicker than they had been the year before, but still weak by pine standards. She made sure to loop them over the thickest of leaves, where the lights added strength to the branches. She crossed the room, again and again, until finally the ornaments all assumed a nook in the tree's foliage. Then, she crossed to the main light and turned it out. The tree looked amazing, especially to the backdrop of an alto voice singing “O Holy Night”.

Kathrin scooped up the tissue paper and stuffed it into the cardboard box. Then she sat back down, and began unraveling the last object: her angel. It wasn't actually an angel: Jen had taken care of that a few Christmas before, when for the first and last time Kathrin had purchased a real tree. In the confusion of setting the Norfolk pine up as straight as possible, Jen had managed to knock the tree over, only after all the decorations were in place. The result: a badly scratched Jen: an overturning of the fish bowl, causing the eventual demise of the first goldfish aptly named “Plop” and “Flush”; and the smashing of a very ornate gilded angel. Kathrin decided to wait before replacing the angel, until her eye caught something so perfect, that the new angel could not possibly wish or try to fall. It had taken two years.

One weekend, on a jaunt to Montreal, Kathrin had stumbled into an antique store, much against her better judgment. Not knowing what beckoned her inside the door, she stumbled through the relative darkness reminding her so much of the token second-hand stores in movies. She had barely run her fingers over the dusty bookcase, when a gentleman, seeming even older than his stock had shuffled over beside her. She turned to find his wrinkled face very near to hers.

“Bonjour.”

“Bonjour.” she mumbled in a painfully bad accent.

“Ah,” he said smiling. “you are English.”

“Yes, I mean oui.”

“That is all right. I speak English better than you speak French, I think. May I help you?”

Kathrin had spoken the words before she thought about them. “I'm looking for an angel.”

“An angel?”

“Yes. Un ange.”

“Ah. For what?”

“For a tree.”

The old man nodded. “Pour Noël.”

“Oui.”

He shook his ancient head slowly. “Non. I have no angels, I am sorry.”
Kathrin smiled. She really didn’t expect him to have any. “That’s O.K. I wanted to look around anyway.”

She moved slowly away from the bookcase, as the man shuffled back to the antique desk that served as his counter. Kathrin walked down the narrow pathway created by old dressers and chairs, and stumbled through the maze until she came to a rocking horse. She gently placed her hand on the smooth wood, and ran her hand over the muzzle of the horse. The paint was faded and chipped in places, but the horse looked like it had been well loved. She pushed down on the wooden mane, and watched as the horse bobbed to life. The springs creaked under the pressure of her push, echoing more slowly with each bob.

She was so absorbed with the horse that she failed to notice the old man approaching her from behind a crooked hat stand. “Mademoiselle...”

Kathrin jumped nearly out of her skin, and brought her hand up to her heart. “Oh! You scared me.”

The old man bowed slightly. “I beg your pardon, but I thought you might like to see something.”

Kathrin frowned. “What?”

“This way please.”

He shuffled back over towards the desk, and Kathrin followed tentatively. She fought the urge to imitate the old man’s gait. He was such a sweet old man. He actually reminded her of a skinny Santa Claus. *Pere Noël,* she corrected herself. When she reached the desk, he was bent over a wooden chest, pillaging the contents. Kathrin could hear the rustle of newspaper and craned her neck to get a better look. The old man’s wrinkled hands moved deftly over the newsprint, the lines around his knuckles melting fluidly as they bent and stretched. Kathrin caught a glimpse of something shiny and gold, moving through the man’s fingers and across the paper. It seemed to dart furtively from her glance, nesting itself into the folds of the chest’s body. Finally the old man’s hands baited and caught the hidden treasure, and he pulled the object from the box and brought it to the surface of the desk. Kathrin bent over the table and reached her hands instinctively towards the golden tangle of ribbon and hair. Her long, thin hands parted the ribbons to reveal a golden lion’s head. Kathrin gasped. She touched the hair forming the lion’s mane. “Is it... is it real?” she asked uncertainly.
The old man nodded solemnly. Kathrin slowly released the breath caught in her lungs. She was holding the strands of someone’s hair. Someone’s thick golden hair. Some dead person’s hair. The thought of it creeped her out. She looked up at the old man. “Why?”

“It is a puppet. A woman made it probably to give to the man she loved. So he would always have a part of her near him. Not so strange. I think.”

Kathrin nodded slowly. “No, you’re right. It’s beautiful. How old do you think it is?”

“Sixty years.”

“That’s all? It seems so much older - so much more out of time.”

A crinkly smile spread across the old man’s face. “I think... it is worn with love.”

“Yes. How much?”

“Fifty dollars.”

Kathrin let out a low whistle. She glanced more closely at the lion’s head. The face was crafted out of some type of thick paper, and carefully painted in gold, with intricate black lines shadowing and contouring the head. The thick mane was sewn with great care, trailing out from the face and bursting forth in every direction from the head. Pieces of ribbon drifted through the curls of the mane. Kathrin slipped her hand into the puppet. There were no finger holes, only a simple glove to fit all the fingers. The body of the puppet was made from lace and thick golden wool, embroidered with fine gold thread and piping. The natural hair spilled over the entire neck and back of the lion.

Kathrin delicately removed the puppet from her hand, and turned it over in her palms. Near the bottom, just above the lace edging an inscription had been embroidered into the fabric. Kathrin peered at the inscription. It read “Coeur de Lion - pour J.D.” Kathrin narrowed her eyes. An inscription to Richard I?

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“Lion’s heart.”

Kathrin smiled. “Oh. I didn’t think to take it literally. It really is gorgeous. I’d like to buy it.”

The old man smiled knowingly. “For your tree?”

“Yes.”

He wrapped the lion up in tissue paper, and placed it within a paper bag. Kathrin passed him a crisp bill, in exchange for a receipt and a wink. “Maybe someday, you give it to your lover?”
“Maybe. Merci.”

“Goodbye Mademoiselle Coeur de Lion. Take well of yourself.”

“Thank you.” she said as she plucked a business card from the desk, and headed for the door. The door jangled to a close behind her.

And so had she found her angel. It was the crowning glory of her tree: no doubt about it. Every year, as she pulled the tangle of hair and ribbon from the tissue paper she thought about the old man. She had written him a brief note after her first Christmas, telling him how beautiful the tree looked decked out in its full splendor. Though she addressed the letter to Jean Desrosiers of Desrosiers’ Antiques, she always thought of him as the old man whose wrinkled hands had sold her a lion.

Carefully she pulled the lion from its nest. She combed her fingers through the mane and then took the lion to the tree. Luckily the ficus could support the weight of the puppet. With the tree fully decorated, she took a final glance at the ornaments. The Camel bell hung directly below the lion, and the silver contrasted nicely with the golden hair. Kathrin smiled. “What do you think, fish?”

The fish didn’t respond. “Fucking fish.”

The CD’s final song ended, and Kathrin took the opportunity to place something a little more her style into the tray. She scanned her collection, and pulled a Spanish guitar compilation from the shelf. She loved the urgency of the lone guitar, playing its heart out to something or someone that would never respond. She imagined herself, lost in the hills of Peru, dipping and swirling across the mountainside. A more romantic version of “The Sound of Music”. No nuns, or war, just a long-haired Julie Andrews without the shrill voice. When her father had sent the camel bells to her and her sisters, he had wrapped them in three sheer scarves. What the middle eastern women wrapped around their heads to fight the desert. What the Muslim girls wore in Lamu, to respect their God. What the belly dancers flung around rooms in the heat of their native dances. Kathrin had never known exactly where her father had procured the scarves, but she had danced with hers for hours at a time in her youth. She still had the scarf, somewhere.

Suddenly, she wanted the scarf. She put the lion’s tissue into the cardboard box and carried the box to the front hall closet. She pushed it in under the coats, then shut the door. Reaching up, she found another box which contained all of her winter gloves and scarves. She pulled the box down, and lifted its lid. Underneath a few heavy wool scarves, she found the scarf her father had sent her. She retrieved it, and returned the box to its position on the shelf. With a
quick flick, she loosened the scarf from its folded creases, and flipped it around her shoulders. It was nearly five feet long, and almost as wide, with rivulets of silver thread running through the fabric. Kathrin moved her shrouded body towards the living room carpet, and watched her reflection in the front windows. If only her mother could see her. Naturally, her mother wouldn’t expect to see her wearing a scarf in the front living room of her apartment, while the rest of the family attended the early church service. A good Catholic girl parading around her apartment on Christmas Eve, with no thought of decorum or religion on the most holy night of the year. Kathrin found herself smirking. Of course her mother also didn’t know that every year she decorated her ficus tree on Christmas Eve either. That she wrapped all of her presents on Christmas Eve. That she consumed a beer while she wrapped the presents. Not even red wine. Heathen. She pulled the scarf over her head, lay down on the sofa doing her best corps imitation, and listened to the guitar. Better than sitting on an uncomfortable pew in church, at any rate. She looked at her watch. 7:30. She had a little over an hour to wrap all her presents and get to Andria’s house. She glanced at the enormous stash of unwrapped presents, and decided to take a shower before she tackled the paper and ribbon. She was going to be late. Again.

Getting the wrapped presents into the trunk of the hatch-back required some work and a lot of patience. Finally, at 8:30 she shut the trunk of the car and got in the driver’s seat. If traffic was good, she might actually make it to Andria’s house on time. She pulled out of the driveway and lit a cigarette. Unlike her other sister, there was no way Andria would let her smoke in the house - not with the baby there.

All around her, the bright lights on the houses shimmered through the clear night. There was only the slightest trace of snow on the ground, and the air in the car was relatively warm. Still, Kathrin turned the heat up to boiling, and set the vent on gale force. She liked winter only in its romantic sense. The thought of Queen’s Park, snuggling close to someone in front of a fire, and watching classic films left her warm and sated; however, shoveling snow, blowing warm air into the freezing night, and paying the gas bill killed the idealism of it all.

She passed several cars filled with nicely dressed passengers, and glanced down at her skirt. Her family was going to be pleased. Most Christmases she arrived in pants. Every time, Andria would roll her eyes and send Kathrin to the back row when pictures were taken. Perhaps this year, she’d get a seat in the front row – and be allowed to hold Danielle in her lap.
When her niece was born, the whole family had crowded into Andria’s private room at the hospital to view the fragile infant. Andria’s face had been pale and near lifeless, but she had not stopped smiling the entire visit. “Kathrin,” Andria had finally warned, “you will stay away from my daughter.”

They had all laughed; Kathrin the hardest. She would be the favorite aunt, and everyone in the family was aware of it. She would be the family confidant, the abettor, the middle-woman. And more importantly, she knew that whenever the child needed looking after or baby-sitting, she’d be the one to watch over Danielle. There was, simply, no other way. Too had my family favorite can’t speak yet.

Andria was a perfect mom. She cooked like a gourmet, crafted like Martha Stewart, mothered like a wet-nurse, and up until Danielle’s birth, held a well-rewarded teaching position with the Board of Ed. Teaching developmentally challenged children, to top it all off. At twenty-six. It was enough to make anyone who didn’t know her sick. And her husband Mark was no better. Out-aging his wife by eight years, he had just been promoted to Vice Principal at a local high-school. The youngest VP in the history of the school and probably the world. The problem wasn’t so much that he was an over-achiever. In fact, Kathrin was sure she would’ve liked him if he hadn’t married her sister, and in doing so become family. Instead, the thing about Mark that bothered Kathrin so much was that he talked to her as if she was a delinquent child. She hated the sound-board psychology he used on her. “So, Kathrin, what you’re saying is that...” If she wanted someone useless to help her think her thoughts, she’d go to a shrink, not her brother-in-law. But the two of them were blissfully happy, so she accepted Mark into the family, but boy, was she going to enjoy corrupting their child.

Jen, while similar in attitude to Andria, was much more understanding of Kathrin. She didn’t lecture, didn’t hold grudges, and certainly didn’t offer advice that seemed more like lectures than advice. And Jen’s husband Scott was amazing. It was hard to accept that he too was a teacher. He was completely different than her other brother-in-law. Thank God. So, five great relatives out of six was a pretty good deal. And Scott’s bar-tending brother Andrew would be there - he was always good for a laugh. And Andrew’s girlfriend Tammy, and her mother’s friend Agnes. Ten people to round out Christmas Eve. All in all, it wouldn’t be so bad. Well, there was one thing... no. If I had a date, we’d be uneven. Except, Danielle would be on the verge of bedtime, so really there’d be an even number at the table. There probably wasn’t room for one more anyway.
Kathrin flicked her turn signal on, and pulled over to right hand lane. She slowed as she approached her sister’s street, and then turned onto the narrow avenue. Cars lined both sides of the street. She threw her second cigarette out the window, and searched for a place to park. Andria’s driveway was full, but on the opposite side of the street there was space enough for the hatch-back to fit. She pulled into a driveway and turned the car around. Glancing quickly in her rear view, she put the gear into reverse, and cautiously turned the wheel. The car slid into the spot with ease. She turned the key in the ignition, and flipped off her lights. Once out on the street, Kathrin pulled her coat tightly around her shoulders. It was a bit nippy closer to the water. She popped the trunk, and began stacking presents on the car behind hers. When they were fully stacked she slammed the trunk closed, and gathered the pile into her arms. She looked both ways down the street, then started crossing towards Andria’s house, taking a huge breath.

Andria answered the door, holding Danielle in her arms. “I don’t know who’s here for all the presents. Mark, grab them before she drops them on the carpet.”

Mark relieved Kathrin of her burden, as Andria shut the door behind her. Kathrin shook her coat off, and hung it in the front closet before enveloping her sister and niece in a big hug. “Hiya, sis. How’s my little sweetie?” she asked as she kissed the top of Danielle’s head.

Danielle moved her nine-month-old arms out to Kathrin. Andria gently passed the baby over. Kathrin covered the child’s sweet face with kisses, and made little snorting noises. The baby laughed and smiled in response.

“God, she’s so big already. What are you feeding her? Steroids?”

Andria smiled. “She’s the perfect size for her age.”

“Yes. She is. She is perfect.”

Kathrin carried the baby airplane style into the living room. Everyone was sitting around the living room, where the centre table had been replaced by a large playpen. Red and blue trim decorated the pen. “You all look like you’re waiting for a boxing match to begin,” Kathrin observed.

She plunked Danielle into the playpen, and shoved a plastic elephant into her hand. Danielle chewed thoughtfully on the elephant and began bouncing around the playpen, grabbing the red trim. Kathrin crossed to her mother and embraced her. “Hi.”

“Hi. You look very nice,” her mother responded.

“Yeah, we almost didn’t recognize you.” Scott added, from his seat by the fireplace.

“Ha! Ha!” Kathrin said, tossing him a mock-evil look.
Mark deposited the gifts by the tree. “Kath, what can I get you to drink?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you sure? Egg nog? A glass of wine?”

Kathrin shook her head. “I’m fine actually.”

Mark looked questioningly at his wife. She shrugged and turned to Kathrin. “So, did you finally get your tree rigged up?”

Kathrin laughed. “About an hour ago.”

“Record time, again.”

Agnes sat beside Ingrid, knitting something. She was always knitting and it drove everyone crazy. Of course none of them ever saw the finished products, except for the sweaters that adorned Rufus and Cassi on their winter walks. Kathrin imagined that all Agnes ever knitted were dog sweaters. She probably sold them at Christmas Bazaars all across the city.

“So Agnes, what are you knitting now?” Kathrin asked.

Agnes looked up. “Hmm? Oh, a little something for my granddaughter in Calgary.”

“Oh yeah? Your granddaughter like brown?” Kathrin asked politely.

“It’s to wear over her Brownie suit when the weather gets cold.”

“How sweet.”

Jen dropped her head over her lap, and coughed a few times in order to dispel her laughter in some way. She took a sip of her wine and then shot Kathrin a meanly twinkling eye. “We missed you at church. It was a lovely service. Wasn’t it mother?”

Ingrid smiled. “Oh yes. They sang the most beautiful hymns.”

Kathrin rolled her eyes. “I’m sure it was amazing.”

Kathrin walked over to the fireplace, and stood beside Scott’s chair. The room was painted an eggshell blue, and Andria had spent hours sponge painting the wall behind the fireplace. It looked like a Victorian manor, the way all the furniture and detailing was done. “I can’t believe how big this room looks.” Kathrin stated.

Andria smiled. “Doesn’t it? I was so pleased. The sponge work was definitely worth it.”

“Now, if we could only keep Danielle from throwing food at it, we’d be perfect.” Mark added, smiling at his wife.

She gently swatted him on the arm. “Oh that’s not true. Don’t lie.”

Mark laughed, and put his arm around Andria. “Yes, my wife is right. We have a perfectly wonderful daughter. And house. And family.”
Scott gently nudged Kathrin with his elbow. She elbowed him back. Obviously she wasn’t the only one who was irked by Mark. “Where’s your brother?” she asked quietly.

“He and Tammy went downstairs to admire the new quilt.”

“She’s making another one? Where does she find the time?”

Agnes kept putting away her knitting, oblivious to everyone else in the room. Danielle was tiring of her elephant, and kept looking around for someone to notice her. Kathrin scooped the baby up from her playpen, and began twirling around.

“Kath,” Andria warned, “don’t get her too excited, or you’ll be the one putting her to bed.”

“Oh, she’s all right.” Kathrin said, gently dipping the child in her arms.

“Actually, maybe we should get her to bed. Then we can get dinner on the way.”

Mark moved to take Danielle from Kathrin’s arms, but Kathrin stopped him. “Can I do it?”

Mark looked at his wife. “Sure,” Andria replied, “that would be great. She’s already washed and everything. She just needs a new diaper. Thanks. Mark, I need your help in the kitchen.”

Kathrin carried the baby to the stairs. “C’mon pumpkin. Time for bed.”

She climbed the stairs and moved down the hallways and into Danielle’s room. The walls were bordered with Peter Rabbit and his friends, and on the wall behind the dressing-table a huge picture of Peter Rabbit was painted. “You poor kid,” Kathrin giggled, “I hope you don’t have nightmares.”

Danielle cooed as Kathrin placed her on the table, and began unbuttoning her pajamas. She pulled Danielle’s feet from the p.j.’s and gently bent her head to kiss them. Danielle smelled of baby powder and apple juice, probably two of the best smells Kathrin had ever had the luck to inhale. Kathrin began singing a soft lullaby. She loved this child, whom she didn’t really know, but who was so good and sweet and perfect. Who would grow up to be some ordinary person, but for the moment was the best thing Kathrin had ever seen. She kissed the soft full tummy of the baby, and Danielle grabbed a thick curl of her hair. Kathrin laughed softly, and began untangling the curl. Danielle gurgled. “Did you say that you won’t let me have my hair back? C’mon Auntie Kathrin needs her hair.”

Once her hair was reclaimed, she finished taking the bottom part of the p.j.’s off Danielle. She lifted her by her two feet, and moved the fabric out of the way. Then she grabbed the soother from the change table and plucked it into Danielle’s mouth. She carefully pinned the soother to
Danielle’s top and smoothed the hair from the child’s forehead. Danielle wiped her eyes awkwardly and Kathrin placed a gentle kiss on the baby’s forehead. “Someone’s tired,” she murmured, and began singing again.

The diaper pulled away from Danielle’s bottom, relatively clean but damp. Kathrin wiped her, and then applied a little cream and a sprinkling of baby powder. She rolled up the used diaper and stashed it into the diaper pail. Then she pulled a new diaper from under the table and began slipping it under Danielle’s clean bum. “You are such a sweet girl. How come you’re so good, huh?”

Danielle’s eyes fluttered in response. Kathrin did up the diaper, and started tucking Danielle back into the pyjamas. She snapped each snap carefully, so as not to pinch Danielle’s skin. When she had finished the job, she smoothed Danielle’s hair again and placed a slow kiss on her small head. Quietly, she slipped her pinkie finger into Danielle’s little hand, and the baby looked up at her. Kathrin smiled, and tucked the baby up into her arms. She Waltzed slowly around the room holding the child’s warmth against her chest. How can babies look like this? As if there’s nothing wrong in the world. Those big eyes that see you, and seem to say ‘I know you. I know what you wish you could be, but I will accept you for what you are.’ No matter what.

Kathrin leaned her head against Danielle’s soft hair and hummed softly, still turning with the baby. She didn’t notice Jen standing in the doorway as she moved to the cradle, and gently lowered the baby into bed. Danielle stared up at her, then slowly, drowsily, her eyes began to flutter and shut. Kathrin kissed her own finger and placed it across the child’s face. Then she turned to find her sister looking at her. She brought her hand up to her mouth, and put one finger before her lips. Jen smiled, nodded, and slowly approached the cradle. They both looked down on the infant. Jen put her arm around Kathrin, and whispered, “She’s beautiful.”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t you want one, Kath?”

Kathrin turned to her sister. “With who?”

Jen kept her voice low. “You don’t need someone. Women do it all the time.”

Kathrin frowned and looked towards the doorway. “If mom could hear you…”

Jen smiled. “It’s just…you’re so good with her. You’re so good with all of them. Like you want to protect them. You’d lay down your life for her, wouldn’t you?”

Kathrin watched the sleeping baby thoughtfully. “Yeah.”

“So?”
“So what?”
Jen leaned in. “Why don’t you have one?”
Kathrin breathed. “I’m only good with Danielle because she’s not mine twenty-four hours a day. I’d be a terrible mother.”
“Shh! You’d be a great mother.”
Kathrin watched Danielle’s face twitch in the darkened room, lit up only by the nightlight. “You know…it’s their eyes. They’re not afraid of anything. All babies. Puppies, monkeys, cats. They know that someone is watching out for them. That’s what gets me.”
Jen grabbed Kathrin’s hand. “Scott and I have started trying.”
Kathrin dropped her jaw. “Really? That’s great! That’s really great.”
“And then...”
“Don’t rush it. For now, I just want to be an aunt. My fish are responsibility enough.”
“C’mon, dinner’s ready.” Jen pulled Kathrin’s hand.
“One minute. I just want to watch a bit longer.”
Jen left the room. Kathrin turned back to the cradle, and listened to Danielle suck her soother. It was so peaceful in the room. Kathrin smiled, then suddenly her face slackened and she grabbed at her belly. A deeply-rooted pain shot up from her gut, and wrapped itself around her lower abdomen. She tried to shake the pain, as it grabbed lower and lower in her body, until she could feel it trying to ooze out of her. A throbbing burn moved along her back and hit her tailbone, as she tensed until the moment passed. She let out a long breath and waited. Nothing happened. She frowned and passed her hand along her tummy then took a few steps across the room, realizing the moment was over. She snuck out of the room and down the stairs.

Indigestion.

She was nestled in beside Agnes and Scott. Agnes had exchanged her knitting needles for a knife and fork and Scott kept poking her with his elbow. “You do that again buddy, and I’m going to dump gravy in your lap.” Kathrin murmured so only Scott could hear.

He smiled like a twelve-year-old in church. Kathrin passed a loaded plate to Agnes, and turned her attention to Tammy and Andrew. “So, how’s the quilt look?”

Tammy’s smile lit up the room. “It’s gorgeous,” she gushed, “I can’t wait until it’s finished.”

Andrew nodded his agreement. His mouth was too stuffed with “pre-grace” food to speak. When he had finally finished chewing he took a big sip of wine and looked at Kathrin. “Kath, I wanted to ask you: what are you doing for New Year’s Eve?”
“Why? You have a date Tammy?”

“Very funny,” he responded, “No. Do you have plans?”

Kathrin looked skyward to reflect on the question. “I’m having dinner at my place. Why?”

Andrew took another sip. “We’re having a big party at the club, and everyone is allowed to invite ten guests. Tammy is going with another couple, and I don’t know anyone else who really wants to go. You want the tickets?”

“How many?” Kathrin asked.

“Seven. I can ask if you need another one.”

Kathrin groaned. “Unfortunately, there will be only seven of us. Thanks for reminding me!”

Andrew laughed. “I didn’t mean it like that. What do you say?”

Kathrin nodded thoughtfully. “Actually, it sounds like fun. Thanks.”

“No problem. I’ll drop them by work next week.”

“Great. Thanks a lot.”

Andria passed Kathrin a plate. She took the plate and dropped it gently in front of her.

When everyone had been served, Mark said grace and they all began eating. Except for Andrew, who was nearly through his first helping. The rest of the conversation revolved around sports, baby clothes and holiday plans. Kathrin kept silent for most of dinner, watching her family interact. It was going well. Andria hadn’t pestered everyone about how well they liked the food, and her mother wasn’t babbling incessantly. They made it through seconds, and Andrew made it through thirds without any problems.

Kathrin and Jen cleared the plates, and Tammy and Scott loaded the dishwasher. In no time they had secured and cleaned the kitchen. Andria stood over an angry espresso maker, and whipped up cappuccino. Agnes had retired to the living room and once again armed herself with her knitting needles, while Ingrid looked on in awe. Andrew and Mark had disappeared down into the workshop to discuss power tools. Everything was fine... until the kitchen crew finished their work and headed out into the living room. Ingrid was staring at the fire, tears streaming down her face. Jen was the first to rush over. “Mom. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Why are you crying?”

“I’m not crying. Who’s crying?”
Kathrin grabbed a serviette from Andria’s hand. “You’re crying. Why?”
Ingrid dabbed her face with the serviette. “I’m fine.”
Kathrin’s head rolled back onto her shoulders. “Just tell us what’s wrong.”
“Nothing’s wrong.” Ingrid repeated, still dabbing her moist cheeks.

The women stood watching her, while Scott went to find the shelter with the other men.

Finally Ingrid sighed dramatically, and motioned for Andria to pass her a mug of cappuccino.

“There is nothing wrong. I was just thinking. Your father would be so proud of you all.”

Jen and Kathrin exchanged glances. Both women sat down automatically across from their mother and waited as Andria patiently passed mugs around the room. Tammy gave Kathrin a quizzical look, then followed Kathrin’s motion to sit down. It was to be Tammy’s initiation into the family. *God bless her,* Kathrin thought.

Ingrid blew her nose. “I’m sorry girls. I don’t mean to ruin Christmas. It’s just that every year this time, I think of him. How happy he would be if he could see you all here, together.”

Andria crossed over to her mother and patted her on the back. “Mom, he can see us. I’ll bet he’s looking down on us right now.”

“I’ll bet you’re right sweetheart. You know, he loved Christmas more than anything. He used to mark the days off on his calendar, right from the first of the month. I remember those little red x marks. Like right out of a movie. And every time he had to go away over the holidays, he’d always give me the presents he’d picked out beforehand, and make me promise not to open them until Christmas morning. And he’d always send gifts from wherever he was.”

Agnes’ needles clicked quickly, keeping time to Ingrid’s thoughts. “I just wish,” Ingrid continued, “that you girls had gotten the chance to know him. He was a wonderful man, wasn’t he Agnes?”

Agnes looked up. “He was a very special man, Ingrid.”

“Yes.” Ingrid plucked at her sweater absently.

Tammy inched forward on the sofa. “What was he like, Mrs. Connelly?”

Kathrin winced. Ingrid leaned back against the couch’s arm. “He was a journalist. Always happy when he was covering a story. He liked to travel. Loved to travel. I fell in love with him because he told a good story. He made me laugh, almost to the point of tears. When he asked me to marry him, he said ‘Ingrid, I may not always be with you, but no matter where I am, I’ll always be thinking of you.’ I knew when I married him that he was a wanderer, but I was willing to give him room to roam. And we were married for eight wonderful years. He gave me
three beautiful daughters, but never got to know them. He never even laid eyes on Andria. But God, he loved them more than anything.”

Tammy sighed. “That’s so romantic.”
Kathrin looked at Tammy blankly. “Romantic?”

“Kathrin,” her mother warned, then turned to Tammy, “Kathrin hates it when I get all sentimental.”

Tammy turned a hesitant eye towards Kathrin. Everyone else braced themselves.
Agnes put her needles down. “Kathrin, your father cannot be blamed for the way he was. And your mother cannot be blamed for loving him.”

Kathrin turned to Agnes. “I just think that it’s sad that my mother’s been carrying around my father’s memory for years like a hair shirt.”

“Kathrin,” Andria pleaded, “on this night?”
Kathrin bowed her head. “I’m sorry, but a couple of lousy pictures and stories that have no meaning to any of us don’t thrill me. I never even met the guy.”

Jen turned to Kathrin. “I remember him. Vaguely. He was some big guy who picked me up, spun me around and bought me ice cream. But he never did anything but try to provide for us.”

Kathrin turned to Tammy. “You know, we didn’t even find out he died until two weeks later.”

Ingrid stood up. “Kathrin! I loved your father and I always will. He had his faults, and as a good Catholic you should realize that we all do. We must accept things for what they are.”

Her mother’s mouth shut, and she stood still, silently weeping in the living room. Then she turned on her heel and fled up the stairs. Andria watched her mother leave, then turned to Kathrin. “Way to go, Kath.”

Andria went upstairs after her mother. Kathrin sat back down. “What I’d do?”

The three other women remained silent. Agnes picked up her knitting needles and began working furiously at her sweater. Tammy swallowed her cappuccino nervously, glancing from Jen to Agnes. Finally, Jen moved in closer to Kathrin and put her arm around her sister. “Kath, you were a little out of line.”

“Jen, please. I mean really, ice cream?”

“I know. I agree with you, but that’s what gets her through. If his memory helps her, then we should respect that. It might not be right for you or me, but she needs it.”
Kathrin looked away and breathed. She stretched her legs then got up. “I know. I’ll go apologize.”

Jen sighed. “That would be a good idea.”

Kathrin moved up the stairs. When she had disappeared, Jen turned to Tammy. “I’m sorry you had to witness that.”

Tammy smiled weakly. “It must be tough.”

“Kathrin’s not in the wrong. Everything she said is true, and it hurts her more than she lets on. Under her tough skin, she still feels abandoned. Just like I do sometimes. But I remember him, and he did love us. I remember one day Mom went grocery shopping, and Dad was watching us. I went into the baby’s room and there he was, looking down at her. And Kathrin was lying there looking up at him. And he turned to me, and said ‘She has your mommy’s eyes.’ He loved Kathrin more than she’ll ever know. She reminded him of Mom.”

“How did he die? If you don’t mind my asking.”

Jen shook her head. “I don’t mind. He was away in Thailand, doing a piece on prostitution. After the story and photos were wired back to New York, he and a few men he met there decided to take a bike trip up into the mountains. They got to Chang Mai and then went into the mountain-side. They traveled for a few days, camping and stuff along the back roads. The third day in, he lost control of the bike in the rain.”

“He died in a bike crash.”

“No. By the time they got him back to a hospital the gangrene had attacked most of his body. He died in Bangkok. We didn’t find out until we got a telegram. I think my mother still has it. It came around Christmas time, but I think by that point she already knew.”

Tammy swallowed. “That’s so awful.”

Jen nodded. “Yeah it is. But the worst part is: I think if she had seen his body, she might have understood. She might have gotten over it.”

Agnes clicked her tongue, and put her needles down. “He was a remarkable man.”
Kathrin lay in her bed for quite some time after her alarm went off. She snuggled down into her sheets, and tried to fall back asleep. After a few minutes she realized that sleep was impossible, and so rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. She could vaguely hear the automatic coffee pot dripping in the kitchen, but everything else was absolutely silent. Just my luck that today the world has come to an end. Might as well. She had ruined the party. Even after a humble apology, Ingrid had refused to look her in the eye. Andria had kept walking around, straightening things and answering questions with one-word sentences. No one had stayed around; they had simply taken their gifts and departed for home. When everyone else had left, Kathrin had gone into the kitchen to talk to Andria.

"Andria," she had begun.

"Not now. We'll see you tomorrow."

Then Andria had left the kitchen. Mark had tried to put away the dishes as quietly as possible, then he had turned to Kathrin, whose hands were pressed against the counter into neatly shaped fists. "I don't know what happened," he had said, "but I think you should be more careful of how you treat your family. You don't seem to realize just how much your actions affect them."

Kathrin had looked at him stiffly. "You weren't there."

Mark had dropped his towel onto the counter. "No, but when you upset Andria, it upsets me, Kathrin. I'll see you out."

They had walked to the front hallway and Kathrin had picked up her stack of presents, though she knew she didn't deserve any. Mark had looped her arms through her coat, and then slowly shut the door behind her, without saying anything.

It never fails. I piss everyone off. Kathrin continued staring at the ceiling. She hadn't meant to make everyone angry, but they were so damn frustrating. Her father was dead, why couldn't they see that? She had accepted it. Of course she didn't like it, but why couldn't her mother let him die? Kathrin leaned across her bed and pulled open her bottom dresser drawer. Inside was a dark blue photo album. She pulled the album from the drawer and placed it on the bed beside her. Then she began rifling through the pages, flipping past pictures of her and her sisters at various ages, Halloween snapshots, camping trips and graduation photos. She finally turned to the last page. Pulling back the clear sheet of plastic, she removed a faded picture from the album. It was a wedding photo of her mother and father. Her mother looked young and beautiful, with huge smiling blue eyes. Kathrin felt ill at ease looking at her mother's face, it seemed so much like those of her sisters. They shared the same smile and noses. The shape of
their faces was even the same; a soft roundness which made them all seem delicate. Jen even had the same hair as her mother, while Andria’s was finer and lighter. Kathrin’s hair had been passed down to her from Nana Kate, on her father’s side.

Kathrin ran her fingers over her mother’s face, and slowly trailed them across her father’s image. His face was thinner than her mother’s and etched with sharp angles and jutting cheekbones. His hair was the colour of wheat - just a little darker than Kathrin’s but without the curl. Kathrin could see herself in his face, but his eyes were hazel. That was the only evidence of Kathrin’s mother in Kathrin. They both shared the same bright blue eyes. But Kathrin was taller than her mother and sisters, and carried the height upright. She had always been thin, and somewhat bony. Her two aunts had had the same body before they died, leaving those characteristics to only her. She was the final ‘true’ Connelly - in name, but also in body.

Kathrin stared at the photo. The man in the picture was a stranger to her - and she would never allow him any more presence in her life than she would allow a stranger. How her sisters could accept him as something more than just a photo, or in Jen’s case, a hazy memory, Kathrin would never understand. Her aunts had been infrequent visitors, and then died when she was still fairly young. The only times she ever saw them for more than an hour was at the summer cottage. They shared no stories about their brother, out of respect for her mother’s feelings she imagined. Maybe that was why she didn’t feel the same way about him. If she had some sense of folklore, more than the tired stories her mother had shared with her again and again, she might feel differently. Most often she had the feeling that her mother was making up stories - remembering her father in a way he never was. In her mother’s memories her father was perfect - always doing and saying the right things – as if her mother was keeping only the good china, not the chipped teacup, or the bent silverware. It was as if her father had never had a past. Her parents, after all, hadn’t dated long. They had a “whirlwind romance” which ended in marriage. Her mother had been a small town girl, who moved to Toronto to live with relatives when her parents died. He had been in town to visit his grandparents. They had seen each other in front of Massey Hall, waiting to be let in for some jazz concert, and had fallen in love at first sight. Ironically, her relatives knew his grandparents, and they had all gone for coffee and hot chocolate at The Senator afterwards. The rest was history.

Kathrin had pondered their meeting her whole life. How two absolute strangers could see each other and suddenly know that they were meant to be together. She had never once had even a fleeting glimpse of someone like that. Of knowing right away. Maybe it was something out of the
past. Like old movies. Love happened in old movies within the first minute of screen time. Then the rest of the plot moved around getting the two people together by the end. That didn’t happen in the nineties - at least not in her world. In her world, life was taken up by simple tasks that became big problems. Love didn’t drop off the trees. Most often, it didn’t even grow from the blossoms on the trees. Had she ever fallen in love like that? She couldn’t think of one person she had met because she knew she wanted to meet them. Most of the time, she met people by being a clumsy idiot; by stumbling into them, or spilling her drink, or asking a stupid question.

She wanted love at first sight, the sudden thrill that rushed down the spine, and collected in a pool of jelly underneath the ribcage. Why hadn’t she noticed? Maybe she’d never been looking. Maybe she never had the time.

Kathrin threw back her covers and hopped out of bed. Her apartment was slightly chilly, so she rushed into the bathroom. The tiles stuck coldly to her toes. She turned on the hot water, and quickly threw off her flannel nightshirt. Ducking into the shower, she rinsed all the previous day’s dirt from her body, and felt a little better. She had been standing under the weak rush of water for a few minutes by the time she realized that it was Christmas Day. A fleeting smile spread across her face. There was something about waking up on Christmas morning that always made her feel giddy and childish. No... child-like. It was like a new beginning. Even New Year’s Day didn’t make her feel fresh or new. Probably because she was always hung over.

It’s going to be a long week. She still had to finalize the details of the catering for New Year’s Eve, and the MuchMusic project needed to be finished for air time the same night. The New Year’s project was her baby. It was coming along, but so many little details had to be ironed out. What she had suggested in her proposal was that the countdown to midnight should parallel the music countdown for the day. No brilliant idea there. But the countdown would incorporate one story line between songs, so that everything was pre-programmed before the show. That way, the vj’s could concentrate on the live aspect later in the show, while the countdown was on. She had drafted a few cyber-characters for the MuchMusic execs, and they had been pleased. Then she and a few writers from both sides had sat down and prepared the story line. All she had to do for the rest of the week was finish some work on perfecting the characters’ movements for their dialogue. If it went over well, she might even be the station’s permanent call in. Then she could move out of the office with her future secured. So, all she was looking at was at least seventy hours of cramping her neck over the computer. Richardson better appreciate my work. Like her boss ever cared. As far as he was concerned, she was well compensated for her labour. Although
he had been perplexed when she'd asked for massage time in her contract. A few hours' relaxation was well worth his money.

By the time she'd finished in the bathroom and thrown some clothes on it was just after noon. Only five more hours until she had to traipse over to her mother's house. Or was it Jen's place? Every year it was a different location. Of course no one ever came over to her apartment for Christmas dinner. It was too small, and had no sense of history to it. Or rather, more bluntly put, it was only an apartment. Unlike the other domestic harbours, Kathrin's place wasn't a home because she didn't share it with anyone. She preferred it that way. No cooking, cleaning, no unwanted guests. But still, it bothered her that she was not considered because she was single. While the rest of her family was opening presents and oohing over Danielle, she was alone in her apartment. Of course Jen and Scott had invited her to spend the night at their place every year for the past three since she'd moved out, but it just wasn't the same. They did their cute little romantic brunch, which probably ended with them throwing their plates into the fireplace and screwing under the Christmas tree. And she'd only be in the way at Andria's house, though she'd never received an invite. Sadly enough, the thought of all the other lonely people in the world cheered her. Plus the fact, she needed the time to relax. After breakfast.

She remembered the Christmases of her youth as she set the table for one. She and her sisters running down the stairs well before light. Screaming for their mother to get up, so they could tear into the presents Santa had delivered. Ingrid always made them open their stockings first, so they could hang their new ornaments on the tree before they got lost or stepped on. Then, for about fifteen minutes, there would be peace as the girls forgot about the big presents and played with their small toys and sucked on candy canes and grabbed for the treasures the others had gotten. They all had identical stockings. After they got tired of their stockings their mother would pull out certain packages, and make the girls open them together. The first few presents were always clothing for them to wear that evening, when the relatives came by. Kathrin had never understood how her mother could figure out which parcels Santa had filled with clothing, and which packages were filled with toys. Some motherly way of communicating with Santa, she'd imagined.

Then her mother would dole out presents individually, and make the two sisters wait as the other opened her package. And so it went, in a circular motion for the rest of the morning. Finally the girls would beg their mother to open the presents they had crafted for her, and explained how they had made everything before she had finished unwrapping the gifts. In later years their mother
took a more involved place in the unwrapping of gifts, but always responded in the same way: as if every gift was the best gift she had ever laid eyes on. But it was those early years Kathrin remembered the most.

The last gift each daughter got was from their father. Some very extravagant toy or dress or object. But that ended soon enough, when the girls started asking about how it was their father could send them stuff from Heaven. “Why doesn’t he just come himself?” Andria asked her mother one Christmas morning.

That put the end to the gifts from her father. It was too traumatic for their mother to explain that the gifts represented his never-ending love, not the fact that he still existed somewhere else.

Then Kathrin decided that she didn’t want to eat at the table, so she took her cutlery to the living room and flicked on the TV. Every channel was booming with holiday festivities. She finally found a black and white version of A Christmas Carol, and turned the volume up. How they could let children watch the movie, she would never understand. It was even worse than fairy tales. Some dead guy coming back to haunt a man - a bastard yes, but still.

She took her plate to the kitchen and prepared her Eggs Benedict. and unwrapped the silver foil from her champagne bottle. After removing the wire, she popped the cork in the sink, and watched as the spray spurted from the neck of the bottle. Then she topped her orange juice with champagne in a crystal flute, and carried the glass and plate back to the living room. She sat down cross-legged on the floor, with her back against the couch. From the look of things, Scrooge was halfway through his journey. Kathrin cut into her eggs with relish and sighed. As good as ever. What was she complaining about. This was probably the most peaceful moment she’d had in weeks. No hang-over or regrets from the night before, no emotional calls from her mother or Carol. She couldn’t dream of a better way of spending a cold winter day than laughing at some poor coal-pinching asshole’s terrible luck.

She leaned over her breakfast, and plucked a small box from under the Christmas tree. It was from Andria and Mark. She carefully loosened the bow so as not to upset her plate, and removed the paper from the box. With one hand, she shook the box slightly. Jewelry. She flipped the lid off with one hand, and shoved a fork full of eggs into her mouth with other. A piece of cotton covered the contents, and she nipped at it with her fingers. The cotton pulled away from a large gold K, speckled with rhinestones. Big. Kathrin craned her neck one way and then the other, trying to find a perspective in which she could admire the brooch. Finally,
she decided that she liked it. But where was she going to wear it? She put her plate down, and held up the K in the light. The brooch was the size of her fist. She flipped it over, and realized that it was older than she had thought at first. The detailing on the pin was too fine to have been made in the last forty years. But Andria had obviously had it cleaned. She flipped the brooch back over. *Scarf pin.* That was the thing about Andria, she would always buy something she thought Kathrin would like, while at the same time being completely functional and practical. Kathrin turned the rhinestones, so the lights of the Christmas tree shone off them. She liked it. And no doubt would grow to love it. That was the way things were with the gifts Andria bought her. They started off as useful, then grew to be things she couldn’t live without.

Kathrin wiped the remainder of sauce off the plate with a crust of toast, and popped it into her mouth. She grabbed the wrapping paper and plate and carried them to the kitchen. The paper found its way into the garbage, and the plate into the sink. Then Kathrin returned to her gifts. Danielle had given her a fine wool sweater in black. The child had good taste. Jen and Scott donated the newest graphics program to her collection, and she was pleased with their choice. She’d try it out on Boxing Day.

Kathrin pulled out the first box her mother had left for her. It was fairly large and bulky. Kathrin opened the box to find a brand new blender, wedged in between the pieces of Styrofoam. She burst out laughing. It was typical of her mother. Of course, she had ruined the last blender she had owned by mixing one too many blender drinks last summer. Now she could use the new one for the exact purpose her mother had intended it for. *Cooking.* Maybe she’d learn a little more this year. Not that she was a terrible cook - she could find her way around a kitchen. But she still had a lot to learn. Kathrin pushed the box back under the tree, and reached for the last package. She lifted the box, and found that it was heavier than she had noticed the night before. Not that she had noticed much, with the state her mind had been in. The box was uniformly heavy, like a telephone book. She unwrapped the gift to find that it was not an actual box as she had thought, but instead a neatly stacked pile of what felt like papers, wrapped in parcel paper and tied with white string. Kathrin frowned.

She ran to the closet and grabbed the pair of shearing scissors from the Christmas box. Then she carefully snipped the string around the paper and lifted the top edge of it. A slight scent of mold ruffled through the air, and Kathrin pulled back the rest of the wrapping. There, before her eyes was a stack of oddly assorted papers. Her fingers rummaged through sheets and sheets of hand written and typed pages, some official looking documents, some photographs and various
newspaper clippings. Eventually she realized that her mother had given her all of her father’s old notes. Why?

Kathrin went back to the top of the stack and looked at the first sheet. It was an article he had written for National Geographic about poaching in Kenya. Kathrin frowned again and lifted the sheet. An envelope slipped from the pile and onto the floor. Kathrin dropped the sheet and retrieved the envelope. Her name was written on it in her mother’s handwriting. She tore open the envelope and pulled out a piece of paper. Unfolding the letter, her mother’s handwriting took up a brief portion of space. Kathrin could barely make out the words for the tears welling in her eyes. She read the note then re-folded the letter and placed it back in the envelope. Not now, she cautioned herself. She got up and brought some tape from the kitchen. Then she taped the parcel paper together and carried the stack of papers to her dresser. Carefully, she wedged the stack into the drawer, and placed the photo album beside it. With a sigh, she shut the drawer and wiped some tears away with her shirt sleeve. Then she stood in her room. At that moment she knew she’d broken her mother’s heart. After everything she had said the day before, her mother had still let her have her father’s work. Because as a child she’d imagined that she would be a journalist just like her dad, and travel the world, and not see her family and live with the lions in Africa. And then when she had finally grown up, her father’s work meant nothing to her. She put her hand up to her head, and suddenly didn’t feel so grown-up anymore. I’m not going to make it through this day.

But she did. How, she would never know. Her mother could tell as soon as she saw Kathrin’s face that her daughter was truly sorry. She forgave her without speaking, and everyone else seemed to notice the calm, and forgave Kathrin as well. So, by the time Kathrin fell exhaustedly to sleep that night, all her sins were wiped away, and she felt better. She spent Boxing Day going through the new graphics application, and found that some of the templates she was working on for MuchMusic would work better with the upgraded software.

Her trip into work on the Monday therefore was more relaxed than she had hoped. Everyone seemed eager to get to work, which rarely happened over the holidays. Of course most of the employees were off, having finished the big ad run in the weeks before Christmas. Kathrin slipped into her office and shut the door. She needed a few moments to prepare for the day before anyone bothered her. She slipped off her boots and put her work socks up on the desk. There were no big meetings scheduled for the day so there was no reason to look professional. She wore no
makeup and had her hair tucked up into a scrunchie. Her legs were covered with fleece, as were her arms. The only accessory she sported was a well worn baseball cap, with the University of Toronto’s logo emblazoned on it. No doubt Richardson would go through the roof, but it would be well worth it, if only to see his bulbous legs poking out from the ceiling. Kathrin reached into her desk and pulled out three Velcro balls. She flung them at the basketball net on her door, then went over to pull them off the Velcro backboard. Some genius, what? Wasn’t it because he saw how static electricity worked, and decided to incorporate it into clothing? Pure genius. Of course she would never be caught dead in Velcro shoes, but why couldn’t she think up stuff like that? The Chia Pet, Silly Putty. Those guys were rolling in it. She was taking her second round of shots when there was a timid tap at her door.

“Come in.”

Her assistant entered into her office, carrying a clip pad. “Merry Christmas. Wow, you look comfortable,” he said, surveying her attire.

“Thanks Jamie, what’s up?”

Jamie sat down in the chair across the desk from her. “O. K. Here’s the deal. MuchMusic had seen the roughs, and Kathrin, they like what they see. They just want to see the finished product by Thursday, so they can O. K. it before Friday. You think it’ll happen?”

Kathrin took a shot and dunked a Velcro ball. “Yes. Definitely.”

“Richardson wants to see you before that. About some Valentine’s Day campaign. Something like two cyber-rabbits in love.”

“Sounds promising. What else?”

“Some guy called from City TV. Wants to know if you want tickets to the New Year’s Bash.”

Kathrin puckered her face up. “No. You want them?”

Jamie’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Call him back, tell him I can’t make it, but I need four tickets.”

Jamie laughed. “You want me to tell him that?”

Kathrin leaned over her desk. “Well, not in those exact words. Tell him to send them to your attention. And make sure you thank him for me.”

“I can’t believe you.”
Kathrin looked at Jamie. "Jamie, do you honestly think he cares? They just want enough people there so it’ll look full. They only want me, cause I’m the only person they know from the company. You’re competent. So do some networking. I’m sure the spread will be amazing."

"All right. Thanks Kathrin."

"No problem."

Jamie finished filling out details on his clipboard, then looked expectantly at Kathrin.

“What do you need?"

"Um," Kathrin stretched her arms over her head, "I need confirmation on Wednesday’s meeting with the Much techo-wizards and our team. 9:00 en punto."

"En punto?"

"Spanish for sharp."

"O. K. What else?"

"I need to use the studio for the rest of the day, so can you be sure to be around to help with Baby, and some of the other minor characters?"

Jamie nodded vigorously. Working with Kathrin was like working alongside the Master Builder. She was always in her zone when she was working against the clock. And the project, well the project was going to make or break the company’s name. Most likely make it, from what Jamie had seen so far.

"Oh, and order us lunch. I’ll pay."

Jamie stood up to leave. He stopped at the door and turned back to Kathrin. "This project is really important to you, huh?"

Kathrin smiled. "Yeah. Don’t worry. We’ll pull it off. Set up that final meeting for 4:00 on Thursday."

Jamie shut the door behind him. Kathrin looked at her watch. 9:15. Fifteen more minutes and then she would begin her work. She cleared a space on her desk, and made her feet comfortable. She looked around her office. It was the first real office she had ever had, and the sign on the door made her feel important. Everywhere around her, pieces of her life filled up the empty space. She felt more at home in her office than in her apartment. At work she had all of her favorite things: mementos from university, framed photographs of her family and friends, pictures and images of ideas and objects that she herself had created for various campaigns and ads. A gold plaque from the 1995 Marketing Awards, office gifts, posters from her favourite movies and a
huge painting her sister had done. It was like she had taken her heart, split it into a hundred
different pieces and plastered her office with them.

Reaching up above her head, she loosened her shoulders, and rose from the chair. She
slipped her “in-house” moccasins onto her feet, grabbed her back-up disks and the new software
package, and slid towards the door. She took a deep breath and then stepped out into the office. A
few people nodded, and Kathrin returned the nods, then headed to the studio.

She didn’t look up until lunch, when Jamie entered carrying a tray of dead fish. He
presented the sushi with relish, and pulled a set of chopsticks out for Kathrin to use. Kathrin
glanced at the pieces of raw tuna and salmon, and opted for the California roll instead. She bit into
the chewy seaweed, and munched the rice and eggs between her tongue and teeth. “You know,
Jamie... you only get sushi when I pay.”

Jamie pulled apart his own chopsticks with a snap. “That’s cause sushi is expensive.”

“I don’t even eat the fish.”

“Exactly. That way I get more.”

Kathrin grabbed another vegetarian chunk of rice and ...something, maybe avocado, and
dunked her chopsticks into the wasabi sauce. “Next time you buy, I’m ordering duck!”

Jamie walked over to her, chewing clearly for her pleasure. He leaned over her shoulder
and peered at the screen. “So... show me what you got.”

Kathrin set up the sound recorder and clicked back to the beginning of the frames. She
pressed play on both programs at once. The small figures moved in time to the music, their lips
twitching in harmony with the sound file.

“That’s good,” Jamie stated from behind her.

“I don’t know. Do you think we should loop the frames at double-time, and speed up the
music?”

Jamie’s sushi-stuffed face shook vigorously. “No. It’ll make it too busy.” He took a deep
breath as his mouth hit wasabi.

“I don’t know. Something’s missing.”

“What about the background? Is it too boring? Maybe add a few chairs or something.”

Kathrin grimaced. “No, that would make it too confusing. But, you’re right, it is boring.
Wait, what a good idea. If we did a colour wash on all the frames...”

Kathrin spun her chair around until she was directly in front of the computer. She stopped
the players and pulled up her programming window. Rows of type went shooting up to the top of
the screen, until Kathrin found the section she was looking for and began typing frantically. After a few minutes she was done. She closed the window, and pressed play again. This time the figures moved at the same speed, but with every few frames the background switched to different colours. The figures seemed to move with some inverted strobe-light effect. Jamie nodded frantically.

"That's it. Wow!"

Kathrin smiled and leaned back in her chair. Things were going to be fine. She spent the rest of the afternoon going over each individual frame, touching up body parts, and mouths. By five, she was exhausted. Jamie had slipped in and out of the studio all afternoon, but by the time he was ready to leave for home, the character of Baby was nearly complete. "Kath," he asked from the doorway, "I'm going to go. Do you need some more help?"

"No. You did a lot of work. Thanks. Go home."

"O.K. Oh by the way, some guy dropped an envelope off for you earlier. I left it on your desk."

Kathrin nodded, her head bent over the keyboard. "Blond?"

"Yeah."

Andrew: "O.K. See you tomorrow."

"Don't stay too late."

Kathrin nodded as the door swung shut. She rolled her head around on her shoulders to loosen some of the tension. Only a few more hours then she would call it quits. The last thing she wanted to do was leave everything until Thursday, because she had no doubt in her mind that Thursday the MuchMusic people would decide that they wanted everything changed. She reached across the large white table in the studio and flicked on the CD Player. She had brought a few CD's, because once she started working without the sound files, she could use some distraction to make the work seem less tedious. She turned on the player, and then settled down to work.

Lizard Man was giving her the largest problem. Somewhere in conception he had lost opposable thumbs, and maneuvering his three fingers was giving her some problems, especially as he was handling a flying-v guitar. She continued to work away, and finally after what seemed like hours, had nearly given up. No matter what she did, he looked stupid holding onto his guitar. By accident she copied one of the fingers onto the screen one time too many. It pasted directly on top of the guitar Lizard Man was holding and automatically solved the problem. Kathrin laughed.

Once, one of her friends in radio had told her a story. One program the crew was working on required a scene that involved making the sound of eggs cracking. They worked on the scene for
hours, searching every sound file they had ever used. Then they started breaking things that would sound like an egg cracking. Finally the producer had walked in and asked them what they were doing. "Trying to make the sound of an egg cracking," someone had replied.

The producer had looked at them all strangely and said, "Then why don't you crack an egg?"

The whole thing was, according to her friend, that sometimes people got so involved in what they were doing, that they forgot about reality, and only worked from imagination.

Kathrin corrected the rest of the frames, and sat back as she let the show run through. It was good. Almost, but not quite, really good. She looked at her watch. It was nearly eight. She stretched, and then decided to quit while she was ahead. She made sure that she had saved the files on both the central server and her own disks, then shut down the computer. Carefully turning out the lights, she made her way back to her office. The entire floor was deathly quiet. Kathrin hadn't even noticed the cleaning crew come and go.

She put on her boots and laced them up. Then she got her coat and headed for the door, making sure that she had her disks on hand. She also grabbed the envelope with Andrew had neatly addressed to her, and slipped her disks inside, along with the New Year's tickets. Nothing was going to let her mess this contract up. Nothing.

The rest of the week sped by. All the meetings went well, and by Thursday afternoon, the finished product, all the hour and five minutes of it, was ready for the premiere viewing. The MuchMusic people loved it. At the end of the viewing, the director of programming approached Kathrin. "We'll be able to use this five or six times after New Year's. How long did it take you?"

Kathrin laughed. "How long? About two hundred hours. With everyone on the project involved."

"You're very good."

Kathrin smiled. "Thank you. By the way, did I tell you I have some ideas for a cyber-vj?"

The director of programming laughed, and placed his arm on her shoulder. "Maybe we could get together and talk about it in the new year. You're coming tomorrow night, aren't you?"

Kathrin swallowed. Is he hitting on me? "I can't actually. I've already made plans. But Jamie will be there."

The director looked across the room at Jamie. "Oh. That's too bad. I'm sorry we'll miss you."
“Well, give me a call and let me know how it all went. That is unless you want some changes made.”

He looked at her intently. “I think it’s perfect the way it is. I’ll have two of my guys go over putting in the logo in the morning. You’re here if we need you, right?”

“Of course.”

“Good. Then we’ll leave it until then. Thank you. You’ve done a great job.”

“I enjoyed it.”

The Much people had barely left when Jamie came around the table. “They loved it!” he boasted.

“They’re not the ones who have to. Wait until the thirteen-year-olds come back with their remarks. They’re the only ones who’ll be watching the show anyway.”

Jamie threw up his arms. “Kathrin, I give up. You’re never satisfied! Let’s go for a drink and celebrate.”

Kathrin smiled. “I’d love to, but I need to pick up my skirt from the cleaners, and set the table, and way too many other things. Tell you what…we’ll all go out on Monday, after we get feedback from the station.”

Jamie shrugged. “Fine, be that way. I’m going for a drink.”

“Then have one for me. But don’t get too wasted, because we may get called over there tomorrow, and I don’t want you hung-over.”

Jamie saluted. “Yes boss!”

“Get outta here.”

As it turned out, Friday was a slow day. The guys working at the station had no problem loading the program, and the logo was inserted without complication. Kathrin spent most of her time at the office shooting hoops. Which was a good thing, because Jamie came in looking like something the cat dragged in, pounced on a few times, then spat out in a huge fur-ball. “I hope,” Kathrin chastised, “that you learned your lesson. You’re not going to be very much fun tonight.”

Jamie groaned. “Have any aspirin? Don’t worry, I’ll be fine by noon.”

It was actually three o’clock that Jamie started to come round. “O. K. Kath, what do you need me to do?”

Kathrin smiled. “I need you to go through my out-box and get rid of everything in it.”

Jamie looked at the out-box then shot Kathrin a look of pure horror. “All of that?”
“Yep, and I expect it done by Monday morning.”
“What are you doing?”
Kathrin gave Jamie her most sinister of smiles. “I’m going home.”
“Aww, Kathrin, c’mon.”
Kathrin giggled. “O. K. Do some of it now, and then finish it on Monday morning.”
“Thanks. Have a good night.”
“I will.” Kathrin grabbed her coat and headed for the door.

The elevator was empty the whole ten floors to the parking garage. Kathrin got into her car and ran through the checklist of her mind. There was nothing she needed to do on her way home. The caterers were arriving at 6:30, so she would have time to take a nap before preparing for the night. She drove slowly through the streets in the downtown core. A steady stream of wet snow was falling over the road and on the sidewalk. The forecast predicted no freezing, so weather would be good for all the cabbies. Kathrin had called earlier that morning to order two cabs for her house, for 10:30. Everything was prepared and ready to go. She smiled. All in all, it had been a good year.
The after supper fullness weighed down on the guests, and they retired to Kathrin’s living room for spiked coffee and conversation. Harold, always the gentleman, moved into the kitchen to clean up the dishes. Kathrin, who was sitting next to Carol on the couch, gently nudged her nose against Carol’s ear. “Should we let him know they’re catered plates?”

Carol erupted into raucous laughter and got up to retrieve her deluded, but well-meaning lover. When the two returned Harold was a darker shade of the rosy hue he normally assumed. He wrapped his arm around Carol’s waist, and pulled her close. She, in turn, rested her chin on his bald spot. Kathrin watched the two intently.

“Harold,” Kathrin finally asked, “how do the two of you dance?”
Harold grinned. “Horizontally.”
Kathrin gagged. “I’m going to puke.”
Steph laughed from her reclined position under the Christmas tree. “Well, if you insist on being mean, you deserve what you get!”
“I was just wondering.”
“At least,” Alison interjected, “Harold has someone to dance with!”
Kathrin put her hand up to her heart as if grabbing at an invisible dagger, and wrenched it out. “Touché!”

She didn’t mind really. She was surrounded by her six closest friends and the relative stability of their own relationships pleased her, as opposed to making her feel jealous or uncomfortable. Had the men been less familiar, or possibly more attractive to her, she might have felt uncomfortable, but as they were they posed no threat.

“Bah!” Carol stated.

Everyone turned to look at her. “I mean,” she clarified, “I don’t think we have to worry about our dear Kathrin. She’s seen more quote unquote dancing in the past two weeks than all of us put together.”

Kathrin kept her eyes on her coffee cup and remained silent and still.
“What?” Alison and Steph asked in unison.
“Thank you, Carol,” Kathrin mumbled, her eyes still fixed on the gold rim of her saucer.
Carol crossed back over to Kathrin. “Oh come on! We all live vicariously through you. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Kathrin moved away from Carol’s arm, and rose from her seat. “Excuse me, I have to go to the bathroom.”
She walked out of the living room, flipping her hair as she went. Everyone else remained silent, watching Carol.

"Oops," she said meekly.

K

Kathrin closed the door behind her and leaned against it. It wasn’t like her to get upset about the teasing. She crossed to the toilet, un-tucked her clothing and sat down. Nothing happened. She waited a few seconds. Still nothing. She was so tense she couldn’t even pee.

"C’mon," she coaxed her body to respond to the cold porcelain’s message. Slowly, a few drops of urine sprinkled into the bowl. Kathrin grimaced as a burning sensation filled her lower body. "Goddammit," she muttered.

Another bladder infection, of course. Ever since Christmas Eve, she had been worried that the pain would return. It finally had, and it reassured her; at least she knew the symptoms. She would have to call her doctor on Monday, to see about getting another prescription of Sulfamethox. A three-day prescription would probably cover it. She eased the rest of her bladder contents out as quickly as possible, then wiped herself delicately in only downward strokes. No sense in flaring up her outside as well. She knew the worst mistake was to scratch at an itch; she was old hat at bodily injuries.

As she flushed the toilet a tentative knock resounded on the door.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Kathrin, it’s Carol. Can I come in?"

Kathrin shrugged her shoulders, then unbolted the lock. Carol stood in the doorway, until Kathrin had finished re-tucking and then moved to let Carol by. When Carol was safely in the bathroom, Kathrin shut the door.

"Kath," Carol began, "I’m sorry but..."

"Don’t worry about it; I’m just in a bad mood."

"Why?"

"I don’t know. I just don’t want to be the object of everybody’s vicariousness anymore."

Carol flinched. "I’m sorry."

"Stop saying you’re sorry. It’s my own fault. I brought it on myself. Just do me a favour: can we keep that stuff between us from now on?"

Carol smiled. "Yeah, O. K."

"Thanks."
There was a short silence, and Kathrin glanced in the mirror as Carol chewed thoughtfully on her lip. “Kath?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you do me a favour?”

Kathrin flipped around from the mirror. “What?”

“I don’t want to bring it up, because it’s not a big deal... but can you keep the height comments to yourself?”

Kathrin’s face fell. “Oh shit! Here I am, thinking about my feelings like usual. Carol, I’m sorry.”

Carol crossed to the mirror. “Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing. Just that I think Harold gets a little upset.”

Kathrin placed her hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Yeah, of course.”

“Thanks.”

Kathrin rolled her head around on her shoulders. There was no sense in dragging the conversation out. “Well, now that we’ve salvaged our faces, we better get back. We’ve got a lot of partying to do. Tonight, my friend, there is no chance of me getting involved in any stories.”

Carol’s dimples appeared. “Oh yeah? Why?”

“Because, I’m going to get so messy drunk, that you’re going to have to carry me home to your place, and tuck me in under the pull-out’s covers.”

“Oh no!”

“Oh yes!”

Kathrin moved towards the door, but a painful burn in her bladder stopped her short. She breathed shallowly and touched her belly.

“What?” Carol asked, coming closer.

“Nothing. I think I have another bladder infection. I’m O. K. now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“You better see someone about that.”


They emerged from the bathroom and when they moved around the corner Kathrin noticed that all her friends were watching her, trying to determine her mood. Kathrin grabbed her coffee, and downed the last of its contents. “Chocolate Martinis?”
No one answered. "Good. Let's drink."

Chocolate Martinis differ from regular Martinis for the simple reason that they are easier to make. One shot of vodka, one shot of creme de cacao, and one single chocolate covered coffee bean. The simplicity of the drink has one minor drawback: it can be prepared quickly and consumed with equal speed. These factors result in a potent mixture that shows no adverse side effects until it is often too late. Three servings of this drink can render an unassuming quaffer mentally and verbally impotent in a matter of minutes. It is not advised to consume such a vast amount of alcohol and liquor unless one is a competent drinker and, even then, under constant supervision. If these measures are not taken, the result can often be disastrous.

"Come on, let's go. It's almost ten thirty." Kathrin hollered from the front closet, as she pulled her long coat from its hanger.

"Did you call the cab company again?"
"Yes, they said they'd be here in ten minutes."
"That was fifteen minutes ago."
"They're late. Want to call again?"
"No, let's just get ready."
"Everybody have their tickets?"
"You have my money?"
"Yes."
"Keys, honey?"
"Got 'em."
"The first cab's here. Who's going?"
"I will."
"O. K. Grab Steph too. The four of us will go."
"I have to lock up."
"O. K. We'll see you there."
"Alison, no puking in the cab."
"Fuck you!"
"I have your ticket."
"See you there - oh, here's the other cab."
“Let’s go.”
“Bye fish.”
There was no response. “Fucking fish!”
The door clicked shut. The fish breathed a full gills worth of relief.

At certain points during the cab ride, Kathrin clearly saw double. She contained her insobriety well and finally, against the bright swirling glow of the streetlights, realized that unless they made it to the bar in good time she was going to miss the “make it or break it” point. If she stopped drinking for too long she’d begin to feel sick, but if she had another drink soon, then gradually lessened her consumption but kept a relatively steady pace, she’d make out all right.

In the back seat, Carol and Harold kept up a quiet but steady banter. The cabby whistled cheerfully. No doubt he was banking on a good night. Kathrin pulled her purse onto her lap and checked to make sure that she had everything. Smokes, check. Money, check. I.D., check. She realized that there was little chance she would be asked for identification, but she carried it with her anyway. Just in case they found her body in the lake the next morning. Lipstick, check. Keys, check. Perfume, check. She always carried a few testers of perfume in her purse. It was amazing what the high-styled mannequins behind the cosmetic counters would give out if they thought you were in the mood to buy. Gum, check. Everything was in place.

Kathrin felt light-headed. She pressed her face against the cool window, and watched the streets fly by. They seemed to be moving, while the cab stood still. Imagine that. If really, we never moved, but instead the scenery moved behind us. Like we were always on set. The people around us were only props. Which would make sense.

Sometimes, Kathrin had been walking down the street, and suddenly thought that she was passing people she might have met, or was going to meet. The same old thought everyone had: maybe I saw you walking down the street, but didn’t notice, didn’t take the time to see you. How many times had she passed the same people? Maybe a hundred times, and never noticed. If people are props, then maybe they’re recycled, like in the theatre. And it’s not until the fifth or the fiftieth time that you finally see them, that you recognize them from some other time and space. It was certainly an interesting thought. Didn’t someone say that the theatre revolved around the universals of time, space and place? Maybe life was a theatre - like a plot that was predestined from the beginning, only someone had to take the time to notice the scenery. And if that was so,
maybe she was a prop as well. Some life-like mannequin that had only been seen once, and was destined to become real when the right person took a look around.

_I am the fuckin' Velveteen Rabbit!_ Kathrin giggled up in the front seat. Carol and Harold exchanged glances in the back. “What?” Carol asked.

Kathrin turned around and placed her chin on the vinyl head-rest. “Ever think, that you’re not real until someone makes you real?”

Carol stared at Kathrin. Beside her Harold smiled. “You’re nobody ‘til somebody loves you…” he crooned into Carol’s ear.

“Exactly.” Kathrin smiled.

Carol looked from one of her companions to the other. “No.”

“It makes sense. You know, like the ‘behind every good man’ thing.” Kathrin cocked her head.

Carol put her hand up to pause the conversation. “So, you’re saying that every man was nothing, until someone believed in him?”

“Right!”

“What about Jesus?”

“The apostles.”

“Hitler?”

“Eichmann.”

“J. F. K.?”

There was a brief pause, then Kathrin turned towards the front. “Hrmm, that’s a tough one.”

The cabby coughed. “Maybe, every woman in his life brought out a little bit of reality in him.”

All three passengers turned to the cabby. “You know,” he continued, “like each woman fleshed out one more piece of him, until he became real. A truly co-operative effort, starting with his mother.”

Kathrin froze in awe. “Oh, my God,” she laughed, “I knew it! I knew deep in my soul, that the true ‘messengers’ had to be cabbies. This just proves it.”

Carol swatted her from the back seat. “You told me that the true ‘messengers’ were bicycle couriers!”
“Carol.” Kathrin turned towards the back. “It doesn’t matter. It proves the same thing. The chosen ones are the guts of this society. The street peddlers of wisdom.”

“Wait a second,” the cabby said. “I’m not claiming anything, and I’m not trying to sell you my ideas. I just thought you needed some help with your argument. It was weak. Don’t make me seem like anything more than I am.”

Kathrin looked at the cabby. “Are you a philosopher?”

He grinned and shook his head. “More like a barstool prophet.”

Kathrin’s mouth fell open. “Who would have known?”

The cabby smiled, and pulled the cab over to the side of the road. “Here we are.”

Kathrin was jolted from her thoughts, and started fumbling through her purse for cash. She handed a few bills to the cabby, and started to get out of the cab.

“Miss?” The cabby grabbed her arm.

“Yes?”

“I think I just proved you argument. I’m real now, aren’t I?”

Kathrin leaned in. “You’re fucking brilliant!” she whispered.

She slammed the door. “He’s fucking brilliant!”

Carol and Harold came around the cab, and stood near Kathrin. “Yeah,” Carol concluded as the cab drove away. “Because you just gave him a $20 tip.”

Kathrin started walking away from the curb. “I don’t care what you say. That man was a true contemporary philosopher.”

Harold laughed. “Barstool prophet!”

Kathrin linked her arms through those of her cronies. “I see the coming of a new age. Beginning tonight.”

“Harold, we better get her a drink.”

Carol pushed her forwards. She grabbed Harold’s hand and pulled him behind her. They fought their way through the crowd lingering by the front door, handed over their tickets and made it to the coat-check. Carol flipped her coat over the counter’s edge and took Harold’s from his hand. Kathrin stood beside them, trying to unbutton her three-quarter length coat. In exasperation, Carol left Harold to tend to the coats, and took over. She quickly unbuttoned the five remaining buttons. She spun Kathrin around, and removed the coat from her shoulders.

Kathrin was wearing a shimmery silver crop top that dipped in around her cleavage. Carol was always amazed how Kathrin wore her clothes. On someone else, the top would look cheap.
but on Kathrin it seemed to be straight off the silver-screen. Below the top, Kathrin wore a black flare skirt that seemed just to miss the top, and expose the perfect amount of stomach. Kathrin’s legs were covered with sheer black nylons and tight boots that clamped her in, up to the knees.

When Harold had placed the coat tags in his pocket the three entered into the main vault of the club. It was just starting to get busy. Carol peered around to find Steph and Alison, but if they had already arrived, they eluded her eyes. Kathrin pulled Carol over to the bar. “I need a drink now, or I’m going to swing into sick-girl.”

The two ordered drinks, and waited as the bartender plopped down two screwdrivers, a Bud, and two pink concoctions that looked like Pepto-Bismol. Kathrin’s eyebrows shot up. “From the other bartender,” the guy said.

Kathrin looked down the bar, and found Andrew’s wave and smiled. She lifted up the drink and took a sip. It tasted like pineapples and marshmallows. Kathrin tried not to gag. “Gross.”

Carol agreed. “I don’t know how much alcohol is in this - but I bet it’s lethal.”

They took the drinks and went back to find Harold seated at a table with Adam and Jason. Steph’s husband. According to Kathrin and Carol, Jason was a nonentity. He said little and, as far as they knew, thought less. Well, except for those long nights in University. Carol and Kathrin would lie on Kathrin’s bed, giggling in hysterics, while they listened to Jason’s moans. They never told Steph about their eaves-dropping - not that it was really eaves-dropping - people on the street would have heard him. Most often the session would end with Carol getting up in disgust. “We’re worse than a bunch of under-sexed frat. boys. This is awful.”

Still, they had listened all through University to the grunts and growls coming in through the vent in Kathrin’s room. Once they had even taped the sounds, and then incorporated them into their “Halloween Noises” mix. Sick, sick, sick.

Kathrin could never look at him without smiling. She knew that he was just an ordinary guy. Wasn’t that the way it was? The normal guys had all the perverted ideas. She crossed to the table, and sat down next to Adam. “Where’s Alison?”

He pointed to the dance floor. “Cutting some rug. Like usual.”

Kathrin stirred her screwdriver with a sizzle stick, and took a long drink. The orange juice slid down her throat with ease. Immediately she felt better. When she had finished the screwdriver, she took another small sip of her Hawaiian-styled pink drink. It went down a little easier. Probably had some stupid name. “Pink Paradise” or “Miami Heat”. Definitely rum-based.
Carol watched her over the mini-umbrella in the drink. "How is it?"

"Getting better."

Harold leaned in. "More like, what is it?"

Both women shrugged. "It looks like pink barf," Adam noted.

"Thank you for your insight. It tastes better than it looks."

They sat, watching people move through the club. Kathrin was facing the dance floor, and scanned the people. Her attention was drawn to the club’s dancer. With every beat, the dancer shimmied a gold-clad body across the small caged area, high above everyone else. Her arms were covered with gold sparkles, and her face was half-covered by a gold cat-mask. "That’s awful."

Kathrin stated.

"What is?"

Kathrin turned to Carol. "Look at the dancer."

Carol turned around, then returned her gaze to Kathrin. "What?"

"This is your typical example of how we are treated in this society."

All three men groaned. They were only too well aware of Kathrin’s feminist tangents.

"No. Don’t groan. Look. There you have a woman, who not only is stuck in a cage, but who is scantily-clad, and dressed to look like a domestic animal."

Harold sighed. "Kathrin, I’m willing to bet you ten dollars that: a, she chose the outfit; b, she likes dancing like that; and c, the bars are more for her protection than for any other reason."

Kathrin threw her free arm up. "That is so typically male."

Harold humoured her. "You can’t feel sorry for someone who freely chooses to pursue a certain career. If she was sold on the slave-market, then I would agree with you. But I have no pity for a woman making probably over $20 an hour, dancing with clothes on, and looking like she’s having the time of her life."

Kathrin slurped the bottom of her drink up with a straw. "Harold, you’re so damned logical."

"Does that mean I win?"

Kathrin reached over and took Carol’s nearly untouched drink. "This round."

She turned her attention back to the dancer. The woman did look like she was having fun, with her high kicks and mechanical arm movements. Kathrin sipped Carol’s drink. She leaned over to Adam. "Shoot some pool?"

He got up without having to be asked twice.
Kathrin’s aim was dead on. After the third straight victory, the opponents went to get Kathrin and Adam each a drink - part of the winner’s parcel. Adam took the opportunity of cornering Kathrin while the next team racked balls. “How do you shoot so well, even after a couple?”

Kathrin smiled, while keeping ahold of her cue. “Simple. I’m drunk.”

Adam stepped aside as Kathrin moved to the table. She located the cue ball, and bent down until her eyes were on level with the felt-covered slate. She could see nothing on either side of the ball; only a hazy hedge of felt and oddly disjointed colours. She focused her eyes on the tip of the cue, and potted another solid ball into the same pocket. She did play better, the more she had to drink. Not perfectly, but better. After missing a shot, she handed her cue to Adam. “See?”

He chugged the beer he had won. “All right. I’ll take your advice.”

Kathrin took the moment to look around the room. The pool tables were kept on the upper level of the club. From her position, she could look over the balcony and watch the people move on the floor below her. She found her table and waved to Carol. Carol rolled her eyes and waved slightly. The club was nearly packed to full capacity, so it was getting closer to midnight.

Kathrin finished the game. She was bored. “Adam, do you want to quit?”

He looked at her with alarm, but then relaxed. “Yeah. Alison will probably call off the wedding if I don’t pay her some attention.”

They left the table to their opponents, and stepped down the metal staircase. Kathrin struggled to get through all the people. “It’s crazy in here!” she yelled to Adam, over the noise.

“Yeah!”

They made their way over to the table and witnessed a highly-excited Carol waving her arms. Kathrin moved over to her. “Oh, you won’t wave at me upstairs, but…”

“Shut up. Look over at the big screen!”

Kathrin turned to the screen. Lizard Man was rocking across the wall of the club, using his thumb to strum his flying-v. Kathrin covered her mouth. “Oh man, I need a drink.”

Just what she had dreaded: to be haunted by her creations the entire night. At least it would all be over by midnight. Kathrin flagged a waitress down, and ordered two double screwdrivers. “Oh wait. Make it two of those pink things.”

The waitress smiled. “Two Oahu Oasis: coming up.”

After the waitress dropped off the drinks, Kathrin sought the refuge of the dance-floor, and kept her back to the giant TV screen. She realized after the first few awkwardly placed steps that
she had had a lot to drink. She could keep her balance, but her fine motor skills had given up, and gone home for the day. Instead, she moved with baby steps across the floor, and raised her arms above her head, like a rock Diva. After two songs, she abandoned the floor and returned to her seat, landing without any grace. The room was hot and filled with excited bodies. Kathrin fanned her herself and took another sip of her drink. The rum-punch was definitely going to her head.

*Better slow down.* She finished her drink, and Adam passed her the other, across the table. Alison and Steph were at the bar, and she could see them talking to a couple from... university it looked like. She looked for Carol and Harold, who had made off for the buffet. Jason was sitting, watching everything occur around him. Kathrin got up and felt her way over to him. "Jason?"

He faced her. "Yeah, Kathrin?"

"How come you’re always so quiet?"

"I like to watch."

"Yeah. Me too. But I talk too."

Jason laughed. "I talk Kathrin. I just like listening better."

"So, you’re the strong, silent type?" she asked, while she reached across and pulled her drink towards her.

"I guess."

"Well," Kathrin giggled, "I know that you’re not so quiet."

Carol appeared beside them. "Kathrin, what are you saying?"

Kathrin looked up. "Well my pretty friend, I was just telling Jason that he’s not so quiet as he thinks. Right Carol?"

Carol glared at her friend. What do you mean?"

"I simply mean," Kathrin continued, "that here we all are, talking. Jason and I are having a conversation, so I know that he’s not so quiet."

Carol shot her a warning look, then smiled. "You’re wasted."

"Au contraire. I am far from wasted. But I plan to get on that plane by the end of the night."

Carol hauled Kathrin up from the seat. "Excuse us. I think we need a bathroom trip."

Carol pulled Kathrin across the lower level of the club to the ladies’ room. Once safely inside she dragged Kathrin to a stall. "Go." She ordered.

Kathrin complied, and went inside. She had some trouble latching the lock. Carol grabbed the door and held it shut. "Just go."
She heard the sound of Kathrin unzipping her skirt, and then the sound of liquid hitting the inside of the toilet bowl. After a lengthy stream spattered across the toilet, she heard Kathrin grab some toilet paper, and then the flush of the toilet. Kathrin emerged from the stall wearing a smile. “I’m better now.”

“Are you going to throw up?”
Kathrin looked at Carol. “Do I ever throw up?”
“No. Let’s go wash your hands.”
They stood before the wall length mirror as Kathrin washed and dried her hands. She reached into her purse and pulled out her lipstick. “Carol, you don’t have to watch over me. I’m fine.”

Carol tapped her fingers against the counter. “I know you’re fine. I actually just wanted a smoke.”

Kathrin pulled her cigarette pack out from her purse. “Well, I’ll give you one, but I know the real reason you wanted me in here. You thought I was going to spill the beans about listening to Jason and Steph having sex.”

Carol took the offered smoke. “You’re right.”
Kathrin lit Carol’s smoke and then her own, and glanced around the bathroom. There were two seats in the small powder room behind them. “Let’s chat.”

Carol followed Kathrin into the smaller, brighter room. They sat in the large comfortable chairs, smoking and tapping their ashes into a large saloon-style standing ashtray.

“Carol, can I ask you a question?”
Carol nodded. “Yeah, sure.”
“How did you meet Harold?”
“He was client. You know all this.”
Kathrin exhaled with her eyes shut. “Yeah, but was it love at first sight?”
Carol contemplated the thought. “I don’t know. I never thought about it before.”

“I mean, you never really dated anyone before him, so you must have felt something special.”

“Well, yeah, maybe I did. I know you guys don’t think he’s anything special, but there was something about the way he walked into the gallery - he seemed to own it. But it wasn’t until he spoke that I really felt something. I don’t know, Kathrin. I don’t remember not loving him, but
it wasn't something I could recognize at first. It just happened. There wasn't a beginning. I can't explain it.”

Kathrin sat up straight. “No. That's good. I know what you're saying. It was love at first sight, but you couldn't identify it as such.”

Carol smiled. “Yeah.”

“That's what I want. Love at first sight. But I want to know at the beginning. Just by looking in someone's eyes. You know, like in the movies. Where every single word is perfect. So perfect that it's almost like it's not real. Like you've been given a script by some unseen director, and you don't have to ask for lines.”

Carol butted out her cigarette, then realizing the conversation wasn't over, grabbed another one. “Go on.”

“I just want to appear somewhere, like out of a mist, and see this perfect stranger across a room, and know. And he'll know, and we'll be drawn like magnets to each other. And his first words will be witty, and charming, and sensitive. And we'll talk for hours and then...”

Carol interrupted. “And then you'll drive off into the sunset and live happily ever after?”

“Well, no.”

“I think it sounds a little too Hollywood for my taste. Things like that only happen in the movies. That's why they call this 'real life'. You're not going to find that Kathrin, and if you do, Lord help you both. Don't go looking. They call it love at first sight, because you're blind before it happens.”

“I've been blind my whole life!” Kathrin moaned, “You have no faith in fairy-tales.”

“Fairy tales were invented to care the shit out of little kids. Not to delude grown women.”

“Well, it's going to happen! Just wait.”

“Fine. Good luck. But don't search for Prince Charming tonight.”

Kathrin frowned. “I wasn't planning on it. Why?”

“Because my sweet, deluded friend, your beer goggles will end you up with a frog. And I am not in the mood to baby sit tadpoles. And to beat this fairy-tale thing to death...it's almost time to turn back into a pumpkin. Come on.”

Kathrin allowed herself to be hoisted back up to her feet. “Well,” she threw her arm out dramatically, “I won't give up!”
After the celebratory kisses and a glass of champagne, Kathrin let her friends drag her out onto the dance floor. She still had little control over her movements, but the growing evidence of inebriation around her allowed her to revel in the awkwardness. What did she care, if she looked like a fool? One night wasn’t going to kill her. She flung herself into motion and danced until her boots felt like they were going to explode all over the room. Every so often, she would duck back to the bar for another drink. Out of Carol’s view of course.

Her feet hurt, so she found an empty couch and sat down. From her position, she could see all her friends, and the dancing cat. She watched the cat move silkily, draping her arms over and through the bars. The dancer had lost much of her vitality, but the slower, more sensual movements were more relaxing. Kathrin felt as if she was being hypnotized - the golden arms moved and contorted, and the cat-mask dipped through the air. Gold pervaded the room, and Kathrin could no longer make out the difference between the sequined gloves, and the spray of sparkles that erupted from those gloves. She watched the large eyes of the cat, only vaguely aware that the eyes were mere shadows around the eyes of the dancer. The lights on the floor splattered gold and silver designs over the furniture, and pulsed through Kathrin’s head. She could see her friends spinning through the screen of lights and smoke, and wanted to go to them, but couldn’t move. The dancer’s movements were picking up momentum, but Kathrin could no longer hear the music. Instead, a large buzz was splitting through her head, as tables reflected light, and people drifted slowly across the club. She placed her drink on the floor, and leaned further back on the couch. It was as if her mind was racing, but her body had stopped moving. She could see everything so clearly, and knew that if someone spoke to her she would respond, but until the spell was broken would sit there mesmerized by the dancer, the lights, the slow droning in her head. All the silver and gold pieces of the sky, floating down on top of her, to her. Pieces she couldn’t touch, but felt, as the heat and light moved over her. As waves of light and sound particles came to her in fragments. As parts of her body seemed to separate, and pulse on their own accord, paying no attention to the rest of her. She moved her eyes across the room, to find someone to break the enchantment before she shut real life out. She could see nothing but arms and bodies, people moving through the screen, and the golden cat stretching itself towards her. In the heat of the bar, drowsiness took over and the cat lulled Kathrin’s body, while exciting her mind. The cat-mask grew larger and took up more space in her head, until it seemed as if the golden cat was something else - something more powerful than the space could contain. Kathrin blinked as the cat became her lion, dancing over top of her, with no formed body, only a floating head of ribbon and hair, and
the huge eyes of a beast. She looked up. The beast moved faster and faster, and the lights blinked and twitched as the far-off pounding of a drum got louder, drew nearer, began tapping into the sides of her brain, and worked its power up through her body, until she felt it might explode in a million golden particles across the backdrop of her eyes.

She opened her eyes suddenly, and flung them across the room. They catapulted off the bed, over the dust infested floor, in through the open door of the closet, in and around the sleeves and necks of assorted fabrics, out through the vent, around the bookcase filled with multi-coloured hard covers, and over to the bedside table. When they had completed their tour, and itemized the details right down to the spidery crack in the plaster, they popped back into their sockets and filled out a report to the brain.

“You were correct sir,” the left eye barked in military style, “we are in unfamiliar territory.”

The right eye came forward. “Sir, the geographical location we have assumed is alien to this platoon.”

The brain nodded slowly, keeping his poker face intact. Both eyes searched the wrinkled, puckered pate, only slightly reassured by the stoic countenance of their leader. Finally the left eye inched closer, and dared to issue the question all three were thinking. “How did we get here?”

The brain threw a stern look at his corporal. “Soldier, we don’t ask questions. We perform our services, we do our duty on a need to know basis. We do not ask, we do not question higher authority. Is that clear?”

The eyes straightened up. “Yessir!”

There was a long and painful silence, broken by a weak cough sent forth from the right eye. “Sir,” he asked meekly, “what now?”

The brain felt a rushing inside of him. Under normal circumstances he would not tolerate these obvious attempts to challenge his authority. He resigned himself to thinking, ‘desperate times call for desperate measures’. The brain pulsed forward towards his team.

“Now men,” he paused awkwardly and worked up the courage to speak his next words, “we get the Hell out!”

Kathrin jolted upright, clutching the bed sheet to her bare breasts as a sudden tear, a painful ripping vibrated through the lining of her stomach. Beside her, the unidentified enemy huffed once, then fell back into a regular pattern of breathing. The realization of where she was, or
more precisely, of not knowing where she was, pinned her frozen, erect under the sheet. Her imagination disfigured and disassembled her bed-mate, until she was lying beside a living corpse. She lay there, unable to move or confront the image postulated in her head. Slowly, she realized sadly that she had no choice but to face whatever she created. She turned her head hesitantly toward the body and began tracing a path up from the feet. He lay conveniently on his front, his head facing away from her and slightly obscured by the pillow. His body was long, six feet she guessed, and covered with fine blond hair. His smooth buttocks lay unconcealed, turned slightly to face her. For a brief moment she thought about reaching her hand over and gently cupping a soft cheek between her fingers. The thought of her pale hand print upon his paler skin stopped her. She didn’t want to wake the sleeping beast beside her; at least, not until she knew what she was up against.

On the bed his back spread out fan-like from his tapered waist, and small freckles dotted the scallops of his shoulders. She tried to determine his name from the shapes and letters the muscles in his body formed, but he remained a mystery to her. She closed her eyes and attempted to recapture the evening. A heavy throb in her temples and neck clouded her memory. She put her hand to her head and squeezed to relieve the pressure.

*Shit Kathrin,* she thought, *how did this happen?*

How did she wake up next to a stranger she had never seen before? Or didn’t remember seeing? She looked around the room. The furniture gave her hope. At least he had decent taste.

*Nice thought,* she muttered to herself, *you get picked up by a stranger, spend a drunken night together, and wake up to find consolation in the fact that he has some taste. You don’t think about AIDS or warts, or that you might be kidnapped or with a married man, but that he has two fairly nice prints on the wall. Pathetic.*

She felt secure that she wasn’t pregnant. At least she hadn’t missed her pill, that was a relief. She swallowed a tiny blue pill every night at 7:00, give or take a couple of times she’d found herself away from home, or missing the spare package she usually carried in her purse. Then again, she wasn’t even sure what had transpired. For all she knew, under those scoops of ass he might be a Ken doll. Anatomically correct only from the waist up.

She slowly put her right hand down under the sheet, and quickly tucked her index finger inside. Her vagina was wet, but void of the thick runny after-sex she remembered from her last serious relationship. Funny how women viewed the act of coming inside as a privileged occurrence. She had done it herself. Only after passing the various pre-coital trials could a man
ejaculate inside her. As passion mounted on those fateful evenings, and he was on the verge of pulling out, she would finally whisper “No, I want you to come inside of me.” She liked how her voice whispered huskily into his ear. Once, her boyfriend had jumped clear off the bed, and stared at her, his member going limp.

“What?” she had asked, confused.

“Kathrin, did you just ask me to do what I thought you said?”

“Yes.”

He swallowed nervously. “I…um…well that’s not really my thing.”

She rolled onto her stomach, and rubbed herself seductively over the bed. “What’s wrong with it? I’m safe.”

He approached the bed slowly. “I think it’s really gross, actually.”

“Coming inside of me?” she asked.

He stopped moving. Suddenly his face lit up. “Did you say ‘inside of me’?”

“Yes. What did you think I said?”

He laughed. “Well, you said it so fast, I thought…”

Kathrin, who had been silently repeating the words over and over again, suddenly covered her mouth with horror. “Oh my God! Right up the…” she whispered, feeling a sudden urge to vomit.

He giggled. “That’s what I thought.”

After that occasion she made sure she was heard correctly. She’d say it with such force and venom that he wouldn’t last but another few strokes inside her.

She had often imagined the sperm high-fiving each other, squealing jubilantly. And then they’d begin the swim, only to die in their struggle, mutilated by an invisible barrier of estrogen. It was a laugh thinking about the battle raging inside her, already knowing the outcome. The come’s outcome. Poor little sperm didn’t stand a chance.

But the stranger’s sperm was not fighting inside. She pulled her finger out and brought it to her nose, trying to confirm his denied entry by smell. A smear of blood on her finger surprised her.

Oh shit, she thought, sliding from the bed. She threw the sheet back. There was no blood on the bed, but she stepped away instinctively. The white sheets comforted her. She realized with relief she must have gotten her period a few days early.
She searched the floor below her. Her underwear, a totally inappropriate black thong, lay twisted in her nylons by her boots. She scooped up the nylons, and shook them to remove the clumps of dust and hair that littered the lace of her thong. *Furniture, three points. Floor dust, minus ten*. She found her skirt, and carrying all three garments walked quickly to the door. Intuitively, she turned right. The bathroom door was open and the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling lit up the room.

She stepped into the bathroom and moved to the toilet. She looked into the pool of water, as if to catch a inverted narcissistic view of herself, and found the definitive answer to her question. There, floating in the centre of the bowl, was a bloated condom.

*Death by drowning.*

The fluid inside her responded to the water, and began a quick descent down her inner thighs. She shuffled to the toilet, trying to suck it back up, or at least keep it from running down her legs. She flipped the toilet seat down and sat on the cold plastic, spreading her legs and looking down into the bowl. A gelatinous glob of blood and plasma clung to her body, then slowly stretched itself into a long strand of sanguine ribbon. Smaller beads of clear fluid ran over the thicker pulp. She watched as the strand gave way and fell with a smack into the water. She clenched her stomach and contracted the muscles, trying to expel the rest of the clumpy mess. Smiling slightly, she thought about the market for a “menstrual vacuum”. Something she and Carol had decided should be on every woman’s Christmas list. It was simple really. A long thin tube was inserted into the vagina, and it gently sucked out the blood. It was all over in twenty minutes. Why didn’t scientists invent something really useful like that, they had often wondered. Instead of wasting millions of dollars on arms. Most wars were initiated by women with cramps anyway.

A sudden spasm of pain rushed through her gut. Again she felt the sensation of flesh ripping, and her body doubled over as yet another wave tore through her. She felt like someone had cut her open from the inside. She turned her eyes to the ceiling. *Oh God, please tell me I didn’t do anything really kinky!*

When she looked back into the bowl, the water had taken on a rosy hue. She recognized the colour and associated the pain and the blood. The blood that always began to fall in watery drips, then slowly fanned out into a larger, paler rings, across the surface of the toilet water. *It must have hit last night. I was just too blotto to know.* Usually it took a day to develop. By late
afternoon, there were huge gobs of blood: crimson, coagulated and ripe, landing heavily on the water and sinking straight down to the bottom of the bowl.

It suddenly dawned on her that she was ill-prepared for the event in any case. She wedged a mound of toilet paper between her thighs, and clamped her legs tightly together as she shimmed over to the sink. She opened the cabinet door quietly, but found nothing inside. No feminine hygiene products anyway. She didn’t know whether to feel relieved or distressed.

What now?

She couldn’t go out and ask him. Ask him what? If he kept personal products on hand in case a one-night stand happened to arrive with a visitor, or if he wouldn’t mind going to the store for her? She had to think fast as she could feel her labia losing grip on the toilet paper.

She slipped her underwear on, only up to her knees. Then she pulled at the toilet paper holder, and loosened a long band of tissue from the roll. Slowly, she wound the paper around the crotch of her underwear, until it was bloated and puffy. It reminded her of a large cocoon wrapped around a thin reed. Or cotton candy on a stick. She pulled the thong all the way up, and with a deft motion, tucked the toilet paper in between her thighs and contained herself.

She put on her nylons and pulled them up over her hips, then slipped on her skirt and gently pulled the zipper up. After doing up the clasp, she approached the mirror to determine if her skirt was long enough. She stood half dressed in front of the glass and slowly bent over to examine the curve of her skirt. It was just long enough to conceal her swelling underwear. She made a few minor adjustments and then looked up.

The mirror confirmed the reflections in the toilet. Her make-up had slipped over her eyes and regrouped, caking and crusty, in the corners. Deep streaks of charcoal rimmed her sockets, accentuating the blood infested eyeballs. She quickly grabbed a tissue, ran it under the sink and dabbed the pulpy mash of fibre into the cake of soap. Washed the streaks away, relieved when her face lost its hellish demeanor. She ran her fingers through her hair, catching her ring in a tangle, then working delicately to pluck the jade stone from her blond curls. Once her hand was free from the grasp of hair, she glanced down at her uncovered chest. Ducking her head quickly towards her armpit she inhaled. She reeked: a combination of body odour, and smoke and alcohol. Her eyes darted to the bathtub, and immediately rejected the idea of taking a shower. The bottom half of the tub was covered in a film of dirt. The thought of taking a shower in an unnamed man’s apartment, left even her ancient bathtub and slow dripping nozzle to be desired.

She turned back to the mirror. “You are an idiot.”
Maybe if she was really lucky, some time during the night she had lost her identity - had become someone else.

She moved slowly back through the bedroom door. The rest of her clothing was littered on the floor and she stooped to gather each article. She grimaced when she picked up her silver top.

Perfect. Leave it to her to wear the worst possible outfit for the trip home. Where the hell was her coat, anyway? She pulled her bra on, hooked it up, then shoved her arms and head into the top. It reeked like smoke.

In university she and her roommates had referred to the embarrassed shuffle home as "the walk of shame". Embarrassed was the best word for it. Or "I'm bare-assed", which seemed more appropriate. Which is exactly how they imagined those girls, walking home alone from some slimy guy's place in the early morning. Only after he didn't ask her if she wanted coffee, or breakfast, or a ride home in his car. Kathrin and her roommates had managed to escape the dreaded "walk", mostly because the guys had usually come back to their place. After the initial wake-up period, it was always easier to say, "I have a lot of work to do." Most of the guys got the hint. Plus the fact, Alison and Steph had met their boyfriends early on in their university careers. Carol was at school solely to study, and Kathrin spent most of her time unwittingly alienating any man/boy who was interested in her.

So they had all managed to make it out of school relatively unscathed; therefore, they were in their rights to laugh at the poor, stupid girls who got sucked in and spat out.

"If only." Carol had commented on various occasions, "they realized that they had the power to make the call."

Kathrin had known what she was talking about. How, really, when it came down to it, women were the ones in control. They had the choice. Men only waited until they felt they were in the clear. Then they pounced.

Obviously then, Kathrin had somehow invited the stranger in the bed, to hit on her. She couldn't remember anything. She couldn't even remember meeting him. Oh God, it's just like out of Automatic Pilot, where the woman wakes up to a really young man sitting on the edge of the bed. She believes she's slept with him, only to find out later, that she really went home with his brother. The younger sibling naturally never let on.

She looked over at the sleeping figure again. He didn't even look vaguely familiar. A growing fear clamped onto her gut. It was scary enough that she was in his apartment, but the real fear hit when she realized that she had lost control of herself. After all her promises. What do I do
now? The easiest thing was to make a dart for the door. She grabbed her boots. Where is my purse? She couldn't go anywhere without her money and keys. She scanned the room quickly. No purse. The living room. She bolted quietly for the hallway.

Her purse and coat were on the table. She grabbed them, and then began moving silently to the door of what she finally gathered was an apartment. Taking a quick second, she scanned the room. It was nice. Big and masculine. What a waste! Well, maybe next time... "Kathrin."

Her lips clenched. Too late to make a run for it. She took a tentative step back to the bedroom doorway. "Yeah?"

She poked her head around the corner to find a fairly attractive man looking at her. He looked down at her purse and coat. "Are you leaving?"

"Yeah, well, I thought... I mean, I really have to go. We're having brunch."

"You and Carol?"

Kathrin let out a nervous laugh. He met them. "Yeah. It's an annual tradition."

The blond looked at his watch. "At eight-thirty?"

"I have to change and take a shower."

The blond swung his naked leg out of bed. "Wait. I'll drive you."

Kathrin took a step forward. "No, it's O.K. You can just call me a cab."

"No." he said, getting up and exposing his body. "I want to."

"No, really. I'm fine."

He reached over to his dresser and pulled out a pair of boxers. Kathrin shut her eyes.  

This is not happening. This is not happening. She felt like she was going to faint. She could feel the blood trickling into the toilet paper. "Listen." she said quickly. "I'd really like some time alone. I don't mind taking a cab."

The blond approached her and put his arm on her shoulder. "Kathrin, I don't want you to feel like what happened last night didn't mean anything. Just let me drive you."

"No!" Kathrin ordered.

He looked at her with bewilderment. "O.K., I'll call you a cab."

He grabbed the portable phone and started dialing. When he received an answer he gave his address. Kathrin nearly choked. She was on the other side of town. It was a disaster.

"Thanks," she said when he had hung up.

"No problem. Are you O.K.?"

"Yeah." she responded automatically. "I gotta go."
He frowned. “Can I call you?”

Kathrin looked at him. He seemed like a really nice guy, and he was attractive. Suddenly, visions of “Automatic Pilot” danced in her head. Of the brother and the younger brother, and how wrong everything went after she stayed. How she became something so terribly right, it turned sour. “No.”

“Why not?” he asked tentatively.

“Because,” she said, moving to the door, “you have no idea who I am.”

She slipped out the door, and headed for the elevator, hoping that he wouldn’t come out of the apartment after her. When the elevator arrived, she pressed the Lobby button at least three times, and watched the door close behind her. Then she brought her hand to her head, and rocked back and forth against the mirrored walls. How could she explain to some guy that whatever he had met wasn’t her? It was better to forget about it. Besides, she had more important things on her mind.

She said nothing the whole ride home. By the time she got out of the cab, it was after nine. Of course she had no brunch to go to. He probably knew it. She made her way up the stairs and let herself into the apartment. The first thing to do was remove the mound of toilet paper from her body. She ran to the bathroom, and pulled off her coat. She dropped it onto the floor, and was about to undo her skirt, when she looked down. The inside of her coat was covered in blood. Kathrin pulled her skirt off frantically. The entire back of her skirt was bloody. Then she yanked down her nylons, and pulled at her thong. The thong and toilet paper fell with a heavy thud onto the tiles. Everything was drenched in blood. Kathrin breathed heavily, and looked around her in utter disbelief. She had never seen so much blood. She ran to the closet and pulled out the biggest pad she could find, then grabbed some underwear from her bedroom dresser and ran back into the bathroom. She pulled on the underwear, and stuck the pad onto the crotch. Her legs were smeared with blood. Frantically, she pulled the washcloth from its rod, ran it under some water, then wiped her legs. She couldn’t understand it. What if the guy had knifed her or something. She couldn’t remember anything happening after she sat down on the couch. Should she call an ambulance? No, it was just that she had started bleeding faster than usual. She’d wait.

She picked up her nylons and began tearing the wet paper from the fabric. Once all the toilet paper was removed, she shoved the nylons, thong and skirt into the sink, and filled the basin with cold water. She took the washcloth to her coat, and managed to get most of the blood out. I
look like a stabbing victim, she thought. Then the horror of the though chilled her. What's happening?

She sat down on the toilet seat, and tried to pee. As the urine washed down, the same burning sensation hit her full-force. She waited until the pain subsided then looked down into the toilet bowl. There was some blood, but the flow seemed to be lessening. Even the pad seemed less blood-soaked. Relax. It was just a sudden rush, that's all. Don't freak out. She dried herself and pulled her underwear back up. She was too tense to sleep. Instead, she carried an old blanket out to the living room and curled up on the couch. There was no pain in her stomach, so she relaxed a little. She grabbed the clicker, and turned on the television. The newest version of "Little Women" was playing, so she concentrated on watching the movie. My periods are never like this. She closed her eyes. Deep, deep down in her bones, she knew that something was terribly wrong.
On Sunday morning, after the intense bleeding had lessened for over twelve hours, Kathrin felt better. She decided to take it easy, and tidy the apartment. The dishes from Friday night were still littered on the kitchen counter. The caterers would be by to pick them up Monday morning. She placed each plate into the boxes provided, along with the cutlery and other china pieces. It was much easier than washing all the plates by hand. When the boxes were filled, she gently lifted and carried them to the back door. It wasn’t too cold outside, so she placed the boxes by the steps as she had agreed to do for the caterers. The gust of fresh air made her feel better.

After she had completed the kitchen clean-up, she finished the rest of the apartment, moving slowly and carefully, so as not to disturb her uterus. She spent the rest of the afternoon organizing her computer folders, until every file was in its proper place. Then she made herself a simple dinner consisting of grilled cheese and tomato soup. Her mother’s cure-all. By nine o’clock she was worn out. She crawled into bed and cracked the spine of her newest book. By the third page she was asleep.

She woke up in the middle of the night with a strong urge to pee. All the lights were off so she groped her way to the bathroom. Her hands missed the switch in the bathroom, but an outdoor light shone into the room. She stumbled over to the toilet and pulled up her nightie. It felt somehow heavier than what she was used to and she looked down to find that once again she was covered in blood, the liquid taking on a dark hue in the unlit room. Her legs were soaked and a cold sweat moved up the base of her spine. All day she had felt better, but suddenly a wave of nausea washed over her. She put her hands under the running tap and rinsed her face. “Calm down. Just think.”

She didn’t know what to do. Her mother would be frantic if she called her. Her sisters would be no better. Finally she realized that she should call her doctor. She flung off her nightie and dropped it into the bathtub. Then she cleaned herself, and pulled the sticky underwear from her hips. The pad was soaked. She went to her room and pulled a fresh pair of underwear from the drawer. By the time she got back to the bathroom a thin stream of blood had stained her right inner thigh. She wiped the blood away and pulled on the underwear, then placed two pads into the underwear and wrapped them in toilet paper. Calmer once the underwear was in place, she went almost naked to the kitchen and turned on the light. Her phone book was lying open on the kitchen table, and she flipped through the pages until she found her doctor’s office number. She picked up the phone and hands shaking, pressed the numbers on the phone pad. The machine picked up on the third ring. “You have reached the offices of Dr. Wong and Dr. Cavanaugh. Please leave a
message and someone will get back to you on the next working day. If this is a medical emergency, please dial 9-1-1. Thank you and happy holidays.”

Kathrin hung up the phone. How did she know if it was a medical emergency? There was no way she was calling an ambulance, no matter what. She hated hospitals. She reached her hand down over her stomach and gently squeezed her abdomen. It was pink and hot. She would go back to bed, and then call Dr. Cavanaugh as soon as the office opened in the morning. She flicked off the light and went into her bedroom, still touching her tummy. Her hand found the light switch and for a brief moment the light blinded her. One glance at her bed sent her into near hysteric. The top sheet was covered in a pool of blood almost the size of a stew pot. She ripped the sheet off and found that the liner too was soaked. The mattress underneath was covered with a spreading patch of blood. Kathrin pulled the two sheets off and hobbled to the bathroom. She dumped them into the bathtub and ran the water on cold. Then she grabbed a wash cloth, dipped it into the tub and rushed back to the bedroom.

As she dabbed at the stain on the mattress, the patch spread, but faded until only a watery smear was visible. Kathrin dabbed the cloth one last time onto the mattress and then returned to the bathroom. She couldn’t deal with taking care of the sheets, so she turned the tap and left them to soak. Then she went to the hall closet and pulled out some old sheets and a ragged quilt. She carried them to the bedroom, and lay the towels over the watermark. Her flannel pyjama bottoms pulled up over the mound of cotton around her hips, and she fought her way into the top, without undoing the buttons. Then she wrapped her bathrobe around her and lay down on the towels, pulling the quilt over her body and tucked it under her chin.

She rocked back and forth on her bed for some time, her hands gently resting on her stomach. She couldn’t feel any blood moving through her body, and breathed slowly, as if trying to hear the slow flow pulse through her abdomen. It was only after what seemed like hours that she drifted off to sleep, still clutching her body, with the light still on.

When she woke at 8:00, she could feel the flow beginning to move again, and hopped out of bed to make it to the bathroom before it gushed forth. She hit the toilet just in time to find a torrent of blood fall from her body. It was pure liquid. After a few moments the bleeding slowed and she pulled her underwear back on. She moved slowly and carefully back to her room, and grabbed the phone. She pressed re-dial, and after a moment was connected to the secretary.

“I need to speak to Dr. Cavanaugh. It’s important.”

“May I ask what it’s in regard to?” came the nasal response.
“I’m hemorrhaging, I think.”

“Are you a patient?”

Kathrin rolled her eyes. “Yes. Kathrin Connelly.”

“One moment, I’ll see if she’s available.”

Kathrin was left with musak for some time, then a brief click and then silence.

“Kathrin?”

“Dr. Cavanaugh.”

“What’s wrong?” Dr. Cavanaugh asked in her slow, soothing voice.

“I don’t know. I started bleeding on Saturday morning, and I’m still bleeding.”

“Straight through?”

“Well, I spotted all of Saturday, but none on Sunday, until 3:00 last night. And then again this morning.”

Dr. Cavanaugh remained silent, and Kathrin heard the click of a pen in the background.

“Is it your period?”

“I don’t think so. I’m not supposed to get it until Friday. And this is ten times more blood than I’ve ever seen.”

“Is the blood clumpy?”

“It was at first, but now it’s all fluid.”

“O.K. How bad is it at this moment?”

“Not too bad.”

“Can you get yourself to the hospital?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“All right. I’ll call and let them know you’re coming. Go to emergency at Toronto General, and they should have the forms and everything set up for you.”

Kathrin swallowed. “Do you think it’s serious?”

“I don’t know. But if you’re bleeding, it wouldn’t do you any good to come here. How are you feeling?”

“I’m O.K. Just a little light headed, but I can drive.”

“Good. I’ll be in touch.”

“Thank you.”

Kathrin hung up the phone. She didn’t know whether to feel relieved or scared. She pulled off her pyjamas and quickly exchanged them for a sweater and overalls. Then she washed
her face, brushed her teeth, combed her hair, and packed a few toiletries into her purse, just in case. She picked up the phone again and called her office. The voice mail was still on, so she left a message for the secretary. “Jane, it’s Kathrin. Something’s come up, so I won’t make it in until this afternoon, or maybe tomorrow. Tell Richardson I’ll give him a call later. Thanks.”

At least if the Much show had gone badly, she wouldn’t have to face the music. She got her long coat from the closet, and left the apartment.

She walked down the empty corridor, listening to her boots echo on the marble floor. The walls were painted a muted shade of blue and stretched down the length of hallway for what seemed like miles. Kathrin felt as if she was being propelled through a dream to the end of a tunnel. As if she would arrive at some bright light and find she was dead. She could no longer hear the stamp of her heels as she approached the double doors. Instead, she listened to the hum of the hospital’s insides. The buzz of far-off pipes and lights pressed in on her from all sides - like a noiseless energy. Finally she pushed one of the doors open, and the crack of the metal bar spurred sound back to life. She heard music piped in over some speakers far above her, and looked up as the door slammed shut. She found herself in a huge cathedral-like room. The ceiling was at least thirty feet high and covered with surreal pictures of angels, pieced together in gold, blue and red mosaic tiles. The angels pacified her. In their fragmentation they seemed to hang everywhere, and tilt and spread their wings over her. Above them, near the top of the curved dome of ceiling, several small windows allowed thin bands of light to unfurl over the angels and stream down the walls until they landed in pools on the floor.

She approached the desk cautiously. A small woman with glasses looked up. “Can I help you?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m Kathrin Connelly. My doctor called.”

“Oh yes,” she pulled a clipboard from the desk, “I have to ask you to fill this out. Do you have a card?”

Kathrin pulled her purse onto the desk. She rummaged through the contents, until she found her wallet. Quickly she scanned the card holder slots until she found the pale blue card. “Here.”

The nurse took the card from her hand and ran it through some sort of machine. When she was done, she handed the card back to Kathrin. “Go around the corner to the next waiting room. Fill out the forms and give them to the nurse there.”
“Thank you.”

Kathrin moved towards the hallway the nurse had pointed to, once again aware of how loud her boots were. She turned the corner and found a smaller waiting room, where two other women were already seated. She sat away from the two women and filled out her form. Most of it was regulation questions - address, phone numbers, etc. She finished the form and approached the desk. The nurse read something off the form and typed it into the computer. “O. K. Kathrin, you’ll be seeing Dr. Smith first. Come this way.”

The nurse led her into what seemed to be a normal examination room. Kathrin frowned. The nurse smiled. “He’s got to figure out what’s wrong with you before we can proceed. Are you bleeding now?”

“I don’t feel like I am.”

“Good. Well, if you feel anything, there’s a bathroom on the left from this room. Dr. Smith will be here in a minute. Please change into the dressing gown on the table.”

The nurse shut the door after her. Kathrin glanced around the room. She didn’t even know where she was in the hospital, but the diagrams neatly labeled and pasted onto the wall seemed to indicate she was somewhere in gynecology. Somewhere in the vicinity of ovaries and fallopian tubes which took on three dimensional proportions on the shelves. She eyed the plastic replicas, which seemed too festive and tacky to be in a hospital. She took her coat off, and slowly undressed. Once she had fastened the thin white ties she pulled herself up onto the table and sat with her legs swinging over the floor. There was a timid knock at the door, then a relatively young doctor in a lab coat entered. He held out his hand. “Hi Kathrin, I’m Dr. Smith. I’m a very good friend and colleague of Dr. Cavanaugh, and I talked to her earlier this morning. I want you to know that you don’t need to worry. We’ll take care of anything that’s wrong. Just tell me what’s been going on.”

Kathrin related the events of the weekend, without mentioning where the bleeding had started. He hadn’t specifically asked her anyway. Once she was done, he asked her to lie down on the table. She did so, and he quickly placed his hands on her stomach. “Tell me if it hurts.”

Gently his hands pressed into her belly, kneading every section of her stomach, then moving down to her abdomen. His hands pushed and prodded her kindly and she felt no pain, until he pushed his fingers near her pelvic bone. She gasped quietly. “Is that where it hurts?”

She started to answer yes, but the sudden realization that she had started to bleed again stopped her. “I’m bleeding.”
His hands rested on her abdomen. “Did it start when I pushed there?”

“Yes.”

“Badly?”

“Not yet.”

“O. K. Bear with me here.”

His hands continued to roam lower on her abdomen and then over to the other side of her belly. Finally, he lifted his hands from her front, and dashed a few notes onto his clipboard.

“Well,” he said finally, “it’s a little bit swollen down there. I’m going to do an internal. It might hurt a little. O. K.?”

Kathrin nodded.

He pulled some rubber gloves off the counter, and pulled them onto his hands, letting each one snap over his wrist. “O. K. I need you to remove your undergarments.”

Kathrin grimaced. He smiled gently. “Don’t worry, I’ve done this a thousand times. Nothing makes me uncomfortable. I don’t want you to be either.”

Kathrin sat up and pulled her underwear off, trying not to look at the blood, and then folded the garment in half and placed it on the chair. She lay back down on the table. Slowly Dr. Smith put his hand on her leg. “All right, I need you to place this leg into the stirrup, and the other one into the other stirrup.”

Kathrin moved her legs tentatively. Calmly, Dr. Smith moved in closer to the table. He pulled one gloved hand down and carefully moved inside of Kathrin. He pressed the interior wall, and Kathrin gasped again as the blood edged forward. After about thirty seconds Dr. Smith removed his hand, the glove covered in blood. He took off the gloves and deposited them into the garbage. “O. K. Kathrin. I don’t feel anything abnormal down there, but I can’t determine that much while you’re bleeding. We’re going to have to put a tiny camera up there to see exactly where the blood is coming from and then try to stop the bleeding.”

Kathrin looked up. “How?”

“We’ll have to cauterize.”

Kathrin swallowed. “Like, burn me?”

Dr. Smith smiled. “It’s not as bad as that. You won’t even feel it.”

The cauterization proved successful, but it was only the tip of the iceberg. A couple of hours after that, Kathrin was required to rinse the blood from her vagina with some type of douche,
and wait until the doctors felt secure about treating her any further. Hours later a nurse entered the room and inserted a foot-long swab inside Kathrin. By 3:30, Kathrin was exhausted, and sighed with relief when the nurse called her into what she assumed was the last waiting room. This time Dr. Smith entered with another woman. He introduced the woman as Dr. Ernstin, and both of them sat down with Kathrin.

“What we have to do now is wait, Kathrin. We want to make sure the bleeding doesn’t start again, but we also want to see you before your period. The cells have been sent to the lab, and we’d like to do some ultrasounds on you. Dr. Ernstin is one of our best gynecologists here, and she’d like you to come back tomorrow. Is that possible?”

Kathrin nodded. “Yes, we just finished a project at work, so things won’t get busy until next week.”

“Good. Well then... I’ve set up an appointment for 9:30 tomorrow for an ultrasound. You’ll need to have consumed at least four glasses of fluid at least two hours before the appointment. O. K.?”

Kathrin nodded again. “Can I ask what you think so far?”

Dr. Ernstin turned to her. “The bleeding has stopped, so that’s a good sign. The problem is that the bleeding is coming from the inside wall of the cervix, so it’s harder to treat, but I don’t think we’re looking at anything too out of the ordinary. I don’t think you’ll have to go to oncology.”

Kathrin looked at her blankly. “What?”

“Sorry. I mean that I don’t think it’s cancerous.”

Kathrin sighed. “Thank God.”

Dr. Smith extended his hand. “I probably won’t see you again, but Dr. Ernstin will be here tomorrow. Don’t worry about it. Go home, have a nice relaxing evening, and take those Tylenols I gave you. You may not feel like taking them, but your body has undergone some serious trauma today.”

Kathrin stood up. “Thank you.”

She chugged four glasses of water forty-five minutes before she left the apartment, and within ten minutes felt, first like she was going to be sick, and second like she was going to piss all over the chair in the kitchen. She called work at 9:00, and Jane answered promptly. “Hi Kath,” she responded when Kathrin spoke.
"I won't be in today."

"Again? Are you all right?"

Kathrin coughed. "My mom isn't feeling well, so I thought that I'd watch her for a couple of days. Richardson blow a fuse yesterday?"

Jane laughed. "Are you kidding? You should see the huge bouquet MuchMusic sent you. They love us. If you get a chance come by and pick it up."

Kathrin smiled. "Sounds good, maybe I will."

"O.K. I hope your mom is feeling better."

"Thanks."

She fought the urge to visit the bathroom, and grabbed her coat. She didn't think she'd make it to the hospital without wetting her pants. At least urine didn't stain.

When she arrived at the hospital she wandered through the corridors until she found the ultrasound area. After checking in at the desk she was ushered into a room and asked to change into another gown. She groaned and heaved off her thick wool sweater. She assumed a weary mask, like she had seen it all, had had everything done to her already. The nurse laughed. "You don't look too happy to be here."

Kathrin smiled feebly. "Can I pee yet?"

The nurse chuckled and adjusted the monitor. "Won't be long."

Once all the instruments were in place the nurse lifted up the gown and smeared Kathrin's belly with a thick gel. Kathrin was surprised by the temperature of the gel. She looked over and saw that the tube was placed into a warmer. She smiled. She needed one of those for her skin lotion. The nurse turned a knob and then faced Kathrin. "Have you ever had an ultrasound?"

Kathrin shook her head. The nurse turned the machine towards Kathrin. "Watch the screen. It'll give you an indication of what your insides look like. In black and white, of course."

Kathrin kept her eyes on the screen as the nurse moved something over her body, pressing down in some areas, and then hitting a key on the keyboard. "Taking pictures," she explained.

Kathrin watched the screen. The image on the monitor was hazy, and she had no idea of what she was looking at. But the nurse scrutinized the view from every angle, in depth. Kathrin felt like her belly was a lake and the nurse was using a sonar to fish. Finally, after several taps on the keyboard the nurse removed her hand from Kathrin's belly, and began wiping the sticky goo off. She threw the paper towels into the garbage and pressed an intercom button on the wall.

"Please send Dr. Ernst in to Ultrasound room 18". Kathrin sat up as the nurse ducked out of the
room. She wiped some excess goop off her belly with her fingers and rubbed them down the side of her gown. The nurse returned to the room. "Kathrin, in order to do the next ultrasound, we need you to empty your bladder."

Kathrin groaned, and eased herself up off the bed. They're so damned fickle - first they want you to pump your bladder to full capacity and endure the most painful two hours of your life, then they demand that you rid yourself of the water in less than two seconds.

"What is next?"
"Trans-vag.," the nurse said perfunctorily.
"Trans what?"
"Trans-vaginal. It's an interior ultrasound."
"Oh."

Kathrin swung her legs over the bed, and then hobbled to the bathroom. When she got into the tiny room, and pulled a sanitary wrap to cover the seat, she found that at first she couldn't urinate, even as she squeezed her muscles tightly. When she gave up, the flow started like a dam unleashed. The release was intense, and Kathrin nearly cried. It was better than any feeling she had ever experienced. For the first time she imagined what it would be like to reach orgasm. As the flood waned she felt cheated, and began to think about the next step in the process. Trans-vaginal. It sounded like a geographic term or a mode of transportation. Choo-choo! Next stop, your uterus! What the hell were they going to insert into her body? A silver bullet?

When she got back to the room, Dr. Ernstine was peering at her belly pictures. She turned and smiled at Kathrin. "Everything looks O. K. We're going to do a trans-vag. Just in case. Then we can meet in my office."

Kathrin hopped back up onto the table. The nurse helped her to lie down, and then pulled a huge white instrument off the counter. She quickly covered it with some kind of condom and some more gel. Kathrin stared in awe. It seemed to be a huge dildo. The nurse caught her glance and patted her arm. "Don't worry. It might feel a bit uncomfortable, but it's not bad. Have you had intercourse?"

Kathrin nodded dumbly.

"Then you'll be fine," the nurse reassured her.

Somehow Kathrin wasn't pacified. The nurse inserted the instrument into Kathrin's vagina, and gently poked it into her body from various angles. It exerted pressure, but wasn't as painful as Kathrin had anticipated. All three women watched the screen intensely. Several times
Dr. Ernstin pointed to the screen or asked the nurse to go back over a previously covered area. Kathrin grew more tense with every pause, expecting that at any moment Dr. Ernstin would turn and sadly shake her head, condemning Kathrin to a slow and painful death. Kathrin turned her head away from the screen. From her position on the examining table she was only a few inches from the wall. Her fingers traced the small, porous bumps where the paint had attached itself to the drywall. She peered closer, until the wall was a screen of gray tones, protrusions and shadows floating lazily before her eyes. She saw pieces of bitmap, reflections of shades, but no clear picture. And still, it always seemed to her that when she got close enough to anything and saw it from only inches away it all made sense. She enjoyed nothing more than viewing her computer images with a 400% zoom. Everything was so microscopic, and so simple because it was reduced to the smallest essence. She wondered if the nurse and doctor felt the same, going over every centimetre of her cervix, finding the smallest bit to contain the true essence of her problem. To isolate disease in one square inch of her body. Maybe then, God did that. He looked down on the entire world at first, then focused and focused until he found the one element that was weak, or sick. Then he treated that element in the way he saw best. Or maybe, while he was looking, he accidentally hit the wrong key, or switched the files, so sometimes he made mistakes too. It happened all the time in hospitals, she was sure. That’s why so many people got second opinions. If only it were that simple. But she felt that surely she didn’t deserve whatever was happening to her. Surely, she hadn’t done anything to deserve it.

“Well,” the nurse said, pulling Kathrin from her thoughts, “we’re all done here.”

Dr. Ernstin smiled. “We’ll let you get dressed and then we’ll meet in my office, up on the third floor.”

Kathrin sat up. She could still feel the gel squishing through her vagina. Like someone had inserted a tub of vaseline inside her. “How does it look?” she asked Dr. Ernstin.

“It looks fine.”

Kathrin heaved a sigh of relief, and hopped off the table. After the other two women left, she dressed calmly. At least the worst was over. But she still had no idea what had happened. No doubt Dr. Ernstin would explain everything in simple terms to her.

The head secretary on the third floor walked her to Dr. Ernstin’s office. She tapped on the door, and then motioned for Kathrin to enter when the doctor responded. Kathrin slipped into the office, and moved to Dr. Ernstin’s desk. Dr. Ernstin gestured to a comfortable armchair beside the desk. Kathrin folded her coat over the chair and then sat. She held her purse on her lap,
and crossed her hands. She felt like she was a student waiting for a grade. Dr. Ernstien shuffled some papers and cleared off her desk. Then she opened Kathrin's medical file and searched through some sheets. Eventually she found the one she was looking for and placed it on top of the other papers. She adjusted her position behind the desk and cleared her throat. Kathrin waited with a growing fear lodging itself in her gut and pushing up towards her rib-cage. Finally the doctor looked up. "O.K., Kathrin, there are a couple of things I want to talk to you about, but first I want to let you know that as of this moment there are no life-threatening problems."

Kathrin frowned. "But there is something?"

"Yes, there is something."

"What?"

"Well, the ultrasounds revealed that there is a lot of swelling around your cervix. Some of it no doubt is from the cauterization. We're not too concerned about that now, because there is no abnormal cell growth, no evidence of cysts, or any type of cancerous or pre-cancerous tumors. However, the swabs we took yesterday indicate that there is evidence of bacterial infection in your vaginal and cervical areas."

Kathrin looked at her. "What does that mean?"

Dr. Ernstien shuffled the paper in front of her. "It means that you have gonorrhea."

Kathrin choked. The clap? Surely the doctor was wrong. "How is that possible? I have protected sex!"

Dr. Ernstien placed her hands on the desk. "You can still contract the infection, no matter how careful you are. It's not a big deal if it's treated effectively and early. The thing that concerns me is that your case is very developed and the infection has spread quite far. My guess is that you've had it for anywhere between four months to a year."

Kathrin covered her mouth in horror. "But..."

"Sometimes it's very difficult to catch the symptoms in women. Most think that they have some other type of infection. Like bladder, or urinary tract. Have you noticed any symptoms while urinating?"

Kathrin nodded glumly. "Yeah, but only recently."

"What I suggest is oral antibiotics, which should take care of the problem. I just wish we had caught it sooner."

"Me too. But what about the bleeding?"
Dr. Ernstin pulled herself up from her chair and crossed to the window. "That's what I want to talk about. I need to figure out exactly why it started," Dr. Ernstin paused, "so I'm going to ask you a few questions. O.K."

Kathrin's heart started pounding. She knew what was going to happen next. Death. "O.K."

"When was the last time you had sex before the bleeding started?"

"The night before."

"Can you give me an estimation in hours?"

Kathrin calculated in her head. *I remember midnight. So maybe two or three in the morning, until eight. "About five hours."*

"That's probably what caused the blood. Often when STD's are left untreated they cause what we call friability - which means that the cervix bleeds easily. As your infection is fairly serious it's only a surprise it didn't happen earlier."

Kathrin pulled the strap of her purse through her fingers. "But it's treatable?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, that's a relief anyway."

"Yes. But unfortunately the complications have left you with something else."

Kathrin snapped her head towards the doctor. "What?"

"PID."

"What is that?"

"Pelvic Inflammatory Disease. That is why your body is so sore and swollen."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I can give you antibiotics to take, and if all goes well, you'll be fine. However, if the PID is complicated, we might have to do surgery. And it's not pretty, and it's very damaging."

"How damaging?"

"Let's put it this way: every time a woman gets another PID infection she reduces the chance of conceiving by 15%. I don't want to scare you, but it can be very serious. Luckily, I think we can deal with both problems at the same time, without having to go through surgery. But I may be wrong. And you should prepare yourself for the fact that you may have to have surgery."
Kathrin sucked at her cheeks. She didn’t feel anything at the news. It was too soon to feel. A million thoughts raced through her head, but none carried enough weight to land, and so flew off, only to be replaced by yet another feather of thought. Finally, she turned to the doctor.

“Do you have any reading material?”

Dr. Ernststein handed her a pre-bundled package of pamphlets from her desk. “Another thing. Kathrin: you should make sure you contact anyone you’ve had sexual contact with in the last year and let them know they should get tested. They’re probably not at risk, but it couldn’t hurt. Especially, make sure you contact the last partner, because of the bleeding.”

Kathrin leaned against the back of her chair, and lifted her face towards the ceiling. The doctor frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know him.”

Dr. Ernststein frowned. “Well surely you must have some way of…” she stopped, and was silent for a moment. “Was it consensual?”

“Yes. Of course. I just…”. she tried to find the right words to justify her actions.

Dr. Ernststein nodded sadly and leaned over to put her hand on Kathrin’s shoulder. “It’s all right. I didn’t mean for it to come out like that. Sometimes it happens. Just promise me you’ll be more careful from now on.”

“I will.”

“I’ll set up a follow-up appointment for three weeks. We’ll call you.”

“Thank you.” Kathrin stood up and put on her coat.

“And Kathrin,” the doctor said, as Kathrin was walking to the door. “no sexual intercourse until after the treatment. and I’ve seen you.”

Dr. Ernststein watched the door shut, and then leaned back in her chair. She shook her head slowly, and sighed. Women, she thought. can be so stupid sometimes.
Once she left the hospital, she went straight to her pharmacy. The pharmacist told her it would take at least a half hour to fill her prescription, so she decided to stop by work. She didn’t welcome the thought of going home to her empty apartment. Plus, the doctor didn’t say she wasn’t able to go to work. It would do her good to throw herself into something.

Jane wasn’t at the desk when Kathrin entered through the glass doors. Kathrin looked around, then decided that she didn’t want to be bothered anyway. She made her way around the office cubicles to her private office, as opposed to walking through the open concept area as she usually did. The interior blinds were drawn. She opened the door and stepped inside, then quickly shut the door quietly behind her. A huge bouquet of flowers took up most of the space on her desk. She approached the vase, and fished a card from the greenery, while trying to keep the long spikes of palm from poking her eyes out. Kathrin, thank you for all your help in making the end of the year so successful. We won’t forget you! MM. Kathrin smiled. At least she could do something right. She pulled off her coat and sat down at her desk. Once seated she pulled her phone over and dialed voice-mail. There were several messages of little importance, including one from Jamie demanding that she owed him a beer for their successful campaign, but he’d call it even because of the free tickets. And there was a message from Richardson, asking her to get in touch with him as soon a possible. Kathrin erased the messages, and after considering her options, decided to call Richardson. She dialed directly to his office extension, keeping her fingers crossed that he was out. He wasn’t.

"Kathrin! We were starting to worry about you and your mother. Where are you?"

Kathrin puckered her lips. "I’m in my office."

"Here? I’ll be right down!"

Kathrin hung up the phone, and flung a ball at the back board. She missed completely, and had to get up to avoid the ball smashing into her vase. As she scooped to pick up the errant ball, Richardson entered the office. He was a large man in his fifties, and wore his size like a light spring coat. Kathrin straightened up, and returned to her desk, offering Richardson a seat across from her. He sat down, and crossed legs. With a quick smile, he rubbed his hand over his bald head. It was a routine occurrence and Kathrin tried not to laugh.

"So," he began, "everything fine?"

"Yep."

"Jane tells me that your mother is ill. Nothing serious I hope."

"No. I’ll be back to work tomorrow."
“Good. Glad to here it, because we need you here. The phone’s been ringing off the hook since the New Year’s success. Everyone in the city wants you to work on their next campaign.”

“Really? That’s great.”

Richardson looked at her. “That’s all you can say? That’s great? I would think you would be more pleased than that.”

“Just a little tired.”

“Well, I guess that’s understandable. My Christmas really wore me out too. I don’t remember ever having as much energy as my grandkids have.”

Kathrin rested her hand on her head. Richardson continued speaking. “I tell you Kathrin, having kids is the hardest job on the planet. Don’t ever do it.”

“I won’t.”

He stopped talking and looked at her. “Are you sure everything’s fine?”

Kathrin lifted her head. “Yes, of course. I…”

She was cut off by a knock at the door. Jane peeked around the corner, looking distraught.

“Kathrin. I have some messages for you,” she said, then seeing Richardson added, “but I can give them to you later. I didn’t realize that you were busy.”

Kathrin looked at Jane impatiently. “No. Now’s fine. What is it?”

“Someone wants to interview you on television. Here’s the note.” She handed a piece of paper to Kathrin.

Kathrin glanced at the note. “Is that all?”

“Um…” she said, jerking her in Richardson’s direction.

“What?” Kathrin demanded.

“Well, your mother called. She wants you to call her after work. She’ll be back from playing bridge by 5:00.”

Kathrin brought her hand up to her mouth. Jane shut the door on her way out. Richardson remained silent. Finally Kathrin faced Richardson. He watched her intently. “Now, do you want to tell me what’s really bothering you?”

Kathrin shook her head. “Just some personal problems. Nothing to worry about. I’m fine.”

Richardson got up from his chair, and moved around the desk. “Kathrin, I hired you because you are a talented young woman, and I felt that we could work well together. But I also
hired you because I liked you, and I thought you were honest. I wanted to help you. But I can’t help you if you don’t let me.”

Kathrin stared at the vase. She refused to make eye contact with Richardson, for fear he might see her break down. And that was the one thing she had promised herself never to do in front of anyone - especially not a colleague. All the feelings that had been welling up inside of her since the bleeding began, were only barely under the surface and she fought hard to control them. She clenched her teeth tightly, until she could continue. “Jim,” she said while keeping her eyes on the flowers, “I’m fine. Really. I had to get some tests done at the hospital yesterday and today, but I’m fine.”

She looked up and met his eyes with determination. She held them captive with her rigid gaze. Slowly she nodded, and finally he backed off, nodding as well. “O. K. I want you to take the rest of the week off.”

“What? It was only a few tests!”

Richardson looked at her sternly. “I don’t care if it was an eye test. I’m not asking, I’m telling. That is my order to you. I don’t want to see you or hear from you until Monday. I want you to rest, relax, and maybe have a bit of fun. Understood?”

Kathrin placed both her hands on the edge of the desk, and began drumming rapidly. “This is unfucking believable!” she muttered.

“Understood?” he asked again, ignoring her comment.

“Fine!”

Richardson went to the door, and then turned back. “Kathrin,” he pleaded.

Kathrin continued drumming, peering at some invisible object on the desk.

“Kathrin! Look at me!”

Kathrin looked up. Her face was white and drawn. Richardson leaned against the door. “Don’t get mad at me. Please. I know you think you’re fine, but look at it like I’m protecting an investment. Please. I’m not doing this to hurt you.”

“Can I at least take some work with me?”

“No! You most certainly cannot! I can’t believe you can even ask me that. Is it that hard to forget about work for five days?”

“Yes.”

He sighed. “You know Kathrin, sometimes you scare me. You remind me of me when I was younger.”
He left the office.

"I know." Kathrin said as she lifted a daisy from the vase.

She twirled the daisy in her hand, and then placed it on the desk. One by one, she pulled the petals from the daisy, keeping the old chant up in her head. "I'll be fine. I'm going to die. I'll be fine. It'll get worse."

Once all of the petals were plucked and she concluded that she'd be fine, she left a message on her voice-mail letting anyone who was interested know that she was unavailable for the rest of the week. Not that there was anything really important scheduled. Thank God for that. At least she had the decency to get sick when it wouldn't matter if she was around or not. She picked up the vase and her coat, then placed the vase back down on her desk. She didn't want flowers at home, or she'd really feel like she was in the hospital. She turned off her lamp and left her office, tempted to sneak some files with her. Richardson would probably fire her for going behind his back. It was only five days. So why did she feel like she'd been given a prison sentence?

She stopped by the front desk on her way out. "Jane," she said, "I won't be back until Monday. Will you pass my messages through my voice-mail?"

Jane smiled apologetically. "Sure. Listen Kathrin, I'm sorry about..."

"My fault. Thanks."

She sat at her kitchen table and stared at the pamphlets, trying to absorb what she had read. It was all so confusing - the medical terms, the clinical analysis, the stats. But mostly Kathrin felt stupid and embarrassed. She couldn't call anyone and say "Guess what? I got the clap." Not even Carol. Not that Carol wouldn't understand, but still. It wasn't something you wanted people to know about. It wasn't like cancer or the measles. You couldn't be brave with an STD - unless it led to AIDS.

She wasn't terrified. At least she was treatable. She wasn't going to die. But the rest of it. When Jen had brought it up, it seemed so unimportant - like it was just a matter of time and then, of course, she'd have a baby. Kathrin pushed the pamphlets away. Not to hold a baby like Danielle in her arms, or smell the sweet scent of fresh skin and powdery hair. It was like something she had never even known she wanted was taken away from her. She stood up and went to the sink to wash out her coffee mug. And Kathrin couldn't even call the man - though she knew his name. Carol had left it on the answering machine - "Hi, tried to get you at the office, they told me you were away - I hope you and Phil didn't go off and do something drastic. Give me a call. I
want to know how your New Year’s went. By the way, I liked him.” Kathrin felt ridiculous. A
grown woman, still screwing around like she was sixteen and not afraid of anything. Well she was
afraid, dammit! For the first fucking time in her life she admitted she was afraid. And with the
admission the well of tears overflowed, and saltwater streamed down her face and into the sink.
Soon she was choking, trying to breathe through the sobs, as her chest heaved over the counter and
she gripped the metal edge of the sink. Her knees gave suddenly and she crumpled to the floor,
clutching her arms around her knees, trying to stifle the cries. Yeah, well cry then. It’s your own
damned fault. The problem should be worse, for everything you’ve done. Cut out a part of you
for every man you’ve slept with and what’s left - not a whole hell of a lot. You should consider
yourself lucky! And then for some reason she was crying for her mother to come and comfort her.
Like when her mother had come so many times in the night, and sat on the edge of her bed until the
nightmares disappeared, or the sickness passed. But she was all grown up, it was up to her to cure
her own sickness.

She cried until her head ached, and her face was raw and swollen. And even when the
tears finally stopped flowing, she felt as if she still had more tears to drop onto her clothes, but no
energy to make them come forth. Her hands and legs were stiff from slouching against the kitchen
cabinets and her bangs were stuck to her forehead, which was damp as well. She pulled herself off
the floor. Her reflection in the kitchen window was horrible, and distorted, but she could clearly
make out the swelling and blood infused puffiness around her eyes. She looked miserable and felt
even worse. The only cure was to find an outlet.

She had forgotten the pure pleasure of dipping her brush in the puddle of acrylic paint, and
smoothing deep hues across the plane of canvas. How the smell was intoxicating, and the texture
so thick and rubbery. How she felt after stretching the canvas and propping the frame up on a
paint covered easel. But mostly, how the hours flew by while she mixed and re-touched and
dabbed the colours in front of her. She wasn’t talented, she knew that, but still the feeling was
inebriating. After bending for so long, she felt stiff, but alive. Like she had plunged into a lake
right after sunrise, and felt her muscles tighten against the cold, and fight back. No one ever saw
her work - Andria was the painter in the family - but she liked to think that her abstracts held the
energy that Andria’s perfect landscapes and portraits lacked.

Friday morning, she returned to the canvas wearing her overalls and a tank top. She
looked at her work with a discerning eye, and thought yellow. Yellow was all that was missing
from the painting. She prepared a quick breakfast, and swallowed her pills. Already the painful urination had ceased, and she felt somewhat relieved. Only two more weeks to go. She drank some orange juice from the container, and carried her toast to the easel set up in front of her Christmas tree. In the morning light, her living room seemed cheerful. She untwisted the top of the ochre tube, and squeezed a thick line of paint onto her pallet. As she screwed the top back on, a dab of paint clung to her fingers. She looked around for a place to wipe the acrylic, and finally resorted to her arm. It wasn’t until after the paint smeared that she noticed it was covering her scar. Her hook. The scar looked better, but still stood prominently away from the skin. Kathrin rubbed the paint in, and for some reason kept rubbing until the skin around the scar was bright pink. She absentmindedly put the tube of paint down, and picked up a piece of toast.

The ring of the phone jolted her heartbeat. She hesitated, then listened as the phone rang a second, third, and fourth time. Then the room was silent again. Kathrin pulled a paintbrush from the can, and dipped it into the yellow paint, pushing the clumpy acrylic around on the pallet. She wasn’t going to answer the phone. She refused to. She raised the brush to the painting and streaked a fine line across the canvas. *I can’t take this.* She put down the brush and crossed to the phone. She dialed in to the message centre, and listened to her message. It was Carol.

“Hi. I’ve left a couple of messages, and you’re not returning them. So I have reason to believe something’s wrong. Please get back to me.”

Kathrin pressed a button and erased the message. She had two choices. Either she could not return the call and have Carol worry, or she could return the call and face the wrath because she hadn’t called earlier. Neither was a promising situation. Finally she dialed Carol’s number at work. She hung up after one ring and stood imagining the conversation.

“*Hello?*

“*Hi. It’s me.*

“My God, where have you been? *If Jane hadn’t told me that you’d been in to work this week, I would have called the cops already. You all right?*

“*I’m fine. Just taking some time off.*

“*You never take time off.*

“Well I though it was about time."

“Oh. Are you sure you haven’t set up a little love nest over there with Phil?"

“No."

“Aw. I was kinda hoping. I thought he was pretty nice.”
“No.”

“Weirdo?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Well, what’s he like?”

“I don’t know.”

“C’mon Kathrin.”

“Carol, I didn’t even know his name until you left it on the machine.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t remember meeting him.”

Carol would laugh hysterically. “Oh shit!”

“Oh shit is right. I woke up the next morning and had no idea where I was.”

“Kathrin, I’m sorry. If I had known. I wouldn’t have let you go. But you seemed so with it at the time. And he seemed like a genuinely nice guy.”

“Yeah, he offered to drive me home.”

Then Carol would laugh again.

“It isn’t funny, Carol!”

“I know, but I can’t help but think of what his reaction would have been if you had asked him to remind you of his name.”

“Thanks.”

Or something like that. Kathrin didn’t want to deal with it. She’d wait until Monday. She put the phone down on the table. Really, she didn’t want Carol to accuse her of hiding out. Of not facing her fears. Well, she didn’t really want to face anything. At that moment all she wanted was to stay in her apartment and paint and eat for the rest of her life. Stay, and yes, hide from everything: her friends, her family, alcohol, men. So much for her foreshadowing of a great year to come. Maybe she could just sleep through the next 364 days. She should hibernate, like a bear and wake up hungry in the spring. And the thought made her laugh - how all the tragedies, modern or otherwise, were supposed to relate to the death of the god-king. If one placed any value on the great Northrop Frye’s opinions. Which Kathrin didn’t, but still, he was the only critic she even remembered from taking that one Canadian Lit. course at U of T. Before she traded good ole’ Northrop in for Marshall, and everything had become a message. But during those formative years she and the other students were forced to understand comedy and tragedy in terms of weather. And how the god-king always died in the winter and was reincarnated in the spring in some other shape.
or guise. That's how she would look at her period of isolation and condemnation - as simply a hibernation until the next phase, the renewal, began. Until she returned to the throne, or at least the hospital, she would follow from the pattern of death and rejuvenation. She would prepare herself for the new beginning, arm her personal battalion and then resurface.

*This time alone is already starting to affect my mind.* She returned to her painting and began mixing some white and red into the edges of the yellow acrylic. And slowly, painfully over the next few hours the familiar form of her crowning angel deepened in shadow and shape, until at sunset, when she stepped back to admire her painting in the weakening light, she found that her canvas exposed the golden ribbons and delicate frame of the lion's vibrant head.

After a dinner of salmon steak lightly grilled on the barbecue, Kathrin raced out into the cold to turn off the gas, then grabbed her blanket and curled up in front of the television. She flipped from one channel to another, realizing quite quickly that there was nothing on. She resigned herself to an obscure and horribly made, horribly directed Canadian 'film'. Film was an approximation, because it wasn't good enough to be a movie, but it wasn't extraordinary or bizarre enough to be a true 'film'. It was just another "small town in the middle of the prairies" show, as the recurring image of rolling fields seemed to indicate.

She was about to turn to the next channel when the scene switched and Kathrin found herself staring at yet another field of wheat - no, it was corn. But the sudden contrast from the previous scene, so dark and misty, to the open field exposed in a brightly lit sunshiny morning, caught her off guard. But still not too interesting - until the camera panned across the field and caught a shirtless man slipping between the long, bristly cornstalks. He was slim-waisted and fair, but his hands were what caught her eyes. Fine, delicate fingers swam through the corn, pushing each stalk out of the way with fluid gestures, as he worked his way through the prairie maze. They weren't excessively large hands, but rather gentle and long, like a piano player's. And then he brought one of them up to his head, and brushed it through his hair, loosening the corn silks from his delicately poised head on top of his shoulders.

Something in the way he carried himself from the fingers, so sure and with such awkward delicacy, affected her. She wanted to run into the TV and wrap a huge down filled blanket about his shoulders: to shelter him from the terrible terrain of the prairies. But she couldn't because, as she kept watching his hands move, he suddenly started running across the field, pushing more frantically through the corn. He ran and ran, from various camera angles, until he was pitched
forth from the field and into a clearing. He stopped abruptly. The camera swung around from his front and then Kathrin saw what the man saw: a huge, shiny lake bordering the sky. Then, as quickly, the camera swung back to face the man as he flung himself down under the shade of a giant willow and looked up, panting under the leaves.

"By God," he wheezed melodramatically. "this is the worst lovin' place in the world!"

Kathrin stared open mouthed at the screen. Then she collapsed into giggles on the couch. "By God," she wheezed through her laughter. "you should have quit while you were silent."

She flipped the channel impatiently. *What a waste of a fine pair of hands.* If only the directors could cast individual parts, not entire actors. She resolved to never watch another Canadian 'film' - unless it happened to win an award outside of Canada. Come to think of it, though, she hadn't actually gone to see a real movie in a long time. Maybe she would pull her movie membership out of her wallet and use it, before it expired. The last movie she had seen was "The English Patient". Now that was movie about true love. Romantic and touching - but still cruel and unforgiving. Exactly how she wanted it to be.

*Hibernation didn't necessarily mean locking yourself away.* If she did it alone, it counted. And secretly, ever since high school she had liked watching movies by herself. It was more exciting alone.

She flipped off the television and got ready for bed. The crying and stress of the last few days was evident on her face when she looked in the mirror, but the light break-out on her chin was nearly gone. She washed her face carefully and then crawled into bed. She drifted off to sleep, her dreams filled with thoughts of fairy tale beginnings, chance meetings, and true love.
The next night she went to the movies alone. Slipping into the aisle seat of the last row she scanned the dark theatre. She inched lower in her chair and folded her fingers stiffly in her lap as the lights died out completely, and the curtain parted. As the music crescendoed she submerged herself in the womb of the theatre space. Outside the real world hurried on, but within the mausoleum of film she lost herself in the now and reality of a black and white fantasy.

The drizzling rain onscreen gave way to a sprawling country estate littered with gray ivy sprawling over its walls. A silvery mist shadowed the trees and slowly faded in a sudden close up. The main door of the house melted into odd tricks of light playing off a fire. The camera panned across the wall of the study and finally came to rest on a lone figure.

She tensed in her chair as the camera roved up the legs and torso of the body. She clenched her fingers tightly and met the eyes on screen. Her breath caught.

In her youth, after her first period but before her first sexual experience, she and her girlfriends walked coolly into theatres, took up the entire first row and spent upwards of two hours moaning, smiling, crying and commenting on the actors. If only those men could pry themselves off the screen and into the arms of the girls in the front row, would they finally know how good they could be treated.

After the movies the girls would go for coffee and try to look mature smoking cigarettes while they discussed the appropriate method of wooing marquee idols.

"I'd strip off all my clothes and tell him to take me right there."

"You would not."

"Says who?"

"I'd send my picture and a thousand roses."

"Too expensive."

"You'd break the camera."

Eventually one of them would turn to Kathrin. "What would you do, Kit?"

She'd smile secretly. "I'd ignore him."

"Yeah right!"

"What?"

They'd wait for her to proceed.
“I have this daydream. I’m older, like twenty-three or something, and Carol and I are meeting for lunch. We go to the hotel my uncle manages. You know how he’s always telling me how all the big stars stay there.

So we’re sitting, having our lunch when all of a sudden Carol’s mouth drops and she lets out this tiny ‘eek’. In real life, I’d probably die or faint, but in the dream I am super cool. Carol’s jumping almost out of her seat, having a conniption fit. She grabs my hand. ‘Do you know who’s here?’ Of course I know. It’s my dream.

I turn, very slowly in the direction Carol’s looking, and watch Richard Gere’s hot body slip into a chair out of the corner of my eye. He settles himself, aware that every person in the restaurant knows his face and his name. Even the maitre d’ is impressed though he greets him, and what looks like to be his agent, casually. It’s not until they order their drinks that Richard relaxes and glances around. I wait until the last second and then turn my face to him. Our eyes meet and with a reserved look on my face I give him a ‘yes, we’re sitting across from each other on the subway’ glance, then continue on with the conversation Carol and I were having before he walked into the room.”

Her friends would interrupt. “Whatever.”

“And? Then what? He falls head over heels and rushes your table? Nice try!”

Kathrin would smile knowingly. “No. But he is interested. Every so often he glances over, but I never raise my eyes to his again. I spend the rest of the lunch calming Carol down. When she’s finally gotten herself under control, she has to leave to get back to work. I pay the bill and make my way to the bar. I sit down on one of those high stools and order a glass of red wine, and casually open the paper Carol left on my bag. Then I wait.”

By this time the girls were twittering nervously. They begged her to continue, enthralled with the amount of thought she had put into the imaginary rendezvous.

“Then he comes over and sits a few stools down. I can feel him watching me. Finally, he clears his throat. ‘Excuse me, but I’m just visiting. Do you know a good place for dinner?’

I take my time looking up. ‘What do you like?’ I ask.

‘I don’t know. Quiet, small, intimate, but great food.’

My uncle always tells me about the hot places so I know what to tell him. ‘How about Peter Pan’s? Or the Barberian, or any of the hotels? To be honest with you, I don’t go out much for dinner. Michael,’ I call over to the bartender, who’s known me since I was little, ‘where’s a good place to eat?’
‘Le Papillion’ he says.

‘French,’ I say to Richard, as I turn back to the paper. I can tell that he’s about ready to admit defeat, so I look up again, and squint at him, like I’m trying to remember something. ‘Hey,’ I pause, as if lost in thought, ‘don’t I know you?’

He smiles. One of those perfect actor smiles, with the whitened teeth and all. My cue.

‘You were in my first year English class at University. With Professor Lumlin.’

He coughs. ‘No, my name’s Richard. Richard Gere.’

‘Hmm. That sounds familiar. My name’s Kathrin. Nice to meet you but,’ I say, finishing the last of my wine, ‘I have to get back to work. Have a nice dinner, wherever you go.’

I slap a bill down on the table, making sure it’s a good tip, grab my stuff, and make my way to the door. It’s not until I step outside and start crossing the street that I hear my name. I turn back and he’s standing there, like those dorks in the Impulse ads.

‘Would you care to join me for dinner?’ he asks shyly.

Knowing the story had come to a near close, Carol would jump in. “Some friend you are. Don’t you ever introduce me?”

Alison would laugh. “So when do you tell him, you knew who he was the whole time?”

“Not until I screw every star in Hollywood.”

The girls had squirmed over their coffees. For the rest of the summer, they worked on developing their stories.

Sometime near the end of high school, the rest of them gave up on matinee idols, and moved on to older men and bars or scholastic pursuits. Kathrin took to the refuge of the theatre alone. She had little interest in high-school boys who thought of only one thing, and preferred the perfectly timed dialogue, with faultless dry kisses, rather than wet sloppy tongues and groping hands. She’d sit with her hands clenched into tight fists, until they relaxed in her lap. And then... well the first time it had taken her by surprise. Caught up in the fierce love scene on screen she had begun moving her fingers in a small circular motion over the lace crotch of her panties. At first her touches were hesitant, as she felt like she was going to get caught and thrown out of the theatre. But gradually, on each subsequent visit, she had grown bolder. Eventually it became a ritual. She would skip classes to catch a romantic flick. On school days when she went to the movies she wore her short kilt and skimpy underwear. On weekends she wore miniskirts or thin pants. She would rub her fingers over herself until she reached silent yet shuddering orgasm. The first time she thought she might actually die. After the movie, she would wait until every one left
and then go to the bathroom. She would change her undergarments in one of the stalls, and walk home feeling like a woman. After a while, she was addicted. She couldn’t give it up.

In the darkness she felt comfortable and sexy; that sense of tabooed eroticism. Some feeling of power she couldn’t recapture in her small Queen Street mildew pit, among the budding artists and poetry reading idealists. Even with the living room dark, and the fan blowing cool air over the tufts of hair poking out through the lace, she couldn’t find her own internal melting point. But at the movies, the figures on screen were so large they were tangible, as if they were really there, reaching out to her. She felt every breath, heard every sigh. People who laughed too loud annoyed her. It got to the point where she refused invitations to see a show with anyone. She didn’t think she could handle not touching herself.

Throughout high school and university Carol had thought it was slightly weird but kept her comments to herself. She worked out four days a week, and knew that Kathrin found the idea of causing bodily pain for fun even more absurd. It was the isolation that bewildered Carol - the unnatural tendency to view the screen in solitude, not wanting to experience the ‘unreal’ in a communal setting, or to share a bag of greasy popcorn. Or point out cinematography and camera angles or analyze sound-tracks. At first Kathrin argued, seeing it not so much weird as it was selfish. But Carol didn’t know about the ritual, and no doubt would not approve. And eventually, as Kathrin paired off with various men, the solo missions to the movie theatre occurred less often. Carol assessed it as a phase, and Kathrin never led her to believe otherwise. She never led anyone to assume otherwise. In fact, no one knew that Kathrin only went to movies when she needed to get off. It was almost like Pee-Wee Herman in reverse. Only difference was, if they caught her, the newspaper would find it a charming trait. In a woman.

So there she was again. Alone, sitting in the dark theatre, wearing silk pants and lace underwear. But she dreaded the thought of touching herself. Like it was something from long ago she didn’t want to be reminded of. She had dressed herself earlier, pulling the garments from her closet with care, joking that it was for kicks. But as she inhaled the rich musty scent through her nostrils all the university visits to the theatre flooded back, and she found herself stimulated. It was like when she had woken up on spring mornings and inhaled the warm, dampness of the little cottage by the lake her father’s sisters had owned. The smell of the theatre catapulted her to another time and a different space, and all those bottled up memories came flooding back as she breathed.
She forced herself to turn her attention to the screen, and actually concentrate on what was going on there and not in her mind. And for the first forty-five minutes it worked. She kept her eye on the main character, a man with an oddly disfigured face, who had suffered through a terrible fire. She watched as he was rejected by every person he turned to for help, except the pretty blind woman who finally showed him compassion. Poor plot, but the acting was above average. She could understand, in some abject way, how the woman could fall for such a despicable creature. His voice was smooth and soft, and Kathrin closed her eyes when he proclaimed his love for the woman. She heard the sudden silence on screen, and when she opened her eyes the two bodies were pressed close together. Then, as if behind her back, her fingers commenced their journey down her stomach, and through the gap of her coat sides. They moved over the front of her pants and folded themselves neatly into the crease of her lap. She uttered a soft sigh, and then glanced around, frightened that someone had heard her. But the heads in front of her remained motionless and she breathed a sigh of relief. Her hands kept tempo with the man’s caresses, and she imagined herself in a like situation, with smooth hands lightly running over her body. A sudden shiver raced down the length of her spine, and she pressed her fingers harder into her clitoris, moving quickly from side to side, through the lace. Underneath her panties, her body throbbed against the material like a finger trapped in a rubber band. She could feel her body temperature rising, and felt the blood rush to her face, filling her cheeks with a vibrant blush. Her forehead seemed hot and sweaty to her, and her lips throbbed. She had read somewhere that women wore lipstick because it imitated the natural colour the lips turned when arousal set in. Her mouth was dry and hot, and she swallowed to moisten her parched tongue. She moved her fingers more frantically, but refrained them from entering into her vagina. She needed no more stimulation than to run her hands fiercely over the lace to achieve release. She could feel the tidal wave of liquid mounting inside of her, and bit her lip to control her breathing. All around people were watching the movie with a concentration that awed Kathrin. That they could sit there and not realize what she was doing. She watched the couple on screen, but more closely the man, whose strong body guided the movement of both. His voice cascaded over the woman’s reclined figure, and Kathrin arched backward in her seat in direct response. She spread her legs wider, but still remained in a relatively staid position. She could hear the voice, like honey oozing over the theatre speakers, and fought to keep her eyes open and alert, but the voice and the pleasure were like a sleeping pill. Her eyes shut like a slow sunset, like a love potion or the dope of sex, and she felt her insides welling up for the crash. And then the crash. Her breath stopped suddenly, as her legs began to twitch.
frantically, as if pulled by an invisible spastic puppeteer. Liquid seeped through her panties and moistened the inside of her coat. Then her legs slowed their frantic vibrations, and she shuddered violently.

She sat through the rest of the movie, and then darted for the bathroom, once the other patrons had left. She pulled a pair of cotton briefs from her purse and exchanged the damp panties for them. Then she dabbed her used panties onto her coat, and pulled on her new underwear. After she flushed the toilet for good measure, she left the bathroom, her panties rolled into a tight ball in the bottom of her purse.

She walked out into the cold night air, feeling alive for the first time in months. She didn’t want to go home, so she ducked into a small café near the car park and ordered a latte. On her way to a small table she scooped up a local magazine and then set it down on the square table. She pulled out the chair and sat down, keeping her coat on.

She flipped open the magazine while she waited for her coffee to cool. Immediately she turned to the classifieds section and began to read. She scanned the sections until she came upon the small space allotted to “Eye Spies”: people who wished to find someone they had seen somewhere. Kathrin had read the section religiously every week for three years in university. She didn’t know what to expect at first, but gradually she had begun waiting for each issue, hoping that someone had seen her. She would skim the ads, trying to find a description that fit her perfectly, but never, not once in those three years, had anyone ever caught a glimpse. Most of them were run-of-the-mill: “Oriental dancer at The Zoo, you boogied your way into my heart. Find me.” “Blond biker with killer legs. Saw you at University/King. Would like to grease your chain.” “Tall brunette with friends. We smiled hello. I’m in love.” Every so often, one would interest Kathrin. “Avocado girl. Your nails as green as the fruit. We met when I upturned the display. Been eating guacamole ever since.”

But, never was there an ad that was directed towards Kathrin. Still, she kept the faith, knowing that the first issue she missed would be the one with her name on it. Of course that had been a few years past, and so Kathrin had never known if she had been seen or not. But, as she started on her latte and scanned the page, she found no description of herself, and so had to live vicariously through the imaginations of others. But it interested her that each ad pinpointed attributes and anatomical rarities that stuck out in the minds of the searchers. How the person they were looking for had some specific part or feature the other found extraordinary. What part would
identify Kathrin? Her hair, no doubt. "Blond mane of fire, you set my heart alight." "Curly top. You remind me of cauliflower."

And what, if ever she felt the urge, would she write? *I have no idea.* She couldn’t pinpoint a fetish. All of her brief relationships had focused on different attributes, initially. They all had one thing in common: nothing. And then, when she could no longer remember what those attribute had been in the first place, she moved on. With every flip, she chose another feature, with every flop, a new characteristic. Surely though, if it came down to it; there had to be something. Some link. One physical item that consistently was checked off on her inventory list. She racked her brain, and then gave up.

She flipped to the movie listings, which hid out mid-section. After a thorough investigation she chose two films she was interested in seeing - both foreign. Both with male actors she knew of, both with male actors she appreciated aesthetically. One on Tuesday, and the second on Friday. Both would help her kill time, until her return to the real world.

And both, as it turned out, were able to get her off.

On Monday, she scrambled to apologize to her mother and Jen for not returning their phone calls. Her mother whined and complained, and Jen pretended not to be hurt, but they turned out to be the easier calls to return. Carol was an entirely different case. At first she pestered Kathrin incessantly, asking again and again if she was ill or depressed or simply a bitch. Then the talk turned to Phil. Kathrin managed to blow the conversation off, by suggesting to Carol that it had turned out badly, and that she had no desire to talk about it. Unfortunately, the false admission led to a larger problem. Carol immediately proposed a sporting event.

"Kathrin, I’m glad to hear it, because I have the perfect guy for you. Don’t hang up. I know I said that I would never arrange another blind date for you, but this guy is amazing."

"No."

"You haven’t even let me finish."

"Carol," Kathrin snapped, then lowered her voice to a near inaudible utterance, "listen. I had a very trying week. I don’t want you or anyone to set me up. I don’t want to meet anyone right now. Maybe not ever again. O.K.?"

Carol was silent.

"No offense. I appreciate the effort, but I’m not interested."

"It went really badly then didn’t it?"
"Yes. Worse than you can imagine."

"He didn’t.‘ Carol paused awkwardly. "he didn’t do."

"No. I’ve just had a chance to realize the errors of my ways, and the smartest thing to do now is just leave it be."

"Well. if that’s what you want. but I still expect you to come out on Friday night."

"I can’t. I already have plans."

"What do you mean? After all that. you have a date."

"Yes. With myself. I’m going to see a movie."

Carol groaned. "Oh God. It’s starting again. How many movies have you seen alone in the past week?"

"Just one."

"Well. that’s how it starts. Why don’t you come work out with me instead?"

"Carol."

"All right. Fine. But if you change your mind - call me. I’m serious."

"Bye."

Kathrin hung up the phone and got down to work. She stayed late Monday night. and on Tuesday, left the office just in time to make the movie. She lost the subtitled meaning half-way through, but it didn’t matter. because the film was only shoulders to her. When she reached climax, it was in time with the sound of a jump rope beating against the floor. and the swirling windmill arms of the protagonist hopping through the air. The release wasn’t nearly as powerful, but it served the same purpose. Kathrin repeated the same clean-up procedure. and then went for another coffee. She kept her eyes down as she exited the theatre, passing the usher who wished her a good night. She opted for a regular coffee, and sat smoking and thinking about the new campaign. Richardson and some of the other senior staff had met that morning to discuss how exactly two mutated rabbits in love tied in with greeting cards. First of all. Kathrin had no warm feelings for Valentine’s Day. and secondly, she couldn’t understand how some exec. from the company could even think of such an absurd idea. The rabbits were characters from one of the card lines and the sketch gave her nothing to work from. But still. somehow she had been assigned to the graphic team. No. somehow she had become the graphic team. She and Jamie. It was a lot of work, and only one week to get from sketch to ad. Kathrin, though realizing that Richardson did have her interests in mind, resented that he had refused to give her the assignment before he kicked
her out of the office. Well, at least she wouldn't have time to think about anything else. Not for at least a week.

She pulled a pen from her purse, and began doodling on a serviette. First she drew a simple sketch of a bunny, and then another, and another, until the whole side of serviette was covered in tiny rabbits. *Multiplying like bunnies.* Like that tied in to love in any way. *But*... if she had a lone bunny out looking for love, who happened to come across a female bunny mannequin in a store window. Kathrin flipped the serviette over. She sketched a box, and drew a stiff bunny into the window. *It might actually work.*

Kathrin drained her coffee mug, and got up. She had to get home and start working on it, before she forgot where she was going. She walked quickly out of the café and to her car. How she had gotten roped into a mushy, love campaign was beyond her. Chances were, the writing team had already created the script for the ad, the whole concept and idea, but she might be able to swing them over to her side. *If she could get enough done, before they met.* She floored the gas pedal and reversed out of the parking space. *When she had an idea, nothing got in her way.* Maybe that was her downfall.

After speeding down the driveway and into the back lot, she rushed up the stairs to her apartment. Immediately, she went into her bedroom, flicked on her computer, and then threw her coat on her bed. She didn’t have the bitmaps for the bunnies, but her own clip-art pictures would do the trick for the moment. She set up her program for a new set of frames, writing the script lines frantically underneath each one. Then she created the shots and angles according to her options and began filling in backgrounds and objects. *It was amazing what the computer was capable of, given the right software.* She felt sorry for Walt, who had to do each cell by hand. He would have saved so much time if he had been born fifty years later. Of course, if he had been born fifty years later, someone else would have done the same thing first. Kathrin's fingers flew from keyboard to mouse, her eyes darted from 100% to 400%, and when she finally got up to get a drink, she noticed it was nearly three in the morning. *Well, if all went well, her lack of sleep would prove successful.*

She sold her idea, with some minor line changes to the writing staff on Wednesday. By Thursday at lunch, she had forty-seven seconds of partially edited tape. By five o'clock she had thirty-eight. Friday morning they pitched the commercial to the top execs. at the greeting card company, who had seen only the cells. *They were in agreement that if the commercial could be clipped by a mere eight seconds, they were in business.*
Kathrin and Jamie sat down after work on Friday, and ran and re-ran the tape. They watched every individual cell flash across the computer screen, but could find no way to take off more than four seconds of tape. Kathrin knew where the weakness was - at the very beginning. The commercial opened with a furry bunny hopping down the street, poking his head into various buildings, his mind filled with thoughts of love. It needed to be there, to develop his character, but took entirely too much time. If she could cut the first section by four seconds, they'd be laughing. But how? She continued to re-run the section of tape. Her eyes narrowed, and she stared at the screen. It wasn't until Jamie hit her arm that she realized she'd zoned out completely. She shook her head violently, then turned to Jamie. "Thanks. I needed that."

Then it came to her, as suddenly as the hit. She quickly inserted some new frames, and proceeded to make a new bunny based on the mannequin bunny. She inserted the new bunny into one of the first few cells and replicated the scenery. Jamie watched in horror.

"What are you doing?"

"We take out eight seconds of discovering that he's broken-hearted and lonely, and fill it with four seconds of the same thing." Kathrin explained, moving her fingers over the keyboard.

"How?"

"Watch."

Kathrin finished typing, and pressed play. The scene started off with a hazy new character slapping the original bunny across the face. The bunny fell down as the new character walked off, and then, instead of hopping along, he seemed more to drag himself down the street, looking much more pathetic than the original scene. Jamie laughed. "Yeah. You spruce up the evil bunny chick, and you got yourself a great commercial."

Kathrin smiled. "And they say violence is overrated."

Kathrin and Jamie spent the next hour recolouring cells, and editing frames, and by 7:30 they were looking at the finished product. "Jamie," Kathrin said, "call that guy. Mr. Edirson, and see if he can meet with me tonight or tomorrow."

Jamie jumped up from his chair. "Sure."

Once Jamie had left the room, Kathrin took a few seconds to check her voice-mail. Her mother wanted to know if she was coming for Sunday dinner. Carol had called to make sure Kathrin hadn't changed her mind about going out. Kathrin erased both messages. Too busy. She needed to get everything finished by Monday morning, and if Edirson didn't go for the changes, she
was screwed. She saved the new commercial under a different name, to ensure neither was lost, and leaned back in her chair. It had been a long week.

Jamie re-entered the studio. “He’s left the office, but I called his cell phone, and he’ll be here at ten tomorrow. There’s nothing left to do until then. Want to go for a drink?”

Kathrin stretched her arms up over her head and smiled. “I’d love to, but I gave up drinking for New Year’s. so I’m going to see a movie.”

Jamie sighed. “I don’t know what’s happening to you, Kathrin. but you’re no fun anymore.”

Kathrin swatted him on the arm. “I am so fun.”

“I know, but you’re not out of control fun, like you were.”

Kathrin eyed Jamie mischievously. “All in good time. Now go home and have a good night.”

“Yes, boss.” Jamie sighed.

After Kathrin had finished cleaning up the studio, she went to her office. She loved it when the office was completely devoid of all human life, except herself. If she were five years younger she would prance around the cubicles pretending she was boss. Well, maybe in ten years she would be boss, and then she could prance around when people were there. If she had the energy. Working so many hours in such a short period of time burned her out. By most Fridays, she was physically and emotionally exhausted. She slumped into her chair, and began rubbing the back of her neck. It was probably a good thing that she had started spending more time by herself. It might even extend her life a few years. She pulled her feet up onto her desk and shut her eyes. She needed a nice long bath, but the doctor had told her during her tests that bathing was the worst thing anyone with an infection could take. Well, after everything cleared up, she was going to sit in her tub for three days straight. Until then, she would relax by going to the movies.

Kathrin’s eyes shot open. She looked at the clock. 7:50. She was going to be late for the eight o’clock showing. She stood up, grabbed her coat, and darted for the door. Once the main office doors were locked securely, Kathrin bolted for the elevator. She pressed the button and waited for what seemed like ages until the elevator trundled to a stop. Kathrin hopped into the elevator and pressed the parking garage button. The elevator paused then jumped to life. She straightened her hair in the mirror and pinched her cheeks to give her face more life. She did look tired. Well, she’d be revived shortly.
The movie had already started by the time she got to the theatre. She rushed into the cinema, and grabbed the second seat in the back row. There were more people in the theatre than she had anticipated, but only two other people in her row, and they were at the other end of the seats. Kathrin pulled her arms from her coat, and wrapped the sides around her waist. They would act as a cover.

She thought briefly of Carol, no doubt getting ready for a big night out. Carol, who would point out the available men to her friends, commenting on shape, angles, and size like she was picking out a house to buy. And there would be laughter and giggles shared between them. All while Kathrin was touching herself in the darkness. Initially, the thought depressed her, but then an image of Dr. Einstein flashed across her mind. Men in movies were much safer than real men. She just needed to bide her time. She had finally finished her prescription and the pain in her abdomen had ceased completely, but didn’t yet feel emotionally cured. Only another week, and then, only if she was clean, would she even consider giving up her matinee idols. If she could.

She relaxed against the plush velvet seat, and slipped her hands into her lap. Her eyes concentrated on the screen, until they too relaxed and followed a small white, curved scar etched into the face of the leading man. Kathrin thought of her own scar, and how perfectly she would fit into the film. She smiled, and waited to melt.

Kathrin occupied the three weeks of her self-imposed confinement with work and movies. She made little time for anything else, with the exception of cooking and painting. Five finished canvases occupied spaces in the living room, propping themselves up against the wall and on the window ledge. She was happy with them, but the last four contained little of the intensity she had captured in the first. When she got home from work, after perfecting the Valentine’s campaign, she no longer rushed to the living room to battle with her palette. Instead, she wandered around the apartment, trying to decide what to do with herself. She had turned the ringer off completely for the first two weeks, but by the third, she had turned it back on and just not answered the phone. When it stopped ringing she would call the message centre and check to see who had called. Then, she’d pace back and forth again, until she decided not to return the call. Finally, she’d make dinner, and push the food back and forth on her plate.

She missed Carol, and Steph, and Alison. She imagined them out for drinks or dancing, laughing and having a great time, but refused to accept any of their invitations. It’s pathetic really, she kept saying to herself, but knew that she was destined to carry out the torture until the
end of her term. And since there was nothing else to do, she went back to the theatre. By the third week of January she had seen seven movies - in two weeks. She had tried to stop going, but the thought of a handsome face, or witty turn of phrase kept her pinned to her seat. And the same usher greeted her with more enthusiasm every time. He probably felt sorry for her. She even felt sorry for herself.

The night before her appointment at the hospital, she couldn’t paint or cook, or even go see a movie. She was too jumpy. The thought of seeing Dr. Ernstine again wasn’t appealing. The thought of more people prodding her body wasn’t ideal either. A nagging doubt took up most of her thoughts, accompanied by constant indigestion.

She went to the bathroom to grab an antacid tablet, hidden away in the back of the medicine cabinet. There was something un-feminine about having gas, and Kathrin always claimed not to have any tablets when anyone asked. But her stomach was jumpy, so she pulled two out of the foil, and chomped vigorously. Then she decided that she needed to do something to calm her nerves. She applied a mud mask to her face and neck, then started going through her closet to pass the time. In less than an hour she had amassed a huge pile of clothes for The Salvation Army. She’d drop them off on the weekend. She placed the pile by the door, went to wash her face, and on the way back noticed that the top of her desk was dirty. A full bedroom dusting ensued. At midnight she was still not tired, and ventured to clean out her drawers. She got through the top four without any trouble, but stopped when she opened the bottom. She had forgotten about her father’s papers. For a split second she was going to pull them out, but shut the drawer, knowing that she’d be up half the night if she did so.

Instead, she went into the living room and turned on the television. The lights and decorations were still up on the ficus. Kathrin grinned. She had kept putting it off. While the T.V. droned on, she carefully packed the ornaments into the boxes she pulled from the closet. By the time she had packed away everything except the lion she was exhausted, and the churning in her stomach had quelled. She held the lion briefly in her hands, turning it over to read the inscription. Maybe one day she’d feel like that. Like she would give anything to be with someone she loved. Give it up, she ordered herself, and quickly wrapped the lion in its tissue paper. Then she stuffed the lion into the box, and stacked the boxes by the closet.

She laid out her clothes for the morning, and got ready for bed. Her face was still bright red from the facial, but would fade by morning. At least, Kathrin thought, I’ll look good when I go to my death.
They took another swab, prodded her with questions and carefully noted her answers. Dr. 
Ernstin performed an internal, and then Kathrin was told to wait outside the doctor’s office. 
When the nurse finally approached Kathrin, it was nearly ten o’clock. Kathrin swallowed and 
hesitantly followed the nurse to the door. Once again Dr. Ernstin was seated at her desk. 
“You’ve read the material?” she asked. 
Kathrin nodded. “A couple times.” 
“Good. We’ll call you later this week to let you know the final results.” 
Kathrin moved in to sit near the desk. “What do you think so far?” 
“There’s no swelling, the cervix looks normal with the exception of the scar tissue from 
the cauterization, and you feel better. It looks good, but we’ll have to wait for the tests. They’ll 
give us the best answer.”

Kathrin sighed in relief, and the doctor smiled. “You still have to be careful, though.” 
“Thank you, I appreciate your concern, and I have thought very seriously about everything 
that has happened. You don’t know how much.” Kathrin stood up. 
The doctor cleared her throat. “Kathrin, I thought you might be interested in some of this 
material. It’s just a thought,” she said, handing Kathrin some pamphlets. 
Kathrin took the pamphlets from the doctor. “Thank you,” she said, and turned for the 
door. 
She let herself out into the hall, and breathed a sigh of pent-up frustration. She knew that 
things weren’t definitely over, and crossed her fingers as she walked towards the exit.
The next two days were the worst she could remember since she’d tried out for a play in 
university. She couldn’t concentrate at work, expecting the hospital to call every minute. She just 
wanted to get it over and done with. Either she was fine and could go on living, or there was a 
problem and she would deal with it. But if she could just find out, then it would be bearable. At 
home, she paced more than usual and was too antsy to even think about going to the movies 
Jamie attacked her for being absent minded; her mother, for being neglectful. Kathrin couldn’t 
even eat. 
The call came at noon on Tuesday. Kathrin waited until Jane connected the call through, 
and sat with her fingers crossed on one hand while squeezing a Velcro ball with the other. 
“Hello, Kathrin Connelly.” 
“Ms. Connelly,” a hesitant voice responded, “I’m calling from Toronto General, about 
your test results, on behalf of Dr. Ernstin.”
Kathrin cringed at the thought of the doctor. "Yes?"
“Dr. Ernstine wanted me to tell you that your test results are fine, and at this time there is no need to worry.”

“Great.”

“She also wants you to schedule quarterly appointments with your own doctor for Pap smears from now on.”

“For how long?”

The nurse hesitated. “Well... forever. To make sure there’s no abnormal cell growth.”

“Like, for the rest of my life?”

“Umm... yes. It’s standard procedure. PID isn’t something that, strictly speaking, goes away. It can come back. Unfortunately. But it’s nothing to worry about. It’s just to keep an eye on the problem.”

“I see. Well, thank you very much. I appreciate the call.”

Kathrin hung up. She racked her brains, trying to think of the pamphlets. She didn’t remember reading that. Of course, she must have. Something like that didn’t not appear in the pamphlets.

She grabbed her purse from under the desk, and pulled it onto her lap. She had slipped the doctor’s pamphlets in there when she left the hospital. She dug into the main section of the purse, then realized the handouts were in the outside section. Her fingers grabbed them and pulled them onto her desk. She flipped over the first one, and second, but found nothing with “PID” written on them. She was about to flip to the next one, when the second title caught her eye again: “Celibacy: Is It For You?” Kathrin’s mouth dropped open. She flipped back to the first pamphlet. “Loving Yourself”. Kathrin raced through the rest of the pamphlets. All of them were about celibacy. Kathrin felt her forehead heating up, and she threw the entire stack into the garbage.

“I can’t believe this...”

Jamie flung open the door. “Hi, I...oh, you’re busy. What’s wrong?”

Kathrin’s hand flew up to her head, and she tried to smooth her curls against it. “Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Jamie frowned. “Maybe I’ll come back.”

“Thanks.”

He shut the door. Kathrin raised herself out of her chair. She paced in front of her desk, trying to wring out the tension in her hands. She needed a drink. She pulled her purse onto
her arm and grabbed her coat from the back of the door. After shutting the door to her office, she stormed up to the front, and found Jane eating her lunch.

"I'm going for lunch. Take my messages."

She didn't wait for Jane to respond. By the time Jane had swallowed a mouthful of pasta salad Kathrin was already on the elevator.

She sat in the bar of the hotel, sipping a glass of red wine, and chain smoking. She barely noticed how much she smoked, though the ashtray grew fuller and fuller while she drank. She leaned back against the plusher contour of the chair, and tried to relax. Tried to forget that judgment had been passed. Of course Dr. Ernststein had told her it was only something to think about – an option. But still, it was so degrading. It wasn't like she got loaded every night, and picked up any guy who paid her attention. She hadn't felt so stupid...well, since the first time she'd ever had sex.

Her first real crush had been on Brian Wilton; a guy two years older than she was. She moaned constantly to Carol that he didn't even know she existed, but that she loved him with every bone in her body. She stared at him in the caf, and had Carol drive by his house when they told their parents they were going to the library. She'd even made a huge cut-out heart and pasted construction paper letters of their names on it. But he never noticed her. One day, when she'd finally given up hope, she was eating with Carol in the caf. They were about to leave their table, when he'd tripped over her bag, and landed almost on top of her. He apologized, using her name, and then she'd known that she stood a chance. After that, he'd smile when he saw her in the hall or at a dance.

Finally one night, Jen had let Kathrin accompany her to a party where Kathrin knew he was going to be. She didn't tell Jen her real reason for wanting to go, and Jen actually seemed excited that her little sister was going to tag along. On the condition that she didn't do anything stupid Kathrin agreed to the deal, and acted as the model little sister. By her second beer, she gathered enough courage to talk to him, and when Jen slipped into the bathroom, Kathrin made her move.

She walked over to where he was standing with his buddies, and waited until there was a lapse in the conversation. When they stopped laughing, he turned and noticed her. "Hey, it's the bag lady!" he said, smiling.

"Well, at least I watch where I'm going!" she countered.
By eleven she was tipsy, and he had slung his arm over her shoulder. She could smell cologne on his shirt, and beer on his breath. She loved every minute of it. He asked her to go with him to grab a beer from the basement, and Kathrin jumped at the chance. When they got to the room with the fridge there were other people around, and Kathrin hopped up on the freezer while Brian chatted with his friends. The other kids gradually filtered out of the room until she was left alone with him. He pulled two beers from the fridge and offered her one. She took the beer from his hand and slowly twisted the cap off, while he inched closer to her, and pushed her legs apart with his hip. Then he reached his hand around her neck and started kissing her. At first she was nervous, but gradually she started kissing him back, and adjusted her position to press against his body.

He started to rub his hand up her stomach, and got to her ribcage when Jen walked in. She was about to turn around and leave when Brian and Kathrin heard her move and broke apart. Jen covered her hand with her mouth when she saw that it was her sister. “I, um, was looking for you. We have to go.”

Kathrin fidgeted with her beer. “O.K., one second all right?”

“I’ll be upstairs.”

Kathrin buried her head in her hand after Jen left. “That was so embarrassing.” she muttered.

Brian laughed. “Well, no harm done. Listen, before you go...can we go out sometime?”

Kathrin grinned beneath her hand. “Yeah.”

“I’ll call you.”

“You have my number?”

“Yeah. Jen’s in my Biology class.”

Kathrin slipped off the freezer. “O.K.”

He grabbed her arm and pushed her against the freezer. Then he kissed her again, and trailed his hand up over her breast. “O.K. You better go.”

Jen didn’t say anything until they were in the car. “Are you nuts?”

Kathrin turned to her. “What?”

“Brian Wilton? Are you kidding? That guy is two years older than you, and two years more experienced.”

Kathrin flapped her hand at Jen. “So what?”
Jen turned the key in the ignition. “So, he’s going to use you and then dump you. You think he really wants a girlfriend who can’t even get into bars? What about in six months when he goes to university? I hope you aren’t going to go out with him.”

“What I do is my business. What, are you jealous?”

Jen turned to look at her. “Jealous? No. But you better be careful.”

Kathrin turned on the radio and looked out the window. She didn’t care what Jen said. Brian liked her. She was sure of it. He’d call, and then she’d have the last laugh.

But that whole weekend, she thought about what Jen had said. Brian did have a reputation around school. Everybody liked him, but he dated girls on a four-date basis. Well, she was going to outsmart him. By the end of it, he’d be begging for one more date.

When he called on Monday afternoon she played it cool. Yeah, she’d go for coffee with him. Yes, Thursday was fine. Well then, she’d see him at school. When she hung up, her heart was racing. She danced around her room, and then lay down on her bed. That was where Jen found her. “So, he called.”

“Mmmn.”

“You going out with him?”

“Mmmn.”

Jen sat down on the bed. “Kathrin, I want to talk to you.”

Kathrin rolled over and away from her sister. “What?”

“Look at me.”

Slowly, Kathrin rolled back over. “What?”

“I want to tell you something. Not because I’m jealous or mad or whatever. But because I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Kathrin groaned. “So, go ahead.”

“He got a friend of mine pregnant last year.”

Kathrin looked up. “What?”

“I’m serious.”

Kathrin raised herself to sitting position. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“She had an abortion. He gave her the money.”
“I know you’ll be careful, but he’s no virgin, and I think that’s what it’ll come down to.”
“I’m not going to get pregnant. I’m not going to sleep with him.”
Jen sighed. “As long as you’re sure. I don’t want him to take advantage of you.”
“O.K. I’m not stupid.”
“Well, if you’re going out with him, you are.”
“Jen, butt out!”
“Just think about it.”

Kathrin rolled back onto her side. After a moment, Jen got up and left. Kathrin lay there for a long time and thought about what Jen had said. Then she knew what she had to do, and she got up and went to the bathroom.

They went for coffee. On the following Sunday, they went shopping. The next Wednesday, he came by to see if she wanted to go for wings. Her mother refused. Kathrin spent the night slamming doors and writing hate notes to her mother in her bedroom. On the Saturday, she went out with Brian and his friends to a bar. She wore a lot of makeup and no one asked her for I.D. She tried to keep up with the boys, and drank far more than she intended. When Brian asked her to go and watch a movie at his house after, she disregarded her curfew.

They got back to his house, and he quietly snuck her down to the rec room. She wandered around the refinished basement while he checked upstairs to see if anyone was awake. All around she saw family pictures, reflecting the brilliance from the pot-lights in the ceiling. He looked so cute in his pictures. Her sister was so wrong about him. Kathrin relaxed.

When he came back, they pulled a movie from the cabinet. As Brian moved back to the couch he turned off all the lights. Kathrin swallowed and started watching the screen. She had no idea what the movie was, but didn’t care. Slowly, Brian’s arms circled her, and his hands ran over her back and then around to her breasts. She was startled by the hands, but forced herself to breathe normally. A few boys had touched her before, but for some reason it felt different. She didn’t care, she had promised herself. He pulled off her shirt in the darkness and unclasped her bra. Then he began kissing her chest. She moved lower on the couch, and he must have thought it was a signal. The next thing Kathrin knew he was on top of her, and dry-humping her pelvis.

Kathrin had always hated that verb, even when her friends took great pleasure in using the term.

Brian pulled her to the floor, and pulled off her pants and underwear. Kathrin kept quite still, wondering what was going to happen. She was completely naked and he still had on all his clothes. She swallowed and then made her decision. She would do whatever he wanted, as long as
he used something. He pulled his shirt out from his jeans, and then unzipped his pants. Kathrin waited for him to pull off his jeans, but he only pushed them down to his knees. She could barely make him out in the darkness, but could feel the denim against her legs. Slowly, he pulled her body to him, and then suddenly thrust himself into her. Her mouth contorted silently, and she willed herself not to make any noise. He continued for a moment, then pulled out. She tried to find his hand. “Brian…”

“I know,” he cut her off, “I’m getting it.”

She could feel him fumbling in his jeans, and then heard him rip open the condom package. Then he was back inside her, and pushing vigorously against her body. Her back rubbed against the carpet, and she could feel the heat up and down her spine. After a moment she cried out from the heat. Brian pulled out again, and lay down on the floor. He grabbed her hand and pulled her on top of him. She straddled his body, as he pushed her down keeping his hands firmly on her sides. Kathrin tried to relieve the pressure of the carpet on her knees, but his force was too strong. She clenched her teeth tightly, and hung on, hoping it would end. Finally, Brian huffed like a horse a few times, and then fell back against the carpet. His quivering body relaxed, and then he gave Kathrin a slight shove as an indication that she should climb off him. Her body burned all over and she could feel her heart pulsing below the tissue of her sex. Brian got up and went to the bathroom. Kathrin reached for her clothes, and started putting them on with haste. She wanted it to be all over with, and the sooner he took her home, the better. When Brian came out she was dressed, and he flicked the lights on. The brightness startled Kathrin and she blinked a few times to get used to it. When she looked at Brian his face was tense. “What?” she asked.

“Kathrin. It broke.”

“What?” she hissed.

“Come on. I’ll take you home. We’ll talk about it in the car.”

“Can you drive?”

“I’m fine.”

They climbed the stairs quietly, and Kathrin gulped in the cold air once she got outside. He ushered her into the car, and quickly reversed out of the driveway. Once they were on the main road, he reached his hand over to her. “We can go tomorrow and get you some pills.”

Kathrin shook her head. “No, I’m O.K. I’ll take care of it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”
“O. K. Are you mad?”

Kathrin didn’t answer. She shook her head silently. Brian looked over. “Listen, if anything happens, we’ll take care of it.”

“O. K.”

He kissed her on the cheek before she got out of the car. It was late, but she was only an hour after her curfew. Hopefully her mom had gone to bed.

She crept down the hall and shut her door silently. Once inside she flicked on the light. She dipped her head to see into the mirror over her dresser. She was disappointed. She didn’t look any different. She undressed slowly, and found that there were two matching patches of raw skin on her knees. Rug-burn. She finally had her first case of rug-burn. She took off her top and turned so that her back reflected in the mirror. Another patch traced two inches of her spine. It was going to kill in the morning.

Then she sat on her bed and pulled off her panties. She gently touched her hot skin and brought the underwear up to her eyes. They were clean. She smiled.

All in all it hadn’t been too bad. And it was official; she was no longer a virgin. She slipped into her night shirt and climbed into bed. She wasn’t going to get pregnant, and she wasn’t going to get any pills. She would be fine. She tucked the sheets up under her nose and tried to fall asleep.

She hadn’t expected it to be like that - so rough and uncaring. Of course, Brian hadn’t known it was her first time. He might have behaved differently if he had known. But it was better that he didn’t. He’d still like her anyway. But he could have been nicer, or at least kissed her or something. *It’s not at all like they do it in the movies. No one gets rug-burn.* She felt stupid, and ashamed, and realized that in some way her sister was right. But, Brian wouldn’t dump her. She was sure of that.

In the weeks following the first time, Kathrin and Brian did it all the time. On the bathroom floor at a party, after school at his house, and in her basement against the wall. She loved the smell of him when they had sex, and she forgot about the first time and started enjoying his being naked. The sex didn’t excite her, but that was because she was too inexperienced. Eventually she’d get good at it. She just liked the fact that he was near her and inside her. But she didn’t understand why they needed to do it so often; after all, being around him was good enough for her. She let him do whatever he wanted, whenever. But she never talked about him around the
house, or around her sister. The only person she told was Carol. Carol feigned disgust at first, but then, more and more often, asked Kathrin for the gruesome details.

During the March break Brian went skiing with some friends from school. He didn’t call Kathrin when he got back, and she didn’t see him for three days. Finally, on the Thursday, Kathrin went to his locker after school. She waited for him for fifteen minutes, and was about to give up when she saw him walking towards her locker. He was with the school president. He didn’t notice Kathrin as he slipped his arm around Mary Montgomery’s waist. Mary removed his hand, and then placed a quick kiss on his lips. Kathrin didn’t stay around to witness any more. She went home and bawled on Jen’s shoulder. Jen didn’t say anything. When Kathrin’s voice grew sore and her eyes swelled to the size of teabags, Jen patted her shoulder and slipped out of the room, realizing that Kathrin needed to be alone. Kathrin never told her about the sex, but she was sure her sister knew. She didn’t feel bad about losing ‘it’, she had actually just wanted to get it over and done with in some way, but still she felt like she had been judged, and that she didn’t measure up.

Kathrin lit another smoke and grimaced at the thought of Brian. He still made her stomach churn. Every once in a while she would run into him, in the old neighborhood. He had lost his hair early, and put on a few pounds. He wasn’t dating and devoted his time to the courtroom. A lawyer, but only criminal. They didn’t make any money. Once, he had worked up the courage to ask her out. She had smiled and said, “I doubt it,” and that was the last time he had ever spoken to her. But even ten years later, he made her feel small, insignificant, and stupid – just like the pamphlets. Like she was some collection of body parts that worked away from her mind. Like she couldn’t control her flesh.

She took a sip of her drink, and saw her uncle in the corner of her eye. Please, don’t let him come over. He saw her before she had a chance to bury her nose in the newspaper. He hobbled over, and kissed her cheeks.

“Kathrin, what a nice surprise. Sorry we couldn’t make it for Christmas. In Boston visiting Ray and the grand-kids.”

“It’s O. K. Uncle Jay, you didn’t miss much. How is everyone?”

“Good. Great. Tell that sister of mine that she should make more of an effort, and maybe we’d see you and your sisters oftener.”

Kathrin laughed. “We’re all grown up now. She doesn’t boss us around anymore.”
“And a bad thing that is. So, what are you doing here? I guess you probably didn’t come to see me. So, a date?”

Kathrin shook her head. “No. The atmosphere.”

Jay sat down. “You need an ear to listen?”

“This used to be my favourite place in the world when I was younger. It always made me feel better coming here. I thought it might work now.”

“So? Is it?”

“No.”

Jay patted her hand. “Well, take all the time you need. You should quit,” he said, pointing to the ashtray.

“Yeah, yeah. So I hear. Now scat, you have more important things to do, than sit here and lecture me.”

Jay raised his pot-bellied figure from the chair. “Well, I always enjoy seeing my favourite niece.”

Kathrin leaned towards his kiss, and wrapped her arms around his large shoulders. “It was nice to see you.”

Jay tweaked her ear. “You too kiddo. And listen, sometimes it’s best to share your sorrow. Why don’t you arrange for a little one-on-one with Carol? That girl’s got spunk.”

Kathrin nodded. She watched her uncle moved towards the main door. Maybe he was right. Maybe she should talk to Carol. Maybe she would. She finished her drink, and left her money on the table. Some snow was falling when she left the hotel, and the fresh air revitalized her. But she was still upset.

When she got back to the office, she picked the phone up, then dropped it back in the cradle. She’d call later.

She didn’t have anything to celebrate when she finally got home that night. She scanned the newspaper to see what was playing at the movies, but forced herself not to get up and go to the theatre. She was getting out of control. Next thing I know, I’ll be living in the projectionist’s booth. Instead she decided to take the long bath she’d been waiting for, and relax for an hour. There was nothing else on her plate for the evening. She ran the taps, and lit the Virgin Mary candles she’d bought at the dollar store. A little sacrilegious, but she figured God would
understand. Wasn’t water a biblical mainstay? She dumped two effervescent bath tablets into the water, and went to find a clip for her hair.

When the bath water was about two feet deep, she let it cool for a while and then stepped out of her clothes and into the hot water. Initially, the heat stung her feet, and she watched as her flesh turned red under the water. Then she lowered her body into the tub, her buttocks hitting the water first, and gasped as the heat enveloped her. Her body slid down against the porcelain until only her knees, arms, shoulders and head were exposed to the air. She lay, not moving for a instant and let the water lap over her. She felt like she was in her own private ocean. Like she could control the ocean. Waving her arms through the water, she changed the direction of the ripples, and watched as the liquid splashed against the front of the tub. She could change the tide. She pushed her arms forward and back, then moved her body up and down against the water. She pushed up and down repeatedly, and kept her arms waving forward and back as her head bobbed and her body rolled with the waves.

It was like she was offering herself up to the water, or her soul to the sea of bath tablets and religious candles. She watched the candles flicker slightly, and rested her head on the bath pillow she had placed behind her. Tendrils of her hair had escaped the clip, and dripped rain onto the sheet of water surrounding her. Kathrin watched her body through the sheet; a slightly greener-grey version of the skin she knew so well. She ran her hand over the curve of her stomach, and felt the silky hair on her upper thigh. Everything felt so smooth in water. If only she were a fish. She reached down to the mound of hair swaying underwater like thick, tangled seaweed, and passed her hand over the tips.

She remembered that they warned her about taking baths after the cauterization, but it had been over three weeks. She shifted lower in the tub, and reached two fingers inside her vagina, forcing open the delta between her legs, and pulled the fingers towards the sky. Suddenly, it was as if her body was grabbing at the water and sucking it in. The water rushed forward and filled up the space. She could feel it swirling warm through the eddies and around the flesh of her insides, and the flesh was sensitive and responded to the heat. Her fingers remained in the stream of running water, feeling the contours and the sudden expanse offered to her. She shut her eyes and visualized what her fingers were feeling. Dark. A cave in her body that she knew so little about. So much space. Hidden nooks that felt smooth under the ocean’s surface. Tiny bubbles of rippling flesh. Soft walls against the front. Smooth borders at the back. Kathrin continued tracing the patterns of her interior, not feeling pleasure, but simply feeling. She sat up slowly, and
contracted her muscles, spilling water out into the ocean. Spilling fluid that floated gently to the surface. Purging the delta, flushing her sea to sea.

She felt warm after, and refused to move for fear of losing the piece of time she wanted to stay within. She felt like something had happened there. in the two by three by six box of space, and that she was cleansed. The candles flickered briefly, then the flame held strong. Kathrin pulled herself up, and reached for the plug. The suck of water going down the drain released her from the moment, and she stood up and reached for a towel. She dried herself completely and then slathered the bottle of lotion her mother had given her for her last birthday all over her body.

Quickly, she got dressed and pulled on her boots. She had just enough time to make it to the last show. She had to go. As she approached the door, the phone rang, and for the first time in weeks, she went to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Kathrin?"

"Hi Carol. How are you?"

"Fine. How are you?"

"Couldn’t be better. Listen, you free for lunch tomorrow?"

The line went silent. "Carol?" Kathrin asked.

"Yeah. Yeah, tomorrow’s good. I take it you’re feeling better."

"I feel great. How about Al’s at 12:30?"

"Sure."

"O. K. I gotta go. I’ll see you tomorrow."

"Um, O. K. Bye."

Kathrin hung up the phone smiling. Her uncle was right. Maybe she should talk to someone. She grabbed her keys, and ran down the stairs.

When she got to the theatre she smiled at the usher, and slipped into the last row. They were playing an old black-and-white film, and Kathrin was entranced from the very beginning. There was no sex, and only a few hard pressed kisses, but Kathrin didn’t need anything more than the voice of the protagonist to satisfy her. She touched herself frantically, and by the end of the movie she was exhausted. But, more importantly she felt alive. She had her regular latté after the show, and thought about what she would say to Carol. She was so intent on figuring out the right way to say it, that she didn’t realize there was a man standing near her, until he tapped her on the shoulder.
“Oh,” Kathrin jumped, “I’m sorry. I’m in my own little dream world.”

“It’s all right,” the man responded, “I was just wondering what you thought of the film.”

Kathrin looked up, and felt herself blushing. “What?”

The man smiled. “I saw you at the theatre.”

Kathrin felt her lungs collapsing. “In the theatre?”

He smiled again. “In line actually.”

Kathrin breathed again. “Oh. I liked it. You?”

“One of the classics. I’m Greg.”

“Hi. Kathleen,” she lied and extended her hand.

“Can I sit here?”

Kathrin hesitated. “Yeah, sure.”

He sat down and folded his coat on his lap. “So, what did you think of Wilson?”

“Who’s Wilson?”

“The lawyer.”

He was talking about the film. “He had the sexiest voice I have ever heard.”

Greg smiled. “I never really thought about it, but I guess you’re right. I don’t think men pay much attention to the voice.”

Kathrin twirled her spoon in her hand. “Well, I guess I have a partiality for it.”

He chuckled and took a sip of his coffee. “So, if you don’t mind my asking, why does a beautiful woman go to the theatre alone?”

Kathrin swallowed. She wasn’t in the mood for her wonderful evening to be ruined. She put her mug down and looked at him. “Listen, I appreciate the conversation, but I have a lot of things on my mind.”

He glanced around at the other tables to see if anyone was listening. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. I just thought…”

“Thanks, but no thanks.” Kathrin got up, grabbed her coat and headed for the door.

Her hands were trembling as she unlocked the car, and got inside. Why is it that people just assume? She was ticked. First the doctor had given her the pamphlets, then this guy had nothing better to do than try to pick her up. She looked at herself in the rearview mirror. Did she look like what they thought? Did she seem like the kind of woman who wanted nothing more than a roll in the hay. She slammed her fist down on the steering wheel. Fuck them all! No one knew how much she really wanted someone, and no one seemed to believe her anyway. She might as
well be exactly what they thought. But she wasn’t going to. And she wasn’t going to talk to
strangers anymore.

She raced home, and spent an hour on the computer, perfecting an old file. She thought
about the situation in detail, and finally realized that if she hadn’t gone to the movie like she had
planned, none of it would have happened. And then she realized how to start the conversation with
Carol.

She dropped her bag heavily into the chair on her right and then pulled out the chair
directly across from Carol and sat down. Without waiting for a greeting she lit the cigarette she
was holding in her hand and exhaled. “I’ve got a problem.”

Carol looked up from the newspaper. “Nice to see you too! Three weeks and that’s all
you can say? What kind of problem?”

She flicked her cigarette. “Does it have to be of a certain type?”

Carol dropped her newspaper to the table. “I mean...financial, philosophical, romantic?”

“Romantic, I guess.”

Carefully Carol folded the newspaper in half and gently deposited it on top of Kathrin’s
handbag. She rested her hands on the table, refusing to look at Kathrin. She flexed her fingers
nimbly against the others, each pad finding its match, then pushing forward and relaxing.

Watching Carol’s fingers pulse was like watching the gills of her fish move.

Finally Carol turned her eyes to Kathrin. “O.K. shoot.”

“I’m obsessed.”

Carol smirked then quickly covered the smile by clenching her lips between her teeth.

“Obsession, hmm. That might overlap into psychological. What kind of obsession are we talking
here? Male?”

“Masculine, yes. Not a specific male.”

Carol rolled her eyes. “It doesn’t have to do with a guy?”

“Yes. No. Guys.”

“You’re obsessed with men? No shit.”

Kathrin put the hand holding her cigarette up to her head. Carol watched the loose spirals
of smoke curl around Kathrin’s forehead. Then Kathrin sighed and tapped her cigarette in the
ashtray. “First, you have to swear you won’t laugh.”

“Don’t be stupid!”
“Seriously. Scouts’ honour.”

“Jeez, Kathrin. We haven’t done that in years.”

“Say it.”

“O.K. Fine. Scouts’ honour.”

Kathrin relaxed. “I am obsessed with men in movies.”

Carol fought the terrible urge to laugh. “Is it possible to be obsessed with something that doesn’t exist?”

“They exist.”

“No. The actors exist. With the exception of documentaries, the characters aren’t real, so in fact you’re obsessed with the actors.”

Kathrin scratched her head. “No, you don’t understand. With the characters.”

“And,” Carol jumped in, “what’s that? An enigma, because it has the face of an actor, but the personality of someone else. Even scarier, because you don’t know who or what it is.”

Kathrin was about to say something, but the last sentence of Carol’s had caught her completely off guard. Her eyes widened. “Shit! You’re right. I have no idea what they are. All I know is, I sit in a darkened theatre alone and some man appears, and whammon, I’m in love.”

Carol pressed fingertip to fingertip more tightly and an imperceptible smile curled under her lips. “Lust. Not love. Shame on you Kath,” she spoke with her best motherly tone, “don’t you remember your childhood? That’s not real. You’re in love with a phantom. Something that seems real, but isn’t. And you’ve fallen for the oldest line in the book. The casting execs have you in their clutches now!”

“Enough!”

“No listen! They hope that you and every other North American woman will fall for that phantom. Not the actor, because the actor is finite, but the character because he’s intangible.”

“Don’t reduce it to mass mentality. It’s more than that. It’s more than estrogen.”

Carol grabbed Kathrin’s smoke and took a haul. “It’s Darwinism.”

Kathrin took her cigarette back. “What are you talking about?”

“Parts.”

“Again?”

“P-A-R-T-S. Parts. Let me explain this to you. Say you have an actor. You bump into him on the street. You say ‘I really liked you in blah-blah-blah, and you were so good in that other
movie. ‘What you liked in one movie is not what you liked in another movie, but the actor is the same as he will be next time you see him in person.’

Kathrin narrowed her eyes. ‘So?’

‘So, you only like parts of him that change. The real person stays the same. Every time you see a movie you only like certain parts that the director is specifically pointing out. So, to simplify your own obsession, I think you’re pulling a Darwin.’

‘You lost me.’

‘You’re not obsessed with characters. You’re obsessed with different parts of each actor. You want to take the best parts that turn you on, away from the theatre and recreate your own, let’s say, king of the jungle.’

Kathrin laughed. ‘That is so not true. I don’t take all the best parts.’

‘O.K. we’ll put it to the test. I’ll name an actor, and you tell me what sticks out about him.’

‘O.K.’

‘Tom Cruise.’

‘Easy. Jaw.’

‘Robert Sean Leonard.’

‘Who is that?’

‘Suicide guy in Dead Poets.’

‘Seriousness.’

‘Jean Claude Van Damme.’

‘Ass.’

‘Harvey Keitel.’

‘Eyes.’

‘Ha!’

‘What?’

Carol motioned for a smoke. ‘See, I got you.’

‘How?’

‘No person in their right mind could find Harvey Keitel attractive.’

Kathrin handed Carol a smoke. ‘He happens to have great eyes!’

‘You’re willing to accept an aging bloated actor because of his eyes?’

Kathrin tossed her head. ‘The sum is more than its parts.’
“Whoa! In this case the sum is far less than its parts. In reality you’re pulling the same stunt women have pulled for centuries. You look around and see parts, functions. We do it all the time. You know: God he has nice eyes, what gorgeous arms, what I wouldn’t give to have that hot ass pushing me into the bed coils. But the whole package is worth less than the parts. What you get is pieces of a Corvette in a K-car. And for a while the K-car seems to be exactly what you need. In the end you accept the K-car for what it is, or you wait for the Corvette.”

“That is the biggest hunk of crap I’ve ever heard!” Kathrin declared.

“Prove it!” Carol shot back through plumes of expelled smoke.

“O. K. Tommy Lee Jones. Man has the looks to stop a Mac truck.”

“You’re ruining your argument.”

Kathrin held up her hand. “But... I’d marry him just to hear him wake me up in the morning.”

“But,” Carol paused dramatically, “would you fuck him?”

“Sure.”

“With your eyes closed.”

“So?”

“So, even if you can’t bear to look at him, you’ve chosen a part of him you find sexy. You wouldn’t marry him. You’d just cut out his voicebox and insert it into Tom Cruise’s jaws, and ask him to speak to you in all seriousness.”

“So, what’s your point?”

“You need to find a real man. In the real world. Not one made from parts that a director chooses to accentuate. Didn’t Frankenstein teach you anything? Maybe you should watch that movie.”

“It wouldn’t turn me on.”

“Turn you on? So what? Wait a second... do you...”

“Yes.”

Carol began choking on the cigarette smoke. “In the theatre?”

“Yes.”

“Oh God! That’s so gross.”

Kathrin looked at Carol. “I can’t help it. It just happens.”

“Since when?”

“High school. But then I stopped.”
“You’re a pervert.”

“Am I?”

Carol shook her head. “No. But, that’s it! No more movies for you. What if you get caught? That wouldn’t go over well.”

“I know.”

“Why did you start doing it again?”

Kathrin groaned. “It’s a long story.”

Carol smiled. “I have time.”

Kathrin sighed, and began her monologue. She knew that Carol wouldn’t interrupt until she was finished. She started editing her thoughts before she laid out the network of events of the past few months for Carol to evaluate. Eventually, Kathrin told her everything, and by the end of the luncheon felt as if a huge tumor had been removed from her chest. Carol sat quietly chain-smoking Kathrin’s cigarettes. When the story came to a close, Carol shook her head.

“Friday night we’re going out. Just the girls.”

Kathrin nodded. “Maybe I should go read those damn pamphlets.”

Work had settled down to a dull pattern of small tasks and projects. Primarily, her daily routine consisted of working on several animated sequences for a children’s program. After creating a few ‘likable’ characters, it was simply a matter of plugging in the scripts forwarded from the studio. Kathrin didn’t have to stay late and for the first time found the regularity of her day appealing. She limited her voyeurism to one movie a week, even though Carol had stated in no uncertain terms that such insane and destructive behaviour would surely lead Kathrin to ruin. But Kathrin reasoned that one short visit a week was justifiable. Still, she told Carol that she had enrolled in a painting class on Tuesday nights, if only to provide herself with an alibi.

She saw her mother for the first few weeks of February, before Ingrid and Agnes departed for their yearly month long cruise, and baby-sat Danielle whenever Andria needed time alone or to run errands. Her lifestyle suddenly became boring, dull, routine - all the things she had promised herself it never would. It wasn’t exciting, and Kathrin felt like a wrinkled dowager, but accepted the turn as the best medication for her mental frame of mind.

Since her conversation with Carol, it was Saturday night she lived for. Getting dressed up to go dancing with her three best friends, and sometimes their mates. The women had resolved to go out once a week until someone gave birth. Then, life as they knew it would be over. Kathrin
spent hours primping in the bathroom, until she was physically and mentally prepared for the evening ahead. She no longer worried about going out — she had a back-up plan.

She stood at the bar, waiting for the bartender to notice her. Every so often the crowd would swell against her, pushing her hips squarely against the hard wood. She moved to make herself more comfortable and knocked into the man standing next to her.

"Sorry," she mumbled, turning her face to the unfortunate gentleman.

He smiled. "No problem. A person could die of thirst waiting here, if he didn't get trampled first."

"You're telling me."

"Tell you what, whoever gets served first buys the other person a drink."

Kathrin looked at the handsome man beside her, then threw a quick glance towards the petite blond woman serving drinks. "You're on."

The bartender served the drinks in her hand, collected the money, and then scanned the bar. Her eyes passed blindly over Kathrin and came to rest on the man beside her. The woman walked over and stopped directly in front of him. "What can I get you?" she asked.


After they got their drinks, he followed her to a less busy corner of the bar. "Did you know something I didn't?" he demanded.

"Hey, if she had been a man, I would've been paying. Consider it a compliment."

He raised his glass and Kathrin clinked her own against his. "Cheers."

They played a rather weak game of pool against two American tourists, then Kathrin moved over to an empty table and found that he was still following her. He pulled her chair out for her, and Kathrin had to suppress a groan. Why is it that all men are gentlemen only for the first few moments? Until they get laid.

"So Katie," he asked, peering over a fresh bottle of beer, "what do you do?"

Kathrin smiled. "I work for the Board of Ed. In Administration. Mostly hiring and liaisons."

"Really? Maybe you could get me a job."

Kathrin frowned. "Why?"

"Well," he said proudly, "once I finish Teacher's College, that is."

"Oh, you're going back to school. That's great."
He looked at her shyly, and Kathrin felt her heart beating fast and warm under her shirt.

"Yeah. I really like it. But, I still have one more year to go."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm only in my fourth year now."

Kathrin's heart stopped and her eyes narrowed. "Of your BA?"

"BSc."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

Kathrin took a sip of her drink. She looked at him. *Cradle robbing*. But, he was cute.

Two months earlier she wouldn't have cared in the least. But things were different then. She smiled. "That's great," she lied.

"Katie? Would you like to go out sometime? If you're not busy."

Kathrin feigned surprise. "Really?" she asked in her most high-schoolish voice. "Sure, let me give you my number."

Her hand dipped into her wallet. Carefully she extracted a business card and glanced at it quickly to make sure. She handed it to him. "I'm really busy this week, so why don't you call sometime next week?"

He grinned. "Great."

Kathrin stretched and stood up. "I should go find my friends. It was nice meeting you."

"I'll call next week."

"I can't wait."

She slipped through the crowd. A pang of guilt hit her, but she chose to ignore it. He was only twenty-one; he'd get over it. She smiled and joined Steph on the dance floor. Immediately Steph brought her head close to Kathrin's and demanded to know who the guy was. Kathrin laughed. "Nobody."

Kay Cohen could feel his eyes scanning her face and body. She turned very slowly and tugged at her hair so that it tumbled down over her shoulder. She met his eyes for a fraction of a second, then dropped hers seductively. She counted to two, then raised her eyes again and found that he was still looking at her. She turned away slowly. She was drunk and flirting and aware of both. So was Carol, who kept nudging her. "Go talk to him. He's hot."

Kathrin kept shoving Carol's hand away. "Shh. He'll see you."
Carol threw up her arms in exasperation. "So what? He's seen you looking at him all night."

Kathrin didn't respond. She was too busy watching him lowering himself from the bar stool out of the corner of her eye. She nodded with satisfaction. By far the best body she had seen in a long time. Carol agreed, and let out a long whistle. She sensed the tactical maneuver in progress and excused herself under the pretense of having to powder her nose. Then she turned and headed for the dance floor. The man slipped into the space that Carol had been occupying, and oozed into a Chippendale pose. "Hi," he said, in a deep booming voice.

Kathrin took a swig of her beer. "Hi."
"I'm Tony."
"Kay."

An awkward moment passed where neither said anything.

"I've never seen you here before." He commented casually, and Kathrin felt like she was in a poorly written melodrama.

"First time."
"Yeah, I figured. You from out of town?"

Kathrin frowned. "No. Why?"
"I don't know. Just asking."

"Oh, I see," she said, not really understanding, "I take it you're from around here?"
"Bred, born and raised."

Inwardly, Kathrin groaned. Outwardly, she laughed sweetly. All looks, no brain.

He took her laughter as a sign of interest. "So what do you like to do?"

She thought quickly. What would a systems analyst do in her spare time? "I play softball."

"Oh yeah?" he asked, quickly scanning her body.

She realized that he would find it hard to believe. She was the antithesis of the burly, athletic female softball players she had seen on TV during the Olympics. Still, there were always exceptions. "Yeah."

"What position?"
"First."

"Wow. That's tough."
"Well, I've got a good stretch," she said, mimicking what she'd heard Scott say on countless occasions.

"Yeah, well, I guess when you play with chicks..."

Kathrin felt her chest tighten. *This is going to end badly.* "What do you do for fun?"

"I work out a lot."

"No kidding?" she asked sarcastically.

He missed it. "Yeah."

She didn't waste any more time. He wasn't worth a card.

The next weekend, the whole group went to the Devil's Martini. Figuring she could do no worse, she assumed her alias of Kay for the second time. It was by far the most convincing role because she could manipulate her computer knowledge and not risk the detection of being a fraud. But mostly, she enjoyed the power of pretending to be an uptight, straight-laced professional, as opposed to her more uninhibited self. And when it came down to it she was an attractive woman, and that's what really mattered the most to faceless, nameless men at bars. Eventually one would mosey on over to her and attack from a different angle, a different point of view, but with the same motive as all the others.

Tom was tall, blond and divorced with two children. She extracted a card at 10:00 p.m. after he produced countless pictures of his kids from his own wallet. Then she waited impatiently for nearly an hour before he left the bar and she was allowed to appear available again.

Jack was shorter, broader, cuter and world-traveled. He imported furniture, most of it antique or rare. By 11:30 he had traced over three hundred years of the history of the armchair while Kathrin listened politely and tried not to yawn. Several times she had caught Carol and Alison's eyes and given them the 'save me' signal. The four of them had turned rescues into a fine science in university. A chin firmly planted in one hand with the thumb and the forefinger slowly pinching down to the tip of the chin meant 'five minutes - then move in'. Several tugs on the most visually apparent earlobe indicated urgency, and the rapid-fire brushing of the tip of the nose by one or two fingers was the 'save me' signal. It meant 'I don't care what you're doing-get over here now and get me away from this creep'. Kathrin was sure the two women had seen it; after all she hadn't been subtle. Even Jack had inquired as to whether she had a cold. They were probably enjoying the whole scene.
Finally Carol moved through the crowd towards them. "Kath, you have to come over. We just ran into Marty Lucas!"

Kathrin looked to Jack to see if he had noticed Carol use her name. He looked at her blankly. "High school friend," she explained quickly, "but it was nice talking to you."

"Wait," he said, grabbing a hold of the arm Carol wasn’t tugging, "can I call you?"

Kathrin flipped him the card she was saving in her coat pocket, and then let herself get pulled away by Carol. When they were safely across the bar, Carol turned back to Kathrin. "Why on earth would you give him your number?"

"He won’t call."

Carol looked at her oddly, but decided not to ask. She felt sure that Kathrin was up to something.

Carol, Steph and Alison had abandoned her near the TV screen. They had little interest in hockey, or any sport that used too much padding and covered male bodies completely. Kathrin was forced to enjoy the Senators pummel the Leafs by herself. She glanced around. Well not completely alone. To her right and closer to the screen, a large cluster of men were definitely interested in the game. She smiled. Their girlfriends were no doubt pissed off. The game was in the second period and the Sens were already up by three.

Occasionally she glanced over to the group of men and watched them move to the bar or their girlfriends at odd intervals. Except for one. His eyes remained glued to the screen. Kathrin found herself more and more intrigued and eventually she was spending more time watching him than the screen. At first she felt as if he would feel her watching him, but then realized that he was oblivious to everything but the blazing puck that traveled across the screen, followed closely by an acid-flashback trail of light. *Courtesy of those idiots down at Fox.*

Suddenly Carol nudged her. "How’s the game?"

Kathrin blushed, realizing she hadn’t been looking at the screen. "Good."

"Yeah right. I’ve been watching you watch that guy for ten minutes now."

"Well, can you blame me?"

Carol laughed. "I see what you’re saying. The back of his head is pretty sexy."

"Shut up!"

"Just go talk to him. You already know you have something in common. You’re both hockey freaks."
Kathrin sighed. "Alas! For that reason alone I couldn’t bear tearing him away from such a sacred occupation."

"Well, stop staring then. You look like an idiot."

Kathrin turned back to the screen. She took a step forward, towards the man. Next thing she knew, she was standing next to him. "So, how much did you bet?" she asked.

His eyes remained glued to the set, but his mouth broke into a wide grin. "Is it that obvious?"

"You’ve been staring at the screen for fifteen minutes straight. Pretty obvious, I’d say."

She noted the obvious effort it took for him to pry his view from the screen.

"I’m an addict."

"No kidding. There are groups for that."

He laughed. "You’re funny. Are you a hockey fan?"

"It’s not that all-encompassing. I like the Senators and The Avalanche. And I hate the Leafs - which is probably the team you bet on."

He looked at her as if she had struck him. "They’re having a bad season."

"They’re always having a bad season."

"Well Ms. Anti-Leafs, I know now that I shouldn’t, but I’m Michael."

"K."

"Like a word or the letter?"

"The letter."

"Neat. Must have been hard for your parents to come up with that. Years of research I bet."

"Ha! Ha!" Kathrin glared at him but then laughed in spite of herself.

He bought her shots and they watched the hockey game together. After it was over, she imagined that he would disappear, but he insisted on ‘cutting some rug’ with her before he left. He was surprisingly adept on the dance floor. Kathrin searched for Carol, and when they made eye contact she conveyed her thoughts in one look. Carol got the message.

Michael excused himself after a few songs in order to find the lavatory. Kathrin sought out her friends. The women were still talking when Michael returned from the bathroom. Kathrin made the introductions, and she could tell from her friends’ reactions that they were impressed. He offered to buy a round of drinks, and they all accepted. While Michael made his way to the bar, Kathrin ducked into the ladies’ room. When she returned, he was talking to Carol near the bar.
Carol shot Kathrin a questioning glance, but before Kathrin could analyze its possible meanings, Michael had pulled her onto the dance floor to join him in a slow dance.

His arms felt strong and powerful around her waist, even if she found the whole dancing scene unappealing and slightly juvenile. Only drunks and school kids danced to slow songs at bars. The thought of him being one or the other hadn’t even crossed her mind. He hadn’t really talked at all about what he did. Instead he had let her talk, which was a refreshing change. Even if she had only told him lies. All of a sudden Kathrin felt panic. *What if Carol told him what I really do for a living? Oh shit.* But if that had been the case, surely he would not have asked her to dance again. She resigned herself to not thinking about it, and moved against his body.

Suddenly he pulled her away from his chest. “I’m going to kiss you,” he said, moving his head closer to her face.

Kathrin jerked back mechanically. “Not in the middle of the dance floor, you’re not!”

He smiled. “Why, are you shy?”

“I guess.”

In reality, she was embarrassed. No self-respecting woman made out with a relative stranger in the middle of a public place. It was disgusting, and she hated it when other people did it in front of her.

“Well,” he sighed, “maybe you’ll let me take you out for coffee at least.”

“Maybe. When?”

“After the bar.”

Kathrin swallowed. She wanted to, she really did. But she couldn’t. She wasn’t going to go back to meaningless one-night stands. It wasn’t worth it. “Maybe,” she said.

His arms tightened around her waist. Slowly, he turned his body so that it was flat against her front. She took a deep breath and moved with him. After a few minutes he began rubbing his jeans against her, and she could feel that he had an erection. Soon he was pressing harder against her, and Kathrin started to feel uncomfortable.

She lifted her head. “Michael...” she said in a half joking whine.

His eyes were shut, and she could hear him moaning softly. *Oh god, he’s getting off on the dance floor.* He paid no attention to her plea and kept moving against her with more force.

“Michael, stop it.” She said with more emotion.

His eyes popped open and he looked directly at her. “Shh! I just want to show you what I’m going to do to you when I take you home and fuck you tonight.”
Kathrin felt as if she'd been slapped. She stood dazed for a moment, while he continued to move calmly to the music, then suddenly wrenched herself free from his grasp.

"You pig!" she hissed and pushed through the crowd of dancing couples, leaving him standing alone on the floor, apparently stunned at her reaction.

Kathrin grabbed Carol’s arm. “Let’s go!”

Carol looked at her for a few seconds, and seeing the expression on her face, grabbed their coats and retrieved Alison and Steph. The four of them stumbled out into the cold. Kathrin refused to put on her coat, and vented her fury by packing snow in her hands, then hurling the balls against anything stationary.

"Men!" she exploded when Carol asked her what the matter was.

“What happened?” all three women chorused.

“That fucker started rubbing up against me, and then when I asked him to stop he said that he was just trying to show me what he was going to do when he fucked me later tonight! Asshole!” She launched another snowball against a wall.

Carol snorted. “Why is it all men are pricks?”

“Exactly because of that.” Steph retorted.

They walked the rest of the way to Alison’s car in silence. When they reached the car, Kathrin dusted the last of the snow from her frozen hands, and sighed.

“Are there any decent men left? Or did you guys get them all?”

Her friends laughed weakly, and climbed into the car. Alison dropped Carol and Kathrin off at Kathrin’s place, and the two women walked slowly up the driveway to where Carol’s car was parked.

“Well,” Carol said reluctantly, “at least you found out sooner than later.”

“True. But I wouldn’t have gone home with him anyway.”

“I know.”

They stood in the driveway and watched the snow fall over them. Finally Kathrin moved towards the front door. “Well, thanks anyway.”


“I’ll bet,” Kathrin said as she pulled out her keys.

“Hey listen, can I ask you a question?”

Kathrin stopped. “Yeah. What?”

“How come that guy asked me if I was in publishing too?”
Kathrin smiled pathetically. "You don’t want to know."
"I think I already do. You’ve been using those cards you made. haven’t you."
Kathrin bowed her head in mock shame. "Guilty."
Carol laughed and shook her head. "You really take the cake sometimes. you know that?"
"Yeah."
"Yeah." Carol echoed.
"Good night, Carol."
"Good night K. I mean, that’s your name isn’t it? Like the letter?"
Kathrin took a long shower when she got home, to clean off the film of Michael’s body that she could still feel, almost to the point of actually smelling. She felt ill and violated. She never wanted to see a living male body again in her life. The only good male body as far as she was concerned was a dead one. But even more than the repulsion she felt towards men - all men, she felt ashamed. It was as if she was a homing beacon for all the rejects and users out there. Like she had the word ‘whore’ stamped across her forehead. All she did was talk to men at bars. It wasn’t like she put on a private strip tease for the patrons. And Steph and Carol and Alison talked to men. Of course, they let it be readily known that they were a member of a couple. But still, she hadn’t done anything to convince Michael that she would sleep with him.

When she was about ten, she had ventured out into the backyard at her home one day during the summer break. She was sitting quietly by the sandbox, playing with her Barbie dolls, when she had heard strange noises coming from Mrs. Martin’s house next door. The sounds piqued her interest and she crawled under the hedge to get a better listen. When she got to the other side of the bushes, she crept silently up to Mrs. Martin’s window. Slowly she stood up, and stretched onto her tiptoes. The white lace curtains fluttered gently in the summer breeze and Kathrin could see clearly into the living room. Mrs. Martin was bent over the couch, and to Kathrin it looked like she had fallen and was trying to pull herself up by gripping onto the back of the sofa. Kathrin was about to call out and ask her if she needed help, when she saw that there was someone else with her. Initially, she relaxed, seeing that Mrs. Martin was getting help, but then she realized that the man in the living room looked to be shoving her into the couch instead of helping her up from it. She opened her mouth to speak, but the sudden realization that the two were naked from the waist down, stopped her. She watched in silent horror as the man repeatedly threw his body against poor Mrs. Martin. There was something long and hard sticking out from his body, and it looked to Kathrin as if he was stabbing her. Mrs. Martin was whimpering, and Kathrin managed to pry her eyes from the bodies. She was scared out of her wits. She dropped from the window without a sound and dove under the hedge, then tore across her lawn.

Her mother was canning pears in the kitchen. “Hurry mom, there’s a man hurting Mrs. Martin. He keeps pushing her down onto the couch, and he’s hitting her with something.”

Kathrin expected her mother to drop everything and rush over to the aid of Mrs. Martin. Instead, Ingrid’s lips pursed into a fine, rigid line. “Hitting her? With what?”

Kathrin swallowed. “With his thingie.”

“Go to your room, Kathrin. Wait there until I come back.”
Kathrin didn't argue with her mother and trudged dejectedly up the stairs. She walked into her room and sat on the edge of the bed. After a few minutes the front door opened and shut and Kathrin darted from her bed to her mother's room. From there she had a clear view over the side of the house and could see Mrs. Martin's front door. She could also see her mother approaching the door with powerful strides. Her mother looked upset. No doubt the thought of someone hurting Mrs. Martin had done it.

When Ingrid got to the door, she rapped hard against the wood, and stood waiting with her arms crossed. Eventually, Kathrin could see the door swing open. The women were too far away for Kathrin to hear, but she could see her mother's fist shaking and temples throbbing. Mrs. Martin seemed to be apologizing, over and over again, then slowly shut the door. Kathrin's mom threw up her arms and then stomped her way down the stairs of the porch. Kathrin dashed back into her room, knowing the penalty would be severe if she was caught disobeying her mother.

Five minutes later, Ingrid mounted the stairs softly and walked into Kathrin's room. Kathrin was colouring at her desk. She turned when her mother entered. "Am I in trouble, mommy?"

"No, of course not. I just want you to stay away from Mrs. Martin's house. Why were you there?"

"I heard some strange noises."

Ingrid's eyes shut tightly for a moment. "Never again, Kathrin. O. K.?"

"What was that man doing?"

Ingrid's eyes darted around the room. "He was showing Mrs. Martin a new dance step."

"With his pants off?"

Ingrid gave up. She sat Kathrin down and offered a rather detailed and clinical assessment of love-making. It didn't sound very appealing to Kathrin.

"And you can do it with anyone you want?"

Ingrid looked like she'd been slapped. "Of course not. You do it with your husband."

Kathrin thought long and hard. "But that wasn't Mr. Martin."

Ingrid turned solemnly to her daughter. "And because of that, Mrs. Martin is going straight to Hell."

It wasn't until Kathrin was about twelve that she heard rumours about Mrs. Martin. How she had sex with anyone who would ask her, and sometimes two or three at the same time. Kathrin didn't understand how Mr. Martin could let her, but he must have been very sad to know that his
wife was going to Hell. When Kathrin was about seventeen, the Martins moved to Edmonton, and Ingrid stood on the porch and waved them off. “Good riddance to bad rubbish,” she muttered.

Kathrin took the opportunity. “Did she really sleep with anyone who’d ask her.”

Ingrid turned a pale face to her daughter. “That woman was a strumpet.”

“A what?”

“A whore. I knew it the first day they moved in.”

“How?”

“Sometimes you can smell it.”

And over ten years later, Kathrin suddenly felt as if she was the one who had the stench of being easy. the lurid aroma of a woman who couldn’t say no.

 Jamie.” she cornered him in her office early Monday morning. “What kind of person am I?”

He looked around as if checking for a hidden microphone. “What do you mean?”

“Well, if someone came in here asking about me, what would you tell them?”

“I’d say you were a great designer, really driven, and fun.”

“What do you mean, fun?”

He paused, and chose his words carefully. “Fun to work with. And full of energy.”

“What about outside of work?”

He grinned. “Why are you asking me?”

“Just answer the question.”

Jamie sat on the edge of her desk. “You’re high-energy. Why?”

“Well, would you say I look excessively available?”

Jamie burst out into laughter. “What?”

Kathrin swatted his arm. “Don’t laugh. What does that mean?”

He composed himself. “Kathrin, I would say you’re the exact opposite. If I was a guy in a bar, I’d be scared to talk to you.”

“Why?”

“Cause you look like you’re about ready to kill someone. You have this evil eye, and I’ve seen it at work and outside of work. It says ‘don’t bother to waste my time, I’ll eat you for breakfast’.”

Kathrin frowned. “Really?”
“It’s not a bad thing,” he quickly offered, “it’s just a little scary for someone who doesn’t know you. Now tell me why you’re asking.”

Kathrin shook her head. “It’s stupid really.”

“So?”

“Well, every Saturday the girls and I, you know Carol, Alison and Steph, go out. It never fails that I eventually talk to some guy who turns out to be a sleaze bag. Why is that?”

Jamie pondered the question with evident attention. “I don’t really know, but maybe you attract guys who crave failure. Maybe they figure you’ll turn them down anyway, so why not try. Or maybe they try too hard to impress you, and when it doesn’t work they get mean. Or maybe, and this is a long shot, maybe you’re just talking to them for the fun of it, to get a few kicks, and they know it.”

Jamie ended his analysis and found that Kathrin was staring at him, her eyes wide.

“Or maybe,” he continued, sensing he’d said the wrong thing, “I’m full of shit because my degree is in history.”

Kathrin smiled. “No. You were right on the money. I don’t give a shit. Thanks a lot.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“You didn’t.”

“Well then,” he said, gathering some files off her desk, “just let me know when I can help.”

He left the office and Kathrin mulled his words over in her head. All those business cards, all the pretending, and that’s what it came down to. In the end, she was way worse than guys like Michael. She played with those guys, and really didn’t care that much. From now on, she thought, in a mental voice similar to Scarlett O’Hara, it’s gonna be me. Take it or leave it.

In the end it turned out sort of how she envisioned it. Kathrin refused to go back to the same bar where she had met Michael, so for the most part they went to The Devil’s Martini. Aside from the relatively young crowd, it was a good place to go. After all, she and her friends weren’t trolling for guys. She still met a few nice men, but usually ducked out of the conversation early. Still, every so often she pulled her business cards out to back her up. But, only as a last resort.

The snow continued through February, and lasted well into March. Kathrin contemplated moving into a real apartment, just to be rid of the snow in her driveway. At least the downstairs tenants did most of the dirty work. She ventured out only to go to work and her weekly movie, and of course the Saturday nights. It was a blessing that her mother was away for another two weeks.
It would be April when she returned. and then the Sunday dinners would resume and Kathrin would be subjected to her mother’s words of wisdom once again.

There was still no news about the sexual trials of Jen and Scott. No news meant bad news, as far as Kathrin could tell. And Jen had spoken about it little since Christmas. Andria was lost in the world of Martha Stewart and Kathrin had no interest in pulling her out of it. Still, Andria had left a long sisterly message saying that they had decided to go to the cottage for a month in the summer and she was more than welcome to visit. Kathrin fought the urge to decline immediately. It would actually be nice to go back to the cottage. She hadn’t been there in about ten years, mostly out of fear that it had crumbled into a state of disrepair. Andria and Mark went every summer, and Kathrin knew that they both had put a lot of effort into it, even though her aunts had left it to their three nieces. Kathrin had no desire to restore the wrap-around porch, or fix the plumbing. It wasn’t the actual cottage that held appeal for her. It was the property, and the lake, and the tall rocky hill where she used to watch sunsets, and make up stories, and daydream. Maybe she would take a few weeks and go. It was still months away, and more pressing issues had come up.

At work she and Jamie had put in a proposal to get a contract starting in April. She was really excited about it, and hoped her work for MuchMusic would help. It was going to be a documentary on several fashion designers, and they wanted a section on the actual thought processes involved from start to finish. Kathrin felt that if they got the chance, they could get about thirty minutes of graphic time wedged into the documentary. Bringing the designs to life on screen.

And then there was the matter of Alison’s wedding. The girls had already chosen the material for the bridesmaids’ dresses, and were in the process of getting arms and waists pinched every time they stepped into the bridal shop. Kathrin had found a great florist, and slowly everything was coming together. Except for a date. As it stood, Kathrin was a dateless wonder. Four months to go. She really didn’t mind the thought of going alone. She was in the bridal party anyway, and would be really busy. Plus, as Carol had pointed out, that way she could scan the attendees. It was sad and twisted, but Carol had a point.

Saturday nights were getting better with every passing weekend. Kathrin stopped trying to meet men, and chose to enjoy the company of her friends. She even went as far as to really introduce Alison to the game of pool. It was like pulling teeth, but slowly, Alison was improving. And finally Kathrin realized one night that even though she was single, she was no longer lonely.
The first day of April fell on a Saturday, and Kathrin found it uplifting for two reasons: first, no one could pull office pranks; and second, it dawned bright and sunny. Kathrin pulled herself out of bed and decided to venture down Queen Street for breakfast.

The sidewalks were clean, and thin streams of water ran over the curbs and into the street. Kathrin inhaled the wetness and could smell spring in the air. She nodded to the small Oriental woman who worked at the corner grocery store, and bought a small plant from the front stand. The lady smiled and wrapped it in a plastic bag. “Still a little cold,” she explained to Kathrin.

Kathrin continued down the street until she reached the small café that served the best omelets she had ever tasted. She found a seat right near the window and ordered a coffee. When the waitress placed it in front of Kathrin and took the order, she also offered Kathrin the morning paper. Kathrin accepted. It had been a long time since she’d done her university routine. She asked the waitress for a pen, and flipped the newspaper open to the crossword. Let’s see if I’m still any good at this. The girls used to make fun of her at school. They could do anything, say anything when she was doing the crossword and she never flinched.

By the time her omelet arrived she had almost given up. The waitress poured her a refill, while looking over her shoulder. “Ecru,” she stated.

“Where?” Kathrin demanded.

“Twenty-one across.”

Kathrin nodded and filled in the blanks. She was a little rusty. She got a few more answers then decided to call it quits. Obviously, the skill had vanished. She laughed suddenly, remembering that Steph had done the crosswords with her. Only, when Steph couldn’t think of an answer, she’d simply fill in a word with the same amount of letters. It was arbitrary as to what the word of choice was. But the funniest thing was, then she’d fill the area around it with other words that fit the pattern. Sometimes she could fill in more spaces than Kathrin, and the words made sense. Didn’t fit with the clues, but made sense nonetheless. Strange that she would remember that. But memories were like that - they popped up at any moment, paying absolutely no attention to rhyme or reason.

After she had finished her breakfast, she walked back to her apartment. The sun had risen, and Kathrin felt flushed in her winter coat. Only a few more weeks, and she’d be wearing a sweatshirt, maybe even shorts if a warm spell hit. Which was quite possible considering the whole El Niño thing. Kathrin really didn’t know that much about it, but after such a hard winter it was
what all the weather forecasts were predicting. Spring. The word sounded so good to her. Maybe she'd even do some cleaning. Lord knew, her apartment could use it.

So, she spent the afternoon wiping, dusting, mopping, spraying, and sweating even though all the windows were wide open. She even polished the silverware, which was only silver plated. And then she took a bath, and nearly drowned herself when she nodded off for a few moments. But when she got out of the bath and the cold air hit, she felt revived and ready for a great night out.

When they arrived at The Devil's Martini, Kathrin immediately hit the dance floor, and vibrated vigorously for almost an hour. Carol hadn't seen her so pumped in ages.

"Hey Miss Energy," she screamed over the music, "what's up with you? Some new drug I should know about?"

Kathrin laughed. "Nope."

Carol thought for a moment. "If I weren't so sure it wasn't true, I'd say you were in love."

Kathrin laughed harder. "Yep. With spring."

Carol rolled her eyes. "You're nuts."

"No, but I'm hot. I'm gonna go get a drink."

She opted for a glass of water and a screwdriver to chase it with. Once she had downed the two glasses, she returned to the dance floor. Before she knew it, it was eleven thirty and she was exhausted. Carol and Harold had secluded themselves at a table in the corner for the moment, but Steph and Alison were still thrashing wildly on the dance floor. Their mates were at a pool table no doubt. Kathrin moved to the bar, but didn't feel like a drink. Instead she stood there while her heart slowed, and looked at herself in the mirror behind the bar. She did look tired. Maybe she'd take a cab home early. Note to self - no more cleaning.

"Heart of lonely cities."

She heard the words and smiled, waiting for someone behind her to respond. It took a few seconds to realize the statement was addressed to her. She slowly turned towards the voice.

"You mean city of lonely hearts."

His eyes met hers as she turned, and caught them in a dead-lock stare. "I was referring to you."

Her smile hung frozen on the verge of faltering, as she catalogued her options. Flight or fight. She could nod, then turn and melt into the crowd, or stay and challenge the unwavering eyes. Her smile broadened.
“Come here often?” she asked in her best bar drawl.

She watched as his body relaxed against the bar. “Enough to know you give out your number a lot.”

The comment caught her off guard. Instinctively she tensed and fiercely defended herself, saying “I never give out my number.”

His eyes narrowed, but remained poised on hers. “My mistake.”

She looked away, then quickly jerked her head back towards him. “I give out my business card. There’s a difference.”

His lips curled into a close-mouthed smile. “You’d rather be harassed at work than at home?”

She thought about the comment, then smiled. “My phone’s not exactly ringing off the hook.”

Her eyes wandered over the bar, and when she looked back at him he was motioning to the bartender, who nodded and pulled two glasses from the bar rack. *He can order drinks without speaking. Impressive.*

He turned back to her and without hesitation asked, “So how come you never leave with anyone? Not lack of suitors, I’ve noticed. You just hand out your card, and slip through the door. Why?”

She shrugged. “Not interested.”

He frowned. “You give your card to guys you’re not interested in?”

“I only give my card to the ones I’m not interested in.”

He laughed. “That makes perfect sense. I always talk to women I find abhorrent. Why bother?”

She slipped her fingers through her hair, and chewed on her lower lip. She didn’t need to confess her sins to him, but, what the hell? “I don’t know. I guess I feel like I owe them something... like a thank you note; a trade. They give me their unconscious lies and fantasies - the regular bullshit. I give them tangible evidence that for a couple of hours they were all they said they were. In the morning, they’re fulfilled and I’m not involved. It’s a good deal.”

“For a detached point of view. But what happens when they call?”

She shook her head. “No one calls.”

He was about to pursue the conversation, but the bartender cut him off by placing two glasses in front of them. She frowned at the glasses, then turned from the bartender to him.
“Water.” he explained.
“But you didn’t say anything to him.”
“Yes, because the bartender can read my mind.”
“Ah.” she said nodding. “the universal language of the regular.”
“Exactly. I’m surprised you don’t know it. You’re here enough.”
“You’ve been watching me?” she asked cautiously, feeling herself tense up again.
He looked over to the TV screen. “I observe.” he said simply.
“There’s a big difference between observing and watching.” she countered.
He reached for a glass of water. “First.” he said. “you observe. Then you watch. In the end you pretty much know.”
She took the glass from his hand. “My point exactly. And that’s when the business card comes out.”
“When you know he’s not right?”
“Right.”
“What if he is right?”
She laughed. “I don’t know. Never gotten that far.”
Their conversation lapsed into a lull. He was the first to break the silence. “What’s your name?”
She looked at him and then hesitantly said, “Kathrin.”
He extended his arm. “Aaron.”
She felt her hand slide firmly into his grip, warm and fluid. The waiter leaned across the bar. “You two need anything else?”
Aaron shook his head. “Fine, thanks.”
They disengaged. Kathrin covered the absence with a smile. “You’re not going to buy me a drink?”
“Why? You’d only have one sip then place it on the bar. I’m not cheap, but I’m not stupid either. After the drink comes the card.”
She looked out over the sea of people. “Touche. I’m flattered you’ve been watching me.”
“Observing.” he corrected.
She wrinkled her nose. “Sorry. Observing me. Are you still?”
“No.”
Kathrin glanced around to locate Carol, Steph and Alison. Aaron followed her gaze, then pointed to the dance floor. Kathrin followed the direction of his finger and saw them, dancing in a small cluster. “Oh,” she said, slightly unsettled that he knew who her friends were, “well, I should find out when we’re leaving. Nice meeting you.”

He nodded again.

She looked at her friends, then back at Aaron. She opened her mouth, then thinking better of it, shut it again.

“What?” he asked.

She took a deep breath, and from some far away place heard her voice ask: “Are you going to be here for a bit? I’d like to talk to you some more.”

He smiled. “Yes.”

She turned back towards the dance floor. He watched her take three steps, and then quietly called her name. She looked back, and he felt a flood of relief wash over his body as she responded. Captured. “Do I get a business card?”

She threw him an over-the-shoulder smile. “You didn’t buy me a drink.” Then she disappeared through the crowd.

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She watched him walk towards the door from her spot on the dance floor. He didn’t look back, just casually stepped out into the night. She waited a few seconds, then felt the rush of adrenaline surge through her veins. She grabbed her coat from the back of a chair and turned to Carol. “If I don’t come back, leave without me.”

Carol stood frozen, watching Kathrin weave through the other dancers. Then she turned back to Alison and Steph. “I don’t fucking believe it.”

Kathrin stepped out into the cooler air. Across the road, the parking lot was still littered with cars. Her eyes darted up and down the street, but found only the hot dog vendor and a tight gaggle of drunken teenage girls surrounding him. She glanced back towards the bar. Surely, it was him she saw leaving. She checked her options. Go back or go home. Damn. She started down the street.

He was leaned up against the wall, lighting matches, then flicking them out into the gutter. He fell in step beside her and asked. “Do you live far from here?”

She shook her head. “No, not very.”

“Can I walk you home?”
She faltered in stride and words. “I, I’m not ready to go home yet.”

“Can I buy you a coffee?”

“Yes.”

They walked slowly down the street, Kathrin feeling light-headed and emotional, as if she was going to faint or maybe throw up. When they turned the corner, her hand accidentally swung into his and they both jerked. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

They crossed the parking lot. The sky glowed brighter away from the streetlights as Kathrin looked up. She found a star instantaneously and mouthed the words of ‘starlight, star bright’. Aaron watched her intently, then followed her gaze up to the sky. When she was finished, she looked at him sheepishly. “Old habit.”

“What did you wish for?”

“If I tell you it won’t come true.”

He pulled out his matchbook. “Do you catch wishes?”

“Yes.”

“Walk under ladders?”

“No.”

“Make a wish when all the numbers on your clock are the same?”

“Yes.”

He sighed. “Incurable romantic.”

“On occasion.”

He lit a match. “Everything would still happen the way it happens if there were no wishes, and no stars and no time.”

“But there are.”

“Yes, but if you don’t tell me, or if you do tell me, it will or it won’t come true anyway.”

She grinned. “I feel safer not telling you.”

“So, what else do you do?”

“Cross my fingers, count to three on everything, and hold my breath.”

He looked at her oddly, as if deciding something, then swallowed. He moved in towards her with a decisive step. “When?” he asked, as he pushed the loose strands of hair off her face.

She swallowed. “Now. I think.”

He turned her face towards him and kissed her gently on her lips. For a moment her body stood rigid and erect, then slowly melted against him. When he released her, she took a step back,
carefully averting her eyes from his. She nervously plucked the hair around her face, and tucked it in behind her ears. Then she looked back up at the sky and acknowledged the power of the stars. The two of them started walking again at the same moment. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, then said, "I would have done it anyway."

She looked at him, but continued walking without speaking until they came to the coffee shop. The neon 'o' blinked once and then died as he pulled the door open. Inside, Aaron followed Kathrin to the last booth. She slid onto the vinyl seat and relaxed against the cushions, as he went to place their order. She watched his back, his fingers move through his hair. She wondered how she had never noticed him at the bar before as she pulled her wallet out of her jacket pocket, and lay it on the table. He picked up the coffee and cut across the checkered floor, tilting the cups through the air. Like Sinatra on the night-shift. Very suave. I am not going to sleep with him. I am not going to sleep with him. I am not going to sleep with him. She repeated the words over in her head, until she felt quite sure that she could trust herself. And even then, there was some doubt. She reached into her coat and found her smoke pack, pulled out a cigarette and slowly lit it. He placed the cups on the table. "You smoke?"

She moved her cigarette to the side. "Does it bother you?"

"No."

"I'm surprised you never noticed that."

He smiled. "You don't smoke when you talk to men."

"I guess it depends on the man."

He poured cream into his coffee. "My ex-girlfriend used to smoke."

Kathrin reached for the sugar. Figures, she thought, I finally meet a man and he's still wrapped up in his ex-girlfriend.

"You must be artistic," he added, quickly channeling the topic, "or insecure."

"Or both. I'm an insecure graphic designer."

"Then it makes sense. I'm in mutual funds."

"You must be boring."

"Some say."

Kathrin lifted the mug to her lips, and blew smoke over the steam. "Can I ask you a question?"

He nodded.

"Why were you looking at me?"
He grinned. “I don’t know. Something about the way you move, the way you look at people. The way you never go home with anyone. At first I thought you were just a tease, but then I realized there was something more to it. I wanted to know what.”

Kathrin smiled. “Do you know now?”

“No idea. I don’t imagine I’ll ever find out.”

“Probably not.”

He stared at her, as he took a sip of coffee. When he had swallowed, he looked at her timidly. “You don’t think I’m a nut case, do you? For watching you?”

“I’m flattered... in a weird way. I’m just surprised I never noticed you before.”

“I like the side-lines.”

The couple at the next booth got up, and put on their coats. They giggled and held hands as they left, and Kathrin felt a pang of jealousy. It didn’t seem that hard, looking in on it. All she wanted was something more than a few stupid lines in a bar, or a kiss in a parking lot. She wanted something real, tangible, something you could hold in your hand. She wondered if Aaron felt that way, then realized he probably just missed his girlfriend. Still, there was something about him. He was calm. It was as if he had stalked her like prey and waited for the right moment. No, like he had found her and, what was it she had said? Made her real. But he had started the conversation like a dream, so unreal and so romantic; she felt like she was in a movie. A cheesy B movie, but a movie still.

“It’s very easy to talk to you,” he said as if reading her mind.

“Does that surprise you?” she asked.

“Yes. It means there must be something wrong with you.”

“With me? Like what?”

“Well, like maybe you’re a pathological liar.”

She giggled, then burst out into laughter.

“What are you laughing about?” he asked.

“It’s just funny you should say that.”

“Why? Do you lie to the men you talk to at bars?”

She exhaled a fresh burst of laughter. “Well...”

“Well what?”

“Not really. Technically.”

“What does that mean?”
Kathrin leaned in over the table and dropped her voice into a tiny whisper. “Kind of.”
Aaron laughed. “Are you going to tell me? Or will you have to kill me after?”
“Remember how you asked me if they ever called? The men, I mean.”
“Yes.”
“And I said they never called.”
“Yes.”
“Well, I don’t know if they call or not.”
“How can you not? Do you... you give them someone else’s business card?”
Kathrin laughed. “Yes and no.”
Aaron threw his arms up in exasperation. “Kathrin, just tell me.”
“I’ll show you.”
She picked her wallet up off the table and snapped the metal clasps apart. Carefully, she ran her fingers over the divided section of the wallet, until she reached the last pocket. She pulled out a stack of business cards and lay them on the table. “Look,” she directed Aaron, pointing to the stack.
He picked up the stack and thumbed through them. “Katie Cohn, Toronto Board of Education. Kay Cohen, Systems Analyst, IBM Canada. Kathy McConnaughy, Lotus Development, Canada. I can’t believe this.”
Kathrin laughed shyly. “Don’t think I’m a bad person. I just do it for fun.”
Aaron shook his head in disbelief. “You assume an alter ego every time you go out? How do you keep it straight? How don’t you get caught?”
“Well, it’s just variations on my name. It’s very easy, actually. Before I leave my apartment I think of who I want to be. Practice in the car, and then when I arrive I become who I am for the night.”
“What happens if you run into someone you’ve met already?”
“Most of the time they’re too embarrassed to say anything. One time, this guy approached me, but I told him Kate was my twin sister. It’s really easy. Actually, it’s scary how easy it is.”
Aaron dropped the stack of cards onto the table. “So, what’s your name?”
She laughed. “Kathrin Connelly.”
“Why are you telling me the truth?”
“I have no idea. A feeling.”
“You’re nuts.”
“No. I told you before: I realize there’s no future, and back out. It actually saves a lot of time.”

He picked up the top card, and held it up to Kathrin. “I can’t imagine that making these cards doesn’t take up a lot of time.”

“I’m a graphic designer. It’s simple.”

“They’re very good.”

“Thank you.”

“So, which one do I get?”

“You don’t get any.”

“Why?”

“I have to save them.”

“For the wrong people?” he asked.

“Exactly.” She yawned and covered her mouth with her free hand.

“You tired? You want to go home?”

“Yeah, I guess I am a little tired.”

“I’ll call you a cab,” he said, getting up.

She frowned at the ten dollars he slid across the table. “You’re not going to try and take me home?”

“No.”

Kathrin looked at him and felt suddenly disappointed. “Why?” she asked, feigning dejection while actually feeling it a little.

He laughed. “Because I don’t know if I can trust you yet. Plus, I don’t want you to find out about all my lies!”

She giggled. “That bad?”

“Well, did I tell you that I had a spotless apartment?”

“No.”

“Well, if I did, it would have been a lie.”

He turned towards the cash register and asked the waitress to call a cab. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled a slip of paper out of the leather wallet he unfolded. He dropped the paper onto the table, by the money. “Give me a call Kathrin Connelly. That’s my number.”

“I bet!”
He moved in closer to her and placed a warm, slurpy kiss on the top of her head. Then he walked towards the front door. She listened as the door jangled shut, and sat, staring dejectedly into her coffee cup. *The nerve.* The nerves of her heart, tightening, causing everything to beat faster, welling and swelling up inside of her. The dream sequence shattered by the reality behind the dream. She picked up the coffee mug and drained it dry of liquid. Then she picked up the stack of business cards, and slowly tore each one in half. A car honked outside, and she looked through the window to see a cab parked in front of the café.

“Your cab’s here,” the waitress called to her.

“Thanks.” Kathrin replied as she got up from the table.

She picked up the money and the slip of paper. Aaron Taun in neat cursive. Kathrin stopped. *When did he write it down?* She placed the slip into her coat pocket and walked towards the door.

She couldn’t sleep when she got home. Part of her was tempted to call right away, but that part of her was running on nervous energy. She’d probably scare him off. But he was the one who’d been watching her. Instead she dialed Carol’s number. The phone rang four times and then the machine went off. They were still out.

“Hi Carol, it’s Kath. Just wanted to let you know I made it home all right. And alone. Not that it’s any of your business. Give me a call tomorrow.”

She hung up the phone and sat twisting the cord in her fingers. *Very weird day. Very weird guy.* But in a good way. She got up from the table and turned out the lights. Once her eyes got used to the dark she found her way to the bathroom and quickly prepared for bed. She kept running over the conversation in her head. How it had started, ended and everything in between. She tried to picture what he looked like and was startled by how well she remembered everything about him. Gorgeous green eyes, thick and full head of hair. Tall - maybe a couple inches over six feet, and muscular without being bulky. She kicked herself for never seeing him before. Not that she would have done anything but make an ass out of herself.

She got into bed and lit a cigarette. She hadn’t smoked in bed for years. Not since Ken. And then, for what reason, she never knew. Just a cliché - because people were supposed to smoke after sex. Or maybe it was supposed to be just after good sex. But she hadn’t had sex, she was just confused. Maybe she’d call. *There’s no maybe about it, but when?* She gave herself a week.
Kathrin butted out her cigarette and turned out the light. She gathered the sheets under her chin and tried to sleep. Finally, at 3:30 a.m. she drifted off.

At 3:32 Aaron walked through the front door of the apartment building. He walked briskly across the marble floor, and pressed the elevator button firmly. There was no one anywhere around, and the guy on night shift wasn’t at the desk. Aaron got on the elevator and pressed the button. The doors closed and he leaned against the back wall. He had done it. Finally. After a month he had finally spoken to her. Not like he’d planned, or daydreamed about it at work, but still he had finally talked to her. And the heavy feeling in his chest was smaller - he could feel it shrinking.

He unlocked the door to his apartment, and stepped inside. Slowly, he slipped his shoes off, and unbuttoned his coat. He flicked on the light-switch, and surveyed his castle. Everything was in order. Of course there was no reason for it not to be - no one else came and went - but still sometimes he felt as if he might come home one night to find that something was different - something had been moved or shifted. Something would smell different or feel different. But it never happened. He shuffled over to the stereo and put on a CD, making sure to turn the volume down low. He thought back to the first night he had gone to The Devil’s Martini. Someone at work had invited him, and he hadn’t been able to think of a good enough reason not to go. He played a fair game of pool, so he was elected to play five tedious games with an annoying blond secretary from the company. She spent more time giggling than shooting, but he had managed to win a few for them. When he wasn’t shooting, he looked around the bar, hoping to get a sign from God that he should leave. Instead, he saw a tall, thin blond woman shooting pool like an Amazon. After that, any invitation to go out was quickly accepted. Of course he never expected to see her again, but there she was, dancing on the floor. And he watched her cautiously, and secretly. And the third time he saw her he knew she was the one.

He undressed in the darkness and left his clothes neatly hung over his chair. He hopped in to bed naked, and pulled the duvet up tight against his chin. From the living room he could hear the music playing, and he lay absolutely still for a few moments trying not to think of her. Kathrin. The name suited her. Strong, but feminine. Perfect. She was. Witty, smart, talented. He could tell all that by looking at her. But most importantly he remembered her eyes. They were clear and full of power. There were no sheepish glances, no hungry stares. She had been honest with him, when it was clear she hadn’t been honest with anyone for a long time. And as he thought of her, a
growing fear was devouring his stomach. What if she didn’t call? And suddenly Aaron knew that sleep was impossible.

He sat in the sun room and watched the dawn break over Toronto. It was a clear and bright day, and for a moment he felt some frantic hope burning in his heart. And then he was consumed again by the fear. And the fear ate him for breakfast.
Starting a relationship is a strange game of hide-and-go-seek. The person with the onus to call is ‘it’. That person stands by the street lamp, covers his/her eyes, and counts down from one hundred. Sometimes the person skips over a few numbers, sometimes a lot of numbers. The quicker the countdown, the less time the prey has to build up a defense. Sometimes the chaser plays by the rules and counts evenly to one. Then both parties are satisfied that the game’s being played fairly. And sometimes the chaser counts in ‘Mississippi’ time. The reason for doing this is often unclear, but usually motivated by same obscure sense of fear.

Carol, after hearing the whole story at least five times, proclaimed that Kathrin should give up any pretense of stoicism, and call Aaron a.s.a.p. Steph and Alison felt that waiting a few days would prove a more successful attack. Kathrin finally decided to wait until she couldn’t not call. By Sunday night she was near the point but decided to stick out one more day - so she wouldn’t appear desperate.

Early Monday morning the producer for the documentary called to schedule a final interview for all the candidates. All of Kathrin’s other thoughts flew out the window. She hauled Jamie and Richardson into a boardroom and planned the week. The final round for the interviews was set for the sixth of April. That gave them four days to come up with a presentation. Kathrin’s mother was returning on the ninth. Kathrin hoped she had good news to share when Ingrid got back. She and Jamie went over their pitch a thousand times with Richardson and a senior associate drilling them at every turn. Richardson really wanted the agency to nab the fashion documentary and stressed to Kathrin the importance of having such a prestigious client. He may even have offered some incentives, but Kathrin chose to ignore them. Even if a pay hike was a great idea.

Kathrin spent all of Tuesday going over fashion design books, calculating angles, fabrics and cost. By the time she left work, she felt as if she could give Chanel a run for their money. Or at least Calvin Klein. Instead of going straight home, she called Andria, and asked if she could stop by. They spent fours hours going over dyeing techniques, patterns and colour schemes while chugging coffee. Andria knew of all the designers, and though she didn’t own any of their high-priced clothing, had made apparel based on their designs.

“You really are Martha Stewart in disguise, aren’t you?”

Andria laughed and shook her head. Kathrin noted with near disgust that her sister took pleasure in the comparison. But still Kathrin was ecstatic that her sister knew so much about texture and colour. For the first time, Andria was useful for something. And wasn’t lecturing. They wrapped up shortly after eleven, and Kathrin was ready to head for home. She was
exhausted, but in a good, dreamy way. She promised to call Andria if she had any questions, or at least to let her know the outcome of the interview.

The slip of paper was still on her desk, and Kathrin glanced quickly at the clock. It was too late to call. She was too tired for conversation anyway. Aaron would have to wait. She undressed for bed, and fell asleep as soon as she hit the pillow.

Wednesday, Kathrin and Jamie began work on their demonstration. They agreed to choose classic designs, as opposed to anything too funky or modern. Then they would appear to have some knowledge of haute couture. Plus, Andria had mentioned that the older designs were definitely the better pieces of work. Specifically, because they used all-natural fabrics, unlike most of the man-made stuff of contemporary fashion.

Jamie pieced the designs together and created the graphics. Kathrin then took the graphics and turned them into a flow of images, patterns, and textures on screen. What they wished to show was a montage of sensual imagery - an indication that fashion was much more than something for the eyes alone.

Thursday morning, she showed the simulation to Richardson and his left-hand man. They liked what they saw, but felt that there was an element missing. “I know,” Kathrin agreed, “music.”

She and Jamie had argued until the wee hours of the morning over what music to play with the demo. Finally on Thursday morning, she had sent him to the sound guys at the bottom of the building with the presentation. He still hadn’t returned. Their meeting was set for 2:00 p.m. and she was starting to get a little worried. Without the music they really had nothing exceptional. She was torn between how she felt about the fact that they had been given the last interview. Four other companies were meeting with the producer before her. That meant that he’d be stiff and tired. And grumpy. But it also meant that the opportunity to wow him was there, if he’d had a rough day. She hoped the latter. Where the hell is Jamie?

He arrived fifteen minutes later, with a CD-Rom in hand. Kathrin took it from him and loaded it into her lap-top. She set the sound player up, so that it launched in time with the demo, and started up the LCD panel. Jamie turned out the lights, and the show began.

They had pulled the designer logos off of a fashion site on the Internet, and all four swirled across the screen, as the musical theme of “Star Wars” played. Kathrin had to stifle a giggle. She adjusted the volume, and sat back in her chair. It looked like it was going to work. As the first design came up on the screen, the silky voice of Billie Holliday crooned over the speakers. Kathrin
held her breath, and turned to watch Richardson’s face. His face was set in stone. She shut her eyes, and didn’t open them until the demo was over.

“Well?” Jamie demanded.

Richardson looked at her. “I think it’ll work.”

Kathrin smiled. “It ain’t over yet.”

They were ushered into a large boardroom, and Kathrin was surprised to see that there were seven people already seated. Usually, she and Jamie met with two or three, tops. She scanned the faces quickly, and noted with satisfaction that they all appeared bored. One of the men caught her eye, and she nearly flinched. It was one of the designers. She had seen him on Fashion Television. She took another look around the table and was shocked to discover that all four of the designers were present. She felt like she’d been swallowed up whole. Jamie was oblivious to the fact.

They were introduced, and took their seats matter-of-factly. Kathrin reviewed the game plan in her mind, and then watched as it quickly floated out the window. Initially, she had felt it would be a good idea to discuss first and show after, but with the designers present, some relatively unimportant chit-chat wasn’t going to impress.

Kathrin stood up, and briefly touched Jamie’s hand. He looked at her, and she nodded slightly, indicating to him that he should just play along.

She cleared her throat. “As we are in the presence of the designers to be represented in the documentary, I’d like to propose that we show our simulation first.”

Everyone else at the table agreed. *No doubt some of them think they’ll get a short nap.* Jamie got up and began closing the curtains. Kathrin set up the LCD Panel, and hooked up her laptop. She set the volume controls, and waited until the lights had been extinguished. “Ladies and gentlemen. We are about to show you our idea about how graphic design can fit into this documentary. I know that some of you may feel that computer graphics are too futuristic and symmetrical to allow any grace and style into the aesthetic nature of fashion, but we hope that this demonstration will change your minds. With no further introduction...”

She pressed play. The logos flashed on the screen, and Kathrin sat down. She had fifteen minutes to think while the others were absorbed, she hoped. Jamie threw her a questioning glance but her reserve pacified him. She snuck occasional glances across the table. A few interested
individuals, but poker faces for the most part. No doubt the producer had told them not to look impressed, even if they were.

Halfway through the show, an exposé on the third designer caused the designer herself to gasp. Kathrin glanced over to see that the woman was charmed. Kathrin nodded imperceptibly. It was a good sign.

Jamie got up and quickly turned on the lights after the simulation was finished. Kathrin turned off the computer, and waited until the shades were pulled back. Sunlight flooded the room, and Kathrin blinked a few times. Then she looked around the table. Poker faces everywhere, but the third designer was still flushed. Jamie sat back down, and the talks began.

“Well,” the producer began, “all day we’ve seen some interesting approaches. Thank you for your demo. Maybe we’ll start with any questions from the designers."

“Sure,” Kathrin responded.

The first designer cleared his throat. “If you don’t mind my asking, why did you choose those particular designs?”

Kathrin laughed inside. She had the answer by rote. She launched into everything Andria had told her, even outlined the whole issue of natural fabrics versus synthetics. The designers seemed satisfied with her answer, and one kept nodding in agreement.

She answered all the other questions with ease, and let Jamie field some of them. He appeared more nervous than herself, but responded admirably. When the question period was over, Kathrin and the producer discussed some issues about time and availability. By the end of it, she and Jamie had been in the boardroom for over an hour. She didn’t want to press her luck.

“Well, I know that you have plenty of things to discuss, so we won’t keep you. You have our proposal, and I’m available at the office to answer any more questions.”

She and Jamie got up, shook seven hands each and headed for the door. Seven poker faces saw them out. When they got to the street, Kathrin let out a sigh of relief. “I’d say it went well.”

Jamie punched her in the arm carrying her laptop. “Well? It was great!”

“Why do you always have to be the optimist?”

“Why are you always so negative?” he countered.

“So I don’t get disappointed.”

“Harrumph!” he declared.

“When do you think they’ll call?” she asked.

“Tomorrow. By the latest Monday.”
She nodded in agreement, but wasn’t convinced. Producers were notoriously bad for imparting information. They liked the power of playing with people’s minds.

“Drink?” Jamie asked.

“ Fucking right.”

They headed for the pub.

She refused to return to the office with Jamie. As she headed for the parking garage, she told him to tell Richardson it went well. “But don’t look too optimistic!” she ordered.

He threw her a silly grin.

Kathrin called Andria from her cell phone. “Want to see the demo?”

Andria wanted to. Kathrin swung by and the two of them watched it together. Andria was pleased, but halfway through the tape she asked Kathrin to stop. Kathrin looked at her oddly.

“What’s wrong?”

Andria shook her head. “I can’t believe you chose that design. Even without my coaching.”

“Why?”

“It was designed to be worn by a princess in the ’70’s. The princess died, and it was never worn. I think it’s in a museum somewhere in Europe. Probably the most beautiful dress never to be worn.”

Kathrin covered her mouth. “Oh!”

Andria looked at her. “What do you mean, ‘oh’?”

“Well, the designer nearly fainted when I showed it.”

Andria’s face turned pale. Her eyes got larger and larger. “Mama Fashion was there?”

Kathrin nodded. “They all were.”

Andria looked as if she was going to pass out. “All of them? Do you know how lucky you are?”

“Not yet.”

“Just to have met them, I mean. Holy cow!”


Andria got up slowly from her seat. She walked to the window. Then she turned back to Kathrin. “That would be a dream come true.”
Kathrin rolled her eyes then laughed. “You really scare me sometimes.”

Andria smiled. A dazed, dozy smile that let Kathrin know that she hadn’t heard the last statement. Kathrin stayed for dinner, then excused herself. She had an important phone call to make.

It took her ten minutes to pick up the phone, and when she did she immediately hung it up again. She practiced several greetings on the ficus tree. “Hello Aaron it’s Kathrin calling”, “Hi Aaron, I don’t know if you remember me but…”, “Hi, Aaron?”. No matter how she started the words came out sounding scripted. Of course they do, I’m scripting them right now. She gave up and walked over to the phone. Placing the scrap of paper on the small table where the phone rested, she picked up the phone and quickly dialed the numbers. For a moment she hoped he wouldn’t be there. The phone rang a few times, and Kathrin felt like hanging up, but calmed herself. After the fifth ring the answering machine picked up.

“I can’t come to the phone right now but leave a message and I’ll call you back. Thanks.”

Kathrin froze. She couldn’t open her mouth. She heard the beep, and then slammed the phone down. “Tomorrow,” she whispered fiercely to herself.

As she left the kitchen, she failed to notice that the movement of putting down the phone had caused the slip of paper to sail off the table, and fall into the large brass pot that contained her ficus.

When Aaron got home from playing squash, he immediately went to the answering machine. Like he had every evening since Sunday. There was a message. He felt his heart skip a beat, and he pressed play. It was his mother.

“Hi sweetie. Dad and I wanted to know if you were free this weekend. We’re going to the farm to see Auntie Eleanor. Might need some help. Give me a call.”

Aaron grimaced. Exactly how he didn’t want to spend his weekend. He wanted to spend it with Kathrin, but that clearly wasn’t going to happen. After all the trouble of recording a new message on the answering machine. Of course it sounded like it always had, but only because he’d given up after many dismal attempts to place the perfect message on his machine. Each one ended up sounding like it was scripted.

Aaron had expected her to call. He knew she wouldn’t call before Wednesday because women had some phobia about sounding too desperate. He’d give her until Sunday, and then call it
quits. Maybe he would go to the farm. It would keep him away from the machine that intended to drive him crazy.

They still hadn't heard anything by Friday afternoon, and Kathrin took it as a bad sign. Jamie asked her at least five times to call one of the other contenders, but she refused to stoop. Instead she left the office early, and decided to catch a flick to fill up her evening.

When she got to the early show, she greeted the usher and asked him how his day was. He blushed and mumbled something, then watched her walk into the theatre. Kathrin added a little swagger to her step for his sake, and smiled. *It probably makes his night.* She slunk into 'her' seat and waited until the film began. A foreign film. Some Japanese flick that had the critics hopping. And she loved the look of the Japanese stars, and how their skin seemed soft and glowing. She settled in for the film and the curtain parted. Kathrin opened her heavy trench coat in preparation for the show, but realized that she wasn't in the mood. All week she'd been waiting for the movies, but sitting in the darkness, she suddenly had no urge to touch herself.

Instead she actually watched and enjoyed the movie. When it was over, she took a stroll up the street, and grabbed a coffee to go. Then she went home, and opened one of the fashion books. She fell asleep with the light on.

Saturday night the girls went to a small pub for a few drinks. Nothing heavy because they were going in for fittings early the next morning. It was actually a nice change from the previous two months, and Kathrin forgot about everything on her plate from the week. Until Steph caught her off guard. "So, how's the dream guy?"

Kathrin looked at her in the best unimpressed look she could muster. "I wouldn't know."

All three women 'tsk'ed. "You haven't called?" Alison demanded.

"Yes."

"Well, what happened?"

Kathrin looked down. "I couldn't leave a message."

"What?" the question echoed around the table.

"I got so nervous that I froze."

Carol slapped her hand down on the table. "You must have it bad."

"Honestly," Alison added, "I've never seen you behave so childishly before. Just call the guy. What do you have to lose?"
Kathrin shrugged. "Nothing."
"So call."
"It's too late now."
Carol shook her head. "It's not too late yet. You still have one day. But, if you don't call tomorrow, then it'll be too late."
"Why couldn't he have just asked for my number?"
Carol laughed. "What, like all those other guys? Where did it get them?"
"She's got a point." Steph confirmed, and Kathrin threw Carol a hard stare.
Carol shrugged sheepishly.
Kathrin groaned. "All right, enough. I'll call tomorrow."
"That's right."
Kathrin steered the rest of the night's conversation away from herself. They discussed the finer details of the wedding, and finally decided that throw-away cameras were the way to go. The make-up sessions were booked, and the manicurist would see them all on the day previous to the wedding.

"You know my nails chip like crazy." Carol complained.
"How hard will it be to keep them from getting chipped for one day?"
"Well, don't blame me. I don't know how it happens."
Alison sighed. "Krazy glue works. Try it."
The other three looked at her. "You've got to be kidding." Carol said.
"Seriously. Don't worry. I'll set you up."
Kathrin laughed. "Great. The bride to be is a glue pusher."
"Kathrin, it's a very simple procedure. I do it all the time." She turned to Carol. "Just don't touch anything."
Kathrin groaned. *Between the bride and her parents, it's going to be one hell of a good time.*

They left the bar early and Kathrin curled up in bed with another design book. Sunday was going to be hell. First the fittings. Then the family dinner, and then the call. She felt like sleeping until Monday. But then she'd have to deal with the other call at work. It wasn't fair that one woman should have so much bad luck.
The day wasn’t so bad. Her dress fit perfectly. The other three threw her death stares as the seamstress pranced around, sticking pins into her live subjects. Carol nearly sent the frail woman flying when she accidentally pierced skin. Katrin sat in the corner and watched. Her poor friends looked like lambs marching to certain death. Only, with jaundice. Not that she should complain. The pale yellow slip dresses were actually quite pretty, and she would be able to wear hers again if she wanted.

They all grabbed a quick lunch after, and rehashed the pain and suffering they had endured at the hands of the fiercest seamstress in Toronto. Katrin left shortly after three to get to her mother’s, but only after she promised her friends again that she would call Aaron.

Her mother was less irritating than she remembered, but she was sure it would wear off after a couple of weeks. Danielle appeared to have doubled in size again. Katrin snatched the baby out of Mark’s arms the moment she arrived, and refused to let anyone get near her precious niece. Even the dogs were offended, and Rufus hid under the table all afternoon. The early dinner was good, but Katrin wasn’t especially hungry. She lost even more of her appetite when Ingrid cornered her at the table.

“So, honey, any news you want to share with us?”

Katrin grimaced. She knew what was coming. “No,” she responded sweetly, “life’s pretty boring in my neck of the woods.”

Andria spluttered. “Boring? Mom, do you know what Katrin’s been working on?”

Andria launched into the details. Katrin sat silently until her sister finished praising her work. “Andria, it’s only a proposal. It doesn’t mean we got the job.”

Her mother waved her hand. “I’m sure you’ll get it, dear. You’re so good at what you do. Now, if we could only find you a man.”

“Mom!” Katrin groaned.

Jen was quick to pass the potatoes. “Mom, Katrin doesn’t need a man to fulfill her. And anyway, she’s far too busy to meet a man right now.”

*Some help she is.*

“Still,” her mother continued, as if Jen hadn’t spoken, “I met this very nice gentleman on the cruise, and told him all about you. Of course he’s American, but he lives in New York.”

“What was he, a cabin boy?” Katrin sneered.

“Sure. Laugh if you want, but no. He was taking a vacation. With his infirm mother. I hope you girls will remember that, when I start…”

Kathrin rolled her eyes. “Well, you know, mom. I was thinking about finding a man far enough away so that I wouldn’t ever have to see him. New York, huh? That actually sounds pretty good.”

Scott kept from laughing by taking a sip of water. He grinned, knowing how much Kathrin hated being pestered about her love-life. “Kath,” he said, “your mother’s only thinking about your welfare.”

Kathrin threw him an evil stare. “Well, for your information, I have met someone.”

There was a brief moment of silence. Even the baby stopped throwing food onto her high-chair. Jen was the first to speak. “Really? Why didn’t you tell us?”

Kathrin smiled. “Well it seemed a bit premature. We just met.”

“What’s his name?” her mother demanded.

“Aaron. Aaron Taun.” Kathrin said and sat back, satisfied that she had taken everyone by surprise.

She was bombarded by questions, and did her best to answer them. She made up a couple of things, but she was sure her family wasn’t listening anyway. They were all ecstatic that she had a new boyfriend. And in mutual funds! Like it mattered. Kathrin could have said he was the guy who pulled the switch at Death Row, and they would have jumped for joy.

When they finally moved on to other topics of discussion, Kathrin thought about her predicament. Somehow, over the course of the conversation she’d managed to not only have gotten a boyfriend, but also one that was invited for Sunday dinner on the following week. And worse, they knew his name. It would be up and down Ingrid’s gossip line by nightfall. And all Kathrin had to do was break the news to Aaron.

which was much harder than she expected. When she got home, she went to the phone to get the piece of paper with his number on it. It was nowhere to be seen. Kathrin scanned the floor, the table, the entire kitchen with no luck. She checked her briefcase, her day planner, and every drawer in her bedroom. She even went so far as to look through the garbage. She racked her brain, but knew she had left the slip by the phone.

She checked her options. She needed to come up with a way of reaching him soon. Or else he’d never agree to meeting her family. The obvious answer was the phone book. She skimmed through the T’s. There were eight listings. None with A. Knowing her luck, he probably
had an unlisted number. She didn’t want to call all the listings. But she didn’t know where he worked, and try as she might she couldn’t remember the number she had dialed on Thursday. Maybe she had taken the number to work. She checked the kitchen again. Nothing.

“It’s a sign,” she said to nothing in particular.

Just my luck. I meet a guy, go so far as to lie to my family about him, and then I can’t get ahold of him. She felt as if she was going to cry. Not so much because of losing him, as out of frustration. There was only one option, to call the numbers and hope one was his.

She dialed the first number, and an answering machine let her know that she had not reached him. With a black pen, she crossed the name off in the phone book. The next number rang and rang and nobody answered. She put a question mark by the number. Maybe his machine’s off. At the third number a sweet lady politely told her that she had the wrong number. Then she asked what number Kathrin was calling. Kathrin pretended to have mis-dialed and hung up. The following two numbers repeated the same procedure. The sixth number was busy. The seventh number was disconnected, and the last number was a machine for Judy.

Kathrin hung up the phone. Only two out of the eight were possible. She tried the busy number again, and received the same signal. This is disastrous. She put the phone book away and bid a silent farewell to Aaron.

Aaron was getting antsy. Sunday night and 10:00. She still hadn’t called. The answering machine was not blinking, and looked as if it hadn’t rung in ages. He tested the battery, and rewound the tape. Then he bid a sad farewell to the woman who could have been. Been what? He demanded. Aaron, snap out of it. You met a girl, that’s it. Just a girl. And she doesn’t want you. So get on with your life.

But he knew deep down it wasn’t that simple.

They got the job. Kathrin should have been thrilled, but the thought of Aaron dampened her spirits. She went out with Jamie after work for a drink, but her heart wasn’t in it. All day she’d been sitting at her desk, searching for the slip of paper, or thinking about where she had put it. She had nearly destroyed her briefcase, and almost dumped the contents of her desk onto the floor. But the scrap of paper eluded her.

She called Andria and let her know the good news. Andria took it like a raving lunatic, and gave Kathrin a list of days she was free to meet the clients. No doubt she had already crossed
the days off on the calendar. Then Kathrin called her mother and told her. Ingrid giggled like a little girl. “Have you told Aaron?”

“Not yet. Mom.”

“Well, we’ll see you both on Sunday.”

Kathrin got home and tried the phone numbers again. The busy line turned out to be a fax line. Kathrin groaned. *One more to go.*

The line rang three times, then Kathrin could hear the receiver being lifted.

“Hello?” a young woman’s voice asked.

“Hello, is Aaron there?”

There was a pause. “I’m sorry, who are you looking for?”

“Aaron. Aaron Taun.”

“Um, I’m sorry but I think you, um, have the wrong number.”

Kathrin paused. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Well, that’s all right.”

Kathrin hung up. *Well, that’s the end of that.*

By the end of the week, Kathrin had gotten over the loss. She was concentrating hard on the new project at work. The producer had given her three weeks to finish all of her old projects and start the rough work before she met with the designers. Two of them were living in Toronto, and the other two would be flown in for a couple of days each. Kathrin lost herself in the initial research for the new job. The contract gave her an excuse to duck out of the Sunday dinner invitation from her mother. She apologized profusely on behalf of herself and Aaron. She didn’t have the heart to tell her mother. Instead she would wait until the last possible minute, then relay the specifics of the terrible break-up to Andria. Andria in turn would tell her mother. She chose Andria, because she had less of a problem lying to her younger sister.

Instead, she would spend Sunday washing the windows of her apartment. If she wasn’t too hung over from Saturday night of course. She hadn’t even had the opportunity of chatting with Carol. Carol was in Boston, at a gallery opening, and wouldn’t be back until Saturday. Alison and Steph would either only laugh or carry on like idiots, so that was out of the question. And in the end, it had probably turned out for the best.

Still, Saturday night she kept her eyes peeled. Of course she wasn’t actually expecting Aaron to walk through the door. It wasn’t as if he had a locator strapped to his back, and followed
her from bar to bar. And, if he really wanted to see her, he could look her up in the phone book. But he probably wouldn’t, thinking that she wasn’t interested. The thoughts bombarded her constantly, and she wished they would just go away.

Sunday morning, when she pulled herself out of bed, she felt much better, and her heart was lighter than it had been all week. She was actually looking forward to going to work on Monday and taking the full swing into fashion. She washed every window until they sparkled on the inside, then removed the screens for those windows she could reach on the outside. The rest would have to remain in their dirty condition; she wasn’t going to break her neck falling off a ladder.

She waved to Mrs. Cardsell out the open window and wished her a good morning. No doubt the woman had been up since the crack of dawn, turning soil in her gardens. By the end of May, the house next door would be covered in ivy, and morning glories, and the garden would be displaying vibrant roses and borders of lily of the valley. It made Kathrin ill to think of the time Mrs. Cardsell invested in her gardens. Kathrin only bought houseplants that wouldn’t die if left un-watered for at least a month. The ficus had been the only oxygen giving source that Kathrin had actually taken good care of. She made a mental note to water it after she finished the windows.

She ate her lunch on the front steps, then filled the large watering can from the hose on the side of the house. The downstairs tenants had set it up weeks ago. Then she carried the can up the stairs, careful not to slosh any water onto the floor, and brought it into her apartment. She watered the two snake plants in the living room first, and then proceeded to the kitchen. The ficus was doing remarkably well, but had lost some leaves since Christmas. No doubt from the heat of the Christmas lights. Kathrin placed the can on the floor, and began picking leaves out of the soil. A few had fallen down in between the inner pot and the larger brass one. She slid her finger down the space between the two pots and pulled the dead leaves out, placing them on the table behind her. When she was satisfied that all the leaves were gone, she watered the ficus profusely. The can drained, and Kathrin stood up, plucking a few more leaves from the tree. She walked back down the stairs, and placed the can on the front porch. All of her work for the day was done. She trudged back up the stairs with her lunch plate in hand, and went into the kitchen. She nearly dropped the plate. There on the kitchen table, in the middle of her pile of dead leaves, lay the slip of paper with Aaron’s number on it. “Well, I’ll be damned!”

She stared at the paper for a moment. When it was lost for good she had been upset. But looking at it on the table, she started to have doubts. Did she really want to call him after all?
Kathrin scratched her head. He probably wouldn't want to hear from her anyway. She chastised herself for being so fickle. *Well, what the hell. She had nothing to lose.*

She sat at the kitchen table, and pulled the phone onto her lap. She dialed the numbers with precision and after a brief click the phone started ringing. The answering machine. Again.

"Aaron. Hi, this is Kathrin. We met a couple of weeks ago. I tried to call once before, but then I lost your number. Really, I know it sounds like an excuse but it's not. Anyway if you want to, call me back. Oh god, I sound like an idiot. Listen, my number is 753-7777. Please call. Thanks."

She hung up the phone. "Way to go, smoothie."

On Monday she checked her messages once from work. Tuesday, three times. Wednesday she realized she was being punished. And by Thursday she'd come up with at least one hundred good reasons why he hadn't returned her call. His mother had died. His machine broke down. He was out of town. He found a new girlfriend. He didn't want to see her. The last one kept coming up. *time and time again.* By Friday she had given up hope, and cursed herself for even thinking about calling him.

On Sunday she gave her family the bad news. They took it better than she expected. Her reasoning was that they both had busy careers, and their schedules didn't compliment each other. After all, she didn't want to give him a bad name. He hadn't done anything to her.

"Well," Ingrid offered in terms of advice. "you do have to make the time, you know."

"Thanks, mom."

On the way home she decided it was all for the best. Within a week she'd met, dated and dumped him, as far as her family knew anyway. She convinced herself that their whole meeting was a bad omen. "Well, that's the end of that!"

When he finally called over a week later Kathrin erased the message with a firm finger. She was way too busy to get involved. And, after another week passed by, she was sure that she would never hear from him again.
She woke up one Saturday morning near the end of May to the blood-curdling screams of Mrs. Cardsell. Realizing sleep would be impossible to reclaim, she slipped out of bed and snuck over to the window. She peered around the curtain, ensuring that she remained completely hidden from any observers below. Mrs. Cardsell was standing over her rose bushes between the two houses, screaming bloody murder. Kathrin craned her neck to get a better look. From her angle, she couldn’t make out the bushes clearly for the ever-swelling torso of Mrs. Cardsell. No doubt aphids.

Mr. Cardsell, the Peter Pumpkin eater to his corpulent wife, came hurrying over from the other side of the house in response to his wife’s cries.


She lifted her face to his. “What?” she exploded, “I’ll kill ‘em. Every one of ‘em!”

“What?”

She ignored the question. “Look at my roses. Just look.”

Mr. Cardsell and Kathrin leaned closer. “I don’t see anything.” he stated.

“Yes. And you know why? Someone’s snipped my roses. No less than three of my most beautiful yellow tea roses. The first tender blooms of the season, even! I’ll kill ‘em! Those neighbourhood …” she paused and attempted to find the right words, “fart faces!”

Kathrin stifled a giggle, and Mr. Cardsell looked down towards the ground. Then he approached his wife, and took a plump arm in his scrawny fingers. Kathrin was amazed at how long his fingers were.

“Don’t fret, dear. I know you’re upset, but new ones will grow back.”

“That’s not the point!” she snapped, pulling her arm free.

“Yes, I know, but feel flattered. Someone went out of their way to steal your flowers. They could have snipped any roses on the block, but instead they chose yours. That should tell you something.”

She smiled slightly. “Well, they are the nicest on the block.”

“Exactly. And think of how lovely they’ll look on some woman’s dining room table.”

Mrs. Cardsell frowned. “Do you think a woman stole them?”

Mr. Cardsell laid down his trump card. “I think that some young man plucked the blossoms of love for his lover. I remember doing the same for a certain young woman.”

Mrs. Cardsell blushed crimson, and glanced around to see if anyone was looking. “Oh, off with you and your romantic ways. I have work to do. Repairs.”
Mr. Cardsell disappeared around the corner, but only after stopping to give his wife a quick peck on the cheek. Mrs. Cardsell returned to her gardening. Kathrin, now fully awake, went into the bathroom.

She flushed the toilet and the noise masked Mrs. Cardsell's renewed screams at the discovery of a freshly manicured pot of ferns.

She did however hear the door bell ring; once as she finished rinsing her face, and again as she bounded for the door, piling her hair on top of her head into a bun.

She threw open the door, and gasped in surprise to find Aaron's smiling face looming above a nicely tailored linen suit. He began to speak before Kathrin had even thought to say anything.

"You haven't returned my phone calls, so I thought I'd make a house call," he said, standing awkwardly with both arms behind his back.

Kathrin's fingers fluttered to her hair and began organizing strands behind her ears. "How did you find me?" were the first words out of her mouth.

"Phone book," he smirked, "oh, I have something for you."

He pulled a bouquet of flowers from behind his back. Kathrin blushed and reached for the flowers. "Wow they're beautiful. Yellow roses..." she grabbed the bouquet still attached to Aaron's hand and pulled them both inside.

"What?" he asked after the door was securely locked.

"You," she sputtered, as a maniacal giggle rose in her throat, "stole these from my neighbour's garden."

Aaron masked his smile with a mock serious face. "I'll have you know that these are very expensive roses. From the best florist in Toronto."

"Thank God she didn't see you."

He smiled. "Yes, she does seem quite scary. But her husband's a decent fellow."

"Her husband? What do you mean? Did you..."

He cut her off. "He pointed the fern out as I was leaving. After I explained my objective. It seems your neighbours are quite concerned about you, and your sudden disappearance from the outside world. He seemed to recall that your last dinner party was on New Year's Eve."

Kathrin frowned. She didn't realize they'd been keeping tabs. "I have become a bit of a hermit," she admitted, "but listen Aaron, I appreciate the thought. More than you know. It's just that my life right now is too complicated to invite any further complications."
He held up his hand to stop her from speaking any further. "I don't want to complicate your complications, as you so eloquently phrased it. I just want to get to know you. To figure you out."

"If you want a mystery, I've got plenty of books upstairs. It's not a good idea."

Aaron clenched his jaw. "Kathrin, do you know how much courage it took for me to even get to your doorstep? I've been up since 6:30 this morning. I refuse to leave until you agree to go out with me. One time. That's all. I think you could do me that favour. After all, you called me first. I'm not that repulsive, am I?"

She looked at him. No, he was definitely not repulsive. He was even better looking than she remembered. "And if I refuse?"

"Then I have no choice but to turn you over to the Cardsells."

"What?"

"As an accessory. To the murder of three lovely roses and some innocent fern."

Kathrin smiled. "You're an evil man. How did you know their name?"

He held up two fingers in front of Kathrin's face, and slowly crossed them before her eyes. "We're like this."

"O.K. I give in. But only once."

"That's all I'm asking for."

She sighed. "Fine. When?"

"Tonight."

"Tonight? I don't think so."

"Are you busy? Honestly?"

"No," she stammered, "but that seems a little too rushed."

"It's only been two months. I'd say it's the furthest thing from rushed. Look at it this way. you can get it over and done with."

"Fine."

He bowed slightly. "See, that wasn't so hard. I though we might go for dinner and then to a movie."

Kathrin shifted uneasily against the door frame. "No movie. I'll go to dinner, but a movie is definitely out."

"Why? I promise I won't lay a finger on you."
Kathrin opened her eyes widely, then burst into giggles. "After last time, I know I have no need to worry about that. It's not that I don't trust you. It's just that films are a very personal thing to me."

She looked up and saw that he was staring at her. "Never mind." she finished.

"No. Tell me."

"I only watch movies alone. Call me crazy, but I never see movies with anyone else around. It's nothing against you."

He watched her intently. Then he slowly opened his mouth. "What if I sit in another row, far away? Would you then?"

Would she? She looked at him. A small tingle went up her spine and she found herself slightly aroused by his question. If he just happened to be in the same place at the same time. Would she?

Her smile indicated her answer. "O.K. Here are the rules: one, after dinner you go your way and I go mine. Two: we go to theatre alone and leave alone. Three: you make no contact of any kind, and let me leave whenever I want. If you break any of those rules, then I'll leave and never see you again."

He smiled. "I thought I was only getting one chance anyway."

She scowled. "Agreed?"

"Agreed. I'll pick you up at seven."

He opened the door and stepped out into the sunlight.

She watched him walk to his car from the upstairs window and then took her flowers to the kitchen.

When Aaron got to the car, he turned in time to see the curtains in the upstairs window flutter, and an unbelievably huge grin spread across his face.

She waited in front of the window, feeling the cool breeze of the fan wash over her. It had gotten warm in the past few days. She wore a loose fuschia silk top over her bra, and a long multicolored cotton gauze skirt draped against her panties. There was something delicious about moving through the airy space, flexing her toes as her hips caught in the dip of a few flamenco steps. *My God, she thought, if I were in Spain I'd wear nothing underneath my clothes.*

She remembered how at seventeen she would creep from the cabin and swim naked in the lake. How the water filled up all the space around her floating body. Understanding for the first
time how the liquid exerted force on the flesh. Every part of her skin touched by something she had never paid attention to. Fan-blown air was exactly the same. And jazz. They all make you feel real. Like you’re forced to react to something. Liquidity, that was the word.

Not even great sex could compare. Only liquid flowed over and through you. The hollow moan of a sax begging the piano to join in. To call forth the horn in a triad of need. The only time Kathrin had heard the human voice join the liquidity was through jazz.

Sitting upstairs at The Senator, watching a small woman in evening attire squeeze her voice through the funnel of distance and ooze her way right to the tips of Kathrin’s nipples. Something water and air could only arouse. Not a sexual awakening, but verging on an ecstatic revelation.

If there was a God, it was the god of the invisible. And Kathrin was touched by something unseen. The fresco was wrong. God and man touched hands across the backdrop of a keyboard in a hurricane. And she felt like was about to enter the eye of the storm.

She pulled out her chair, and slid into the plushy seat. Across the table Aaron waited until she was seated then lowered himself into his own chair. He was dressed casually in jeans and a collarless shirt with a Nepalese belt draped around his waist. Kathrin felt as if they had dressed together. Or as if she was a good wife and had properly dressed her husband for a night out. That was how she judged married men - according to the taste of their wives. Nine times out of ten the clothing was decided by the female counterpart. And probably a good idea too. Otherwise most of the guys she knew would still be walking around in bright navy Adidas and long stripped tube socks that stopped miraculously right below their knees.

She smiled meekly at Aaron. She didn’t know what to say to him. All day long she’d thought of questions and topics for discussion, but she didn’t want to seem too pushy or rude. He smiled back while thinking the exact same thought.

“Well,” she said finally, “so...”

Her voice trailed off. “So,” he responded weakly.

They sat in silence for a moment and were relieved when the waiter came over to take their drink order. “Wine?” Aaron asked her.

“No. Actually, I’ll have a glass - half Sprite, half tonic water.”
The waiter nodded. Aaron grimaced for a moment, then ordered a beer. It would help him relax, which was exactly why Kathrin was staying away from alcohol. She wanted to keep everything in clear perspective. When the waiter left, they resumed their silence.

“So,” Aaron finally spoke, “tell me about your family.”

Kathrin groaned. “Do I have to?”

“They can’t be any worse than mine.”

“Wanna make a bet?”

Aaron laughed. “C’mon.”

“O.K. We’re Catholic. Of Irish descent. My mother is the most irritating person on earth, and it appears that her main goal in life is to get me settled.”

“Sounds exactly like my mother. She’s been counting the days since I was born.”

“Aaron, there is no way your mother is worse than mine.”

“Well, let’s see. Has your mother tried to set you up before?”

Kathrin cast him a smug look. “Almost every week.”

“At a funeral?”

Kathrin stopped moving. “Seriously?”

Aaron shrugged. “She can’t help it.”

Kathrin grinned. “Well, has your mother ever offered to pay for you to go to the spa? So you’ll be more attractive to the opposite sex?”

“No. She drew the line at clothes shopping.”

Kathrin laughed. “You let your mother buy clothes for you?”

Aaron smiled. “God no! I’ve seen some of the stuff she’s picked out for my father. It’s fashion butchery.”

The waiter brought their drinks and asked if they were ready to order. Kathrin hadn’t even picked up her menu. “Give us a couple of minutes,” she requested.

She glanced at the menu while Aaron continued to catalogue the faults of his well meaning mother. “Don’t get me wrong. I love her to pieces, but she’s out of control. Always wanting to do nice things, and cook and clean, and bake. I’m surprised my father can handle it. My mother runs on everlasting batteries. Especially when she’s talking. I guess that’s why dad doesn’t say much.”

Kathrin looked up from the menu. “My mom too.”

“What does your dad think about it?”

_Well, it was bound to come up sooner or later. “My dad’s deceased.”_
Aaron swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

Kathrin quickly jumped in. “Don’t be. He died when I was just a baby. I never knew him.”

“Well, I’m sorry anyway. I imagine it’s hard growing up without a father.”

Kathrin shook her head. “Actually, no. Maybe when I was really young, but as I grew up I never really thought that much about it. I just accepted that things were the way they were. Although sometimes I feel like I’m the only one who thinks that.”

Aaron took a sip of his beer. “What do you mean?”

“Well, can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“O.K. Let’s say you marry someone and about five years later they die. Do you move on with your life and find someone else, or do you hold onto that person like they were a saint?”

Aaron pondered the question. “Well, I don’t know what I’d say, but it sounds as though you believe the person should move on.”

“Maybe not at first, but eventually. The thing that gets me is that my mother and my sisters, Jen and Andria, talk about him like he was a saint. Like he’s the glue that holds us all together.”

Aaron coughed. “Well, isn’t that true, in a way?”

Kathrin sighed. “No. We hold each other together. I firmly believe that. He was just our father. But no one else seems to think that. They all think that he was some wonderful man who made no mistakes. It’s sick.”

“Well, then let me ask you a question: you meet the man of your dreams, marry him, life is perfect, and then one day he gets up and decides to leave you. To die on you. You know that you’ll never find someone else to take his place. What do you do? Go out trolling for live ones on Saturday night?”

Kathrin rolled her eyes. “Please. I’m just saying that it seems strange to spend the rest of your life never taking another risk.”

“And I’m just going to say that I don’t believe you’ve ever been truly in love before.”

Kathrin looked at him for a moment, then turned her eyes back to the menu. “Not another word until you’re ready to order.”
They made it through dinner, flip-flopping their way from various topics, including mutual funds and how it was never too late to start, and the means of getting textiles to appear fuller on screen. Once they were safely away from the issues of love and family Kathrin discovered that she was having a good time. She got up after dinner to go to the bathroom. Actually she went to see if there was any food in her teeth and to dab some perfume on her wrists and neck. She admired herself in the mirror, and found that she had done a good job of getting ready. By her standards anyway. Aaron had given no indication of liking or disliking her appearance. She washed her hands, and pulled several paper towels from the dispenser. Then she remembered that she hadn’t asked Aaron if he had any siblings. He hadn’t mentioned any, so she imagined not.

A coffee was waiting for her when she returned to the table. "We have some time to kill," Aaron explained.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead."

*So much for spraying perfume.* She pulled a smoke from her package and lit up. Aaron watched her. "It’s actually kind of sexy, watching you smoke. Even if it’ll kill you."

Kathrin blew a ring of smoke into the air. "What won’t?"

Aaron nodded. "Good point."

"So, Aaron. You never told me if you have any brothers or sisters."

"I have a younger sister."

"Care to elaborate?" Kathrin teased.

"Elaine. She’s twenty-five. I don’t see her that much."

"Oh," Kathrin said, "she lives far away?"

"No, Toronto. Some family issues."

Kathrin nodded, realizing she had touched a sore spot. "Sorry."

"Don’t worry about it. Well, now that we’ve laid everything on the table..."

Kathrin and Aaron shared a small smile. "We wouldn’t be ideal dinner guests, would we?" she asked.

"Well," he said assuming an English accent, "just don’t ask me anything about myself and I’ll be fine."

Kathrin smiled and shook her head slowly. "No theatre training, huh?"

"Not a drop."

"Well I happen to be an excellent coach."
"I bet you are."

Kathrin looked at her watch to keep from looking at Aaron. "Well, maybe I should get going."

Aaron’s mouth dropped open. "You aren’t serious?"

"I have a movie to catch. Don’t want to be late. Where’s the waiter?"

The waiter brought the bill, while Aaron kept staring at Kathrin incredulously.

"What?" she demanded. "I told you how it was going to be. You accepted the terms. Don’t act surprised."

"I thought you were kidding."

"On the contrary. I’m very serious. The show starts in fifteen minutes. Down the street. You know where?"

He nodded dumbly.

"I’ll be sitting at the back right. Sit the farthest away from there as you possibly can."

She dropped thirty dollars on the table. "Thanks for dinner. It was fun."

He was still staring when she walked out.

She took her time getting to the theatre by walking the long way around the block. To work off the dinner calories, and kill ten minutes. When she got inside she paid for her ticket, smiled at the usher, and moved towards the theatre doors without turning her head. She had no need to look. He wasn’t there yet. She knew it instinctively. When she was little and had nightmares she used to wake up in the middle of the night and walk to her mother’s room. She’d sneak over to the bed and stand watching her mother breathe in her sleep. Within minutes her mother could sense that she was there, and would sit up and pull her into the bed. It was the same way that Kathrin knew Aaron hadn’t arrived yet.

She took her seat, and sat back. The theatre was nearly empty. She could count about fifteen heads in all, and not one of them was Aaron’s. She smiled to herself. She was pleased with the way she’d handled dinner. For the most part she’d remained in control, and the look on Aaron’s face had been priceless. Well worth the wait. Even though she still wasn’t sure how she felt. He was nice, and honest, and attractive. And so far, hadn’t turned out to be a loser. But she didn’t feel any strong desire for him. Instead she was thinking about the movie. And that in itself was a solid indication.
She felt the muscles in her back tighten as someone walked down the right hand aisle. She knew without looking that it was Aaron. It was as if she had hackles rising up from her back. Partially in fear, partially with excitement. She didn’t look at him as he progressed down the aisle, but she could see his shadowy figure in her peripheral view. He crossed the front of the theatre and sat on the right hand side of the other aisle. Not completely in the corner, but not too close to the center. In the exact spot where she could see him and the screen with one look. Automatically she tensed. It was like he had mapped out the theatre and chosen the perfect spot for her view.

He placed his coat on the back of the seat, and sat down. Kathrin felt a chill working its way down her spinal column. She watched him for a brief moment, but then the lights dimmed and she turned her attention towards the screen. She promised herself not to look. Only to ignore him.

Occasionally she snuck a peek. His profile was set in a rigid pose, and he seemed to show no awareness that she was even in the theatre. She was impressed by his calm demeanor, but unnerved by his presence. She was too nervous to be there. She thought about leaving for a split second, but knew that he would think it was a sick game if she did. So she forced herself to relax, and watch the movie. Countless thoughts drifted through her head, and more and more often she found herself staring at him. She felt oddly as if she was infringing on his personal space. All she needed was a pair of binoculars. But at least he was aware that at any given moment she might be watching him. It wasn’t complete voyeurism. She shook her head vigorously and attempted to snap out of her reverie. It was no use. All she could think about was him. Slowly, the screen was replaced by a daydream.

She pictured Aaron undressing before her, and the thoughts stirred her. She reached down to her cotton skirt and began swirling her fingers slowly over the fabric. Each touch seemed to burn the insides of her legs, and she felt a warm soothing heat drifting up her body from her toes. She could see Aaron’s tall, firm body gradually exposed to her view. And then she imagined her fingers trailing over him, and the rippling sensations that moved through his body in response to her touch. And then his lips were touching her, and he was gently pulling her clothes off and dropping them onto the floor, until all she wore were her panties. And he pulled her to him, and slowly circled her waist with his arm, and began dancing across an open room with her. In her trance they were in her apartment, but it had been transformed into a huge marble palace. The ground was cold under her feet, but the air hung heavy and oily on her skin. And they danced, while beads of sweat rolled off their bodies. And in the distance she could see elephants and
peacocks, and a lone lioness tracing her territory with a golden paw. And it made no sense to Kathrin, but it was all real. It was all happening.

She rubbed more urgently against her skin, and fantasized about Aaron holding her tightly, pushing his body against her, and dangling a black silk blindfold over her eyes. And then there was darkness, but his hands and mouth found her body and she saw through his touch, and she moved with him. And she could smell the warm scent of a male body, and how the scent mingled with her own odor, and how the two oils seemed to blend, while he called her name, and touched her in exactly the right way. And she could feel the climax begin, and bit into her bottom lip so she wouldn’t utter a sound. And she pressed harder into the fabric of her skirt, and the heat burned her stomach and her chest, until all she saw in her mind were vivid colours spinning together. And the texture of the dream was bumpy and miles long. And each color spun over the others, until it was crimson and gold and silver meshing the vision of Aaron in her mind, and she could smell the hues like a thick stew of desire welling and thrashing through her. Smell the colours, and taste it. Taste him in her mind. And the blindfold kept everything else out, but her need and desire.

She could feel the heavy throb of blood rushing downwards, and her head was light. She rubbed frantically, fearing that she would never reach it, and fearing that someone would see, but knowing deep down that the feelings were so much more intense than the actions. And the trail of silk flowed down from her mind, through her mouth and throat and chest, buried itself in her gut, and rushed for the sea. Taking every ounce of energy she possessed, and silencing her breath. And she clenched her one hand tightly over her skirt, and the other clenched the arm of the chair. And the heat took over and it pushed up against the tide falling from her head, and the two met with a clap of thunder that reverberated through her entire body, and left her twitching in her chair.

She sat motionless for a few moments, as the ticking evaporated from her stomach. She coughed to cover her sigh, and cleared her throat. And then she cracked her neck, and swallowed. What had just happened, had never happened before. No movie had ever given her a reaction like what was still swirling through her body. She reached her hand down against her underwear to find that she was soaked. Even her hands were sweating. And her forehead pounded. And she felt better than she had felt in years. Maybe even her lifetime.

She had lost the plot of the movie, but she didn’t care. She sat through the rest of the film with a smile pasted to her lips. When the credits rolled she looked over to find Aaron’s head. It was no longer in the seat. She frowned and turned her head, just in time to see him walking out of
the theatre. She stood up slowly and put on her coat. She needed to go to the bathroom desperately.

The washroom was empty, and she slipped into a cubicle quickly. Of course she hadn’t brought any underwear. She wiped down her panties and pulled the damp fabric up between her legs. It felt uncomfortable, but she’d deal with it. The most important thing to do was find Aaron before he left. She rushed out of the theatre and glanced around the front foyer. Aaron was nowhere to be seen. She looked outside. Not there either. He had probably gone to the bathroom too. She stood against the wall. The usher was scooping up popcorn with a broom and dust pail over by the vending counter.

“Excuse me?” she called to him.

He turned around, and blushed. “Yes?”

“Have you seen a guy about six feet, dark hair, green eyes?”

The usher thought for a moment. “No ma’am.”

Kathrin smiled. “O.K. Thanks.”

She walked outside. A light drizzle had started falling, and she pulled her trench coat collar up. She looked down the street, but Aaron was gone. Shit, shit, shit. She wanted to find him. But he had listened and obeyed her rules, and she had no one to blame but herself. She headed for home.

The usher watched her walk out of the theatre and shook his head.

“ Weird lady,” he mumbled to himself.

The projectionist came down the stairs. “Talking to yourself again?”

The usher threw him a sneer. “O.K. smartass. Figure this one out. This chick has been coming here for months. Sometimes two or three times a week.”

“Yeah? So?”

“Alone man. Always alone. So tonight she comes out after the show and asks me if I’ve seen some guy. And she goes on to describe him. Even though she knows that I’ve seen her go into the theatre alone every time. What’s up with that?”

The projectionist smiled. “I don’t know. But if you think that’s crazy, next time we run a film come up to the booth. There’s this gorgeous babe who spends most of her time masturbating. It’s awesome.”

“No shit?”
“Not a word of a lie. Tonight I thought she was going to kill herself.”

“How come you never told me this before?”

The projectionist smiled and shook his head. “Never crossed my mind.”

He went back up to the booth and rewound the film. Then he cleaned the counter area, careful to throw the wad of used tissues into the very bottom of the garbage can.

69

Kathrin was soaked by the time she got home. The rain had started pouring over her the minute she left the theatre. At least it was a warm spring rain. But the rumble of thunder and the flashes of lightning off in the distance indicated by their increasing proximity to one another that it was only going to get worse. She had pulled off her shoes and walked most of the way barefoot. Her purse was drenched and she dripped even more water into it when she started searching for the keys within. She was pissed - wet and upset. *Fine time for a man to be honourable! He could have waited around. Even just to drive me home.*

Two strong hands grabbed her around the waist and before she had time to scream she was spun around and came face to face with Aaron. “You...you...asshole!” she sputtered, tearing herself away from him.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Well you did! Don’t ever do that again! What are you doing here?”

He grinned sheepishly. He wasn’t wearing his coat and his white shirt stuck to his skin. “I know I promised, but I couldn’t help it. Don’t be mad.”

Kathrin let out a deep breath. “Fuck, you scared me.”

“Are you mad?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“No. I’m not mad. I was actually hoping you’d stick around.”

He leaned against the door. “Why?”

“I don’t really know. Why’d you come?”

“I don’t know.”

And then he was kissing her on the mouth, and she was kissing back as hard as she could, and the rain was pouring over them, and the thunder crashed in the distance, and the two of them were joined together in the storm. He pulled away and let out a long and deep breath. “Yeah, I guess that’s why I came.”
Kathrin smiled. “Do you want to come in for a bit and dry off?”
He gave her a long look. “No, I shouldn’t. But will you see me again? As long as it
doesn’t include going to another movie alone.”
Kathrin grinned. “Yes, I’ll see you again, and next time you can choose what we do.”
“That’s what I did this time, and it didn’t work out like I’d planned.”
She pushed him slightly in response to his teasing. “Well, is it a date?”
“Yes. And you better start practicing, because I’m going to kick your butt.”
“At what?”
“Trivial Pursuit.”
Kathrin groaned. “Oh no! All right, it’s your choice, but I should warn you that I’m the
best T.P. player in the country. Maybe the world.”
Aaron laughed. “Thursday night we’ll see who gets that title.”
He leaned in and gave her another kiss. “Goodnight Kathrin.”
“Goodnight Aaron.”
She stepped inside, and shut the door. Aaron walked to his car and Kathrin waited for a
few moments before she climbed the stairs so that her heart would start beating again. Next door,
Mr. Cardsell looked out his window into the rainy night and watched Aaron drive away. He pulled
the curtains tight and smiled to himself.
Aaron sat on the couch staring at the pad of paper in front of him. For fifteen minutes he had stared, not seeing anything else in the room but blurring scribbles where his pen had met the paper. He sat and thought and turned over details and sensations in his mind. And he remembered seeing Kathrin for the first time, and how she later crept into his waking thoughts, but mostly how he had wanted her from the very first moment his eyes fell on her. And how he had left the theatre aware that her eyes rested on him occasionally, but really how he had wanted to sit beside her and breathe in her warm sweet smell. And then how much later her kiss had made him feel alive for the first time since he could remember. But just as she came into crisp and perfect memory, she would fade away and he would see Lily’s smiling face instead. And only minutes later would he realize that he hadn’t been thinking of Kathrin at all. And the process would begin again. He’d snap to, and begin writing on the pad, careful not to break his concentration. And slowly, Kathrin would slip in, to be replaced by Lily, to be replaced by the pad.

He blinked quite suddenly and brought the pad closer to his eyes. He was making a list of all the things he needed to get before Thursday night. He had wine already, but for the rest of the small romantic details he would have to venture out into the world of women and their neat little sections of confined space in boutiques and malls. Women always seemed to know exactly what kind of candles to get, and how to set them on a table. And what flowers went with what kind of vase. He, on the other hand, knew nothing about any of that stuff, and had yet to figure out why women kept candles in the freezer anyway. His mother always had a stash on the second shelf by the ice cubes, and had vaguely indicated once that it aided the burning process. Whatever that meant. Maybe he should call her, but that would mean insight. And the last thing that Aaron wanted was for his mother to know anything about Kathrin. Elaine wouldn’t be any more help. So, he sat staring at a list that meant nothing to him. It was like making a soufflé with all the ingredients, but having none of the culinary arts to go with it. He frowned and took a sip of wine. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea, asking her over. But he had made the offer, and couldn’t back out. Really didn’t want to anyway.

He got up and walked over to the fireplace. It was one of the things that had charmed him about the place. How they could put fireplaces in an apartment. There was a tiny vent on the side of the wall that carried the smoke up a pipe on the outside of the building and let it escape through the roof. Lily used to lie down in front of it and blow cigarette smoke up through the vent. He knew it had to be a fire hazard. One day the whole place would go up in flames. Everything he owned would go up in smoke. The pictures of his family smiled at him, and he wondered if he
should take them down before Kathrin came over. Or if he should move furniture, or straighten
the pictures on the wall. He still had two days to cancel.

He moved across the apartment. It would be strange to have a woman in his place again.
aside from his mother or sister. He wondered if she would know that no other woman had been
there for almost four years. Lily was the last. Could he still execute a seduction? He hoped he
could, but doubted it. He wondered where the brash man who had introduced himself to Kathrin
had gone. That night Aaron had been his best dream come true.

He sat back down and plotted the evening. First, some wine and music to start everything
off right. Then a little dinner. He wasn’t a chef, but he could whip up something decent if he
really tried. Then they would settle in on the couch and play Trivial Pursuit. He groaned. Kathrin
would hate it. He should just call and cancel. Or take her out for dinner. Or even go to another
movie and sit far away from her. Which was just plain weird. But it would be better than trying
to show her how smart he was. And it would avoid him bringing her to his apartment.

He remembered the first time Lily entered his apartment. How her eyes roved over the
leather couches, and the mantle, and how she had slipped seductively into the armchair and tucked
her long legs up into her chest. And laughed when he couldn’t open the bottle of wine that had
been chilling in the fridge all afternoon. She’d gotten up and taken the bottle from his hands, then
expertly extracted the cork with one swift motion. And then, how they hadn’t even tasted the
wine because she had kissed him then led him to the bedroom immediately. He felt sick
remembering, but wiped the thought from his mind. It had been four years. Surely he could get
on with his life. For the first time he felt as if he wanted to. But some part in the back of his head
nagged him. It was as if he was plotting a seduction behind Lily’s back. She’s gone. Aaron.
Move on.

He looked at the list, then crumpled it up in his hands. It wasn’t going to work. He
wasn’t ready yet. He crossed to the phone and called Kathrin to cancel.

She picked up on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Kathrin?”

He could almost hear her smile. “Hi, Aaron. How are you?”

He paused. “I’m well. Um, listen, I wanted to call about Thursday night.”

“Oh, good, I wanted to talk to you about that.”
“Yeah. The plumber’s coming over sometime on Thursday after work. It’s the only time we’re both available. I thought, if you didn’t mind, we could do dinner here. I’ll be here anyway, so it’ll save some time. And I’m sure he’ll be gone pretty early.”

Aaron sighed. “That sounds great.”

“Good. Let’s say seven?”

“I’ll see you then.”

Aaron hung up the phone. He realized that it wasn’t Kathrin he wasn’t ready for. He just didn’t want her at his place. Trespassing on Lily’s ground. Not yet. He sat back down on the couch, and took a lengthy sip from his glass. Under the table he could see the Trivial Pursuit board through the glass. He smiled, and thought about how he was going to follow the advice of one of his roommates from school. He was going to test Kathrin.

One night he had come home to his third year stink tank to find his roommate Jeremy playing Trivial Pursuit with a petite blond Aaron had never seen before. Jeremy shot him a glance that indicated he wasn’t welcome to join the game. Instead he went to the kitchen, and found his other roommates playing cards.

“What’s up with Jeremy?” he asked, grabbing a beer from the fridge.

“He’s trying a new girl out.”

“What?”

His roommates laughed. “He’s got this thing about women and Trivial Pursuit. He says that he never makes a move until he’s sure that she’s the right one.”

“Oh yeah? How do the two relate?” Aaron asked Marty.

Marty rolled his eyes. “According to him it’s simple. You meet a girl, you think you like her, but you want to be sure. So you play the game.”

Aaron frowned. “I still don’t get it.”

“Jeremy seems to think that you can determine someone’s personality by how they play the game.” Bob stated.

“See,” Marty added, “if the girl loses really badly, she’s a ditz, and not worth the effort. If she kicks your ass, then you don’t want her around to remind you. But if it’s a fairly even game, then you can move on to the next level.”

Aaron sat down and let himself be dealt into the game. “He honestly believes that?”

Bob laughed. “Well, there’s a lot more to it than that. I mean, if you really think about it, T.P. can give you a lot of information about the person you’re playing with. You may find out that
they're a huge history buff. Or they happen to love English Literature. Or know nothing about sports."

Aaron nodded. "That makes a little more sense. What else?"

"Well," Bob continued while looking over his cards. "you can also determine the girl’s attitude about things. Does she not answer for fear of saying something stupid, or does she at least try to give an answer even if she may be wrong?"

"Does she giggle stupidly when she gets the answers wrong, or does she get pissed off for having missed such easy questions?" Marty asked, not looking up from his hand.

"How about if she laughs when you miss a question?" Aaron asked.

Both men held up their arms in a gesture of warding off an evil spirit. "Get rid of her."

Bob laid his first card on the table. "I though it sounded stupid at first too. but the more I think about it, the more sense it makes. But most importantly, you get to find out if the chick’s a poor loser, or an even poorer winner."

Aaron laid a card, then scratched his head. "But doesn’t she find out the same about you?"

Marty looked up suddenly. "C’mon, we’re talking about chicks here!" he snapped.

Bob, on the other hand, pondered the question with a bewildered expression on his face.

"Shit, I never though of that."

"Maybe that’s why your bed’s been empty for months!" Marty retorted.

They continued playing cards. Aaron heard Jeremy and his friend go up the stairs. After an hour Jeremy entered the kitchen with a triumphant smile on his face. "So?" the men at the table asked in unison.

"So what?" he replied calmly.

Aaron smiled. "Who won?"

Jeremy smiled. "I won. She didn’t stand a chance. I don’t think she got one piece of pie."

Marty shook his head. "Bad news."

Aaron frowned. "But I saw you go upstairs with her. I thought you didn’t make the next move unless things were even."

Jeremy laughed. "Well, sometimes a piece of pie is just that."

Aaron launched his sweater at Jeremy in mock disgust, while the other guys high-fived him. They spent the rest of the night playing cards.
Of course Aaron’s designs on Kathrin weren’t without morals. At the very least he would find out a thing or two about her. And if she wanted to have sex after, well that would be fine with him too. It was all in the approach. A little competition would loosen the both of them up and then maybe they could move on to the next level.

After Kathrin hung up the phone, she went back to the television program she was watching. An interesting documentary about a lioness cub saved by a Kenyan game warden. Kathrin loved wildlife documentaries. They were nearly all she watched on T.V. She twisted her hair around her fingers, and sat back. In the documentary, they were at the point of returning the lioness to the wild. They dropped her off near a male lion and waited for the response. Kathrin took a sip of orange juice while the English narrator waxed dramatic. “The release of Sheba is almost over. Everyone looks on with hesitation to see what the male will do. Will he tear her to shreds, or will he pay court to her? If the answer is the first, then the whole process of raising Sheba was a disaster. If the second, a success.”

Kathrin stared at the screen. She had always thought that females chose the suitor in respect to every animal relationship. Come to think of it, most of the women I know made the first move. But the documentary was painting a totally different picture. Slowly the lion moved towards the lioness, and Kathrin squeezed her eyes nearly closed. She was used to expecting the worst. All these documentaries were graphic and disturbing. But, after a couple of minutes, the lion seemed satisfied with Sheba. Kathrin rolled her eyes. “Typical male!” she muttered at the screen, as the phone rang again. She jumped up from the couch and ran to the phone. “Hello?” she answered breathlessly.

Carol laughed on the other end. “Did I interrupt?”

“I wish. What’s up?”

“Just wanted to call and see how my little dating fiend is.”

Kathrin sat down at the table. “I don’t know if fiend is the right word, but I’m fine.”

“Good. Listen, when are we going to meet him?”

Kathrin shook her head. “For God’s sake Carol. I only just met him.”

“Well, you’ve only called me three times in the past day to ask about buying candles. What you should wear and where I buy that body oil, so I figured you were pretty interested.”

Kathrin smiled. “I’ll know better on Thursday.”

“Wipe that smile off your face. Kathrin.”
“Goodbye.”

Carol had called on Sunday, demanding to know where Kathrin had been Saturday night. And Kathrin had admitted that she’d been out on a date. And Carol had guessed with whom. So Kathrin had been forgiven, but with a clear reprimand and an order that it would never happen again. “You’ve got six other days a week to go out with him,” was how Carol saw it. And Kathrin promised that she would never err again.

She walked back into the living room, to find that the lion had made the first move, and the mating ritual had already begun. Kathrin stared at the screen as the lion tried to mount the lioness. They moved like mechanical puppets, all wound up and jittering across the Kenyan backdrop. It certainly wasn’t romantic. She flipped the T.V. off with a shudder. She had seen enough.

And then she thought of Aaron. How he was the one who had made the first move. First real move anyway. He wasn’t like the other guys who moved in on her territory and tried to leave their scent anywhere near her. He had made a truly valiant effort. She wondered what he was planning for Thursday. How he would approach her. How she would approach him. She had invited him to her place for more reasons than she let on. Of course, the plumber was coming, that much was true. But he was coming at four. Kathrin had lied, but only a little. The real truth was that she wanted to be at her place. That way she had more control over the situation. She could also catch him off his guard. He’d be a stranger in a stranger land. And she liked it that way. Furthermore, she was willing to venture that she was a better cook than he.

But most of all, it would give her the opportunity of being the hunter. Without his testosterone-infested apartment, she would have the offensive attack on her side. And if she suddenly decided that the game was over, then she’d have the final say. He would be the one turned out, not her.

She decided on shish-kabobs. She had no idea why, but the word sounded exotic on her tongue. And she would give him the ego-boost of allowing him to do the barbecuing. By five the plumber had finished his work, and she pulled the marinated chicken from the plastic bowl, and began skewering the meat, interlocking it with pieces of pineapple, pepper and cherry tomatoes. Once the skewers were done, she popped them into the refrigerator, and went to take a leisurely bath. She piled her hair on top of her head, and slipped into the tall mound of bubbles. The entire bathroom reeked of vanilla from the bubble bath, and her stomach growled with hunger. She
remembered watching the news and how vanilla was supposed to make people less hungry, but it wasn't working.

She had gone out and gotten long silver candles. The table was set with a finger bowl filled with flower petals plucked from Mrs. Cardsell's back yard. The living room was vacuumed and scented with potpourri, and the whole apartment was spotless. She knew that Aaron would notice none of those things which had taken her hours to prepare, but she tidied anyway.

She got out of the bath and rubbed vanilla body lotion all over her body, then dusted her body with talcum powder in the same scent. Then she dabbed some vanilla oil on her arms and wrists. It reeked, but by the time Aaron got there it would have died out. Her stomach was begging for food, but she ignored the hunger, and turned her thoughts to her make-up and clothing. She kept her make-up to a minimum and opted not to put mascara on. Then she flipped her head down towards her knees and smoothed her hair out with a long brush doused in vanilla powder. She watched as a cloud of dust sprinkled down from her hair and landed in a light pattern on the tiles. She stood back up and stepped into the powder, mopping it up with her toes.

Her clothes were laid out neatly on her bed, and she dressed cautiously so as not to get powder all over her outfit. She tied a wrap skirt around her waist, and slipped a tight cotton shirt over her head, careful not to brush it against her deodorant. By the time her shirt was on, her hair was a mess, and she returned to the bathroom to smooth it again. When she was finished, she rummaged through her jewelry box and found a thin silver charm-bracelet her mother had given her for graduation. After clasping the bracelet, she shook it out on her wrist. The tiny charms clanged together daintily, and Kathrin turned in front of her mirror. She opted out of wearing shoes, and stepped gracefully around her room. Everything was in order.

When she emerged from the vanilla cloister of her bedroom it was fifteen minutes until seven. She went out into the kitchen and grabbed the barbecue lighter. *Might as well light it up. I'm starving.* She went out through the back hall off the kitchen to the second floor balcony. It was nearly twenty feet across and the same distance in depth. When she first moved into the apartment she had big plans for the deck. She was going to turn it into a veritable Eden. Of course, she still hadn't repainted the worn wooden planks, and some of the balcony slats were turning green. All of the pots and window boxes were empty, except for one huge pot of rhubarb. It thrived, and returned even fuller every year. Maybe she'd pay Mrs. Cardsell to plant the deck one day. Or maybe she herself would do it. Not like she didn't have the time, but she used the deck so little. The previous summer she'd had one party, and the neighbors across the back yard
had threatened to call the cops because of the noise. That had put a damper on things. And she
didn’t like sun-tanning. So the only times she ever ventured out onto the balcony were when she
used the barbecue. But one day, she’d have sweeping vines and potted rose bushes, and all the
birds in her neighbourhood would flock to her deck.

She took the plastic cover off the barbecue, and dropped it onto the deck. Then she bent
over and turned on the gas. A small hiss escaped through the end of the gas line, and Kathrin
turned the switch on the barbecue. Then she inserted the lighter into the tiny hole and clicked it
several times. A whoosh of flame rose up from the barbecue, and Kathrin stood back quickly.
She had always had a fear of being consumed by the flames of a barbecue. She shut the lid, and
headed back for the kitchen to start making a salad.

Aaron arrived promptly at seven, with a bottle of wine in one hand, and the board game in
another. The wine was chilled, which surprised Kathrin. She expected it to be a last-minute
thought. A quick pick-up at the Liquor Store, just before driving over. Since it was cold, they
might as well drink it. She showed Aaron through to the kitchen and pulled two wine glasses from
the cupboard. “Let me pour this, and then I’ll give you the grand tour, which will take about thirty
seconds.”

Aaron offered to open the wine, but Kathrin waved him off. She pulled the cork-screw
from a drawer, sliced through the foil, and twisted the screw quickly. Then she pulled the cork out
with a small pop. Aaron watched with a satisfied smile on his face. Kathrin poured the wine into
the glasses, and handed him one of them. “O.K. Now the tour.”

It took just over a minute, but only because Aaron stopped to admire some paintings. The
one over her bed especially charmed him. “I like this one,” he stated.

“Thanks.”

He looked at her. “It’s good. Did you do it?”

“Yep.”

He looked at the picture again. It was some kind of animal head, lion he thought, but too
surreal for him to be sure. “What is it?” he asked finally.

She smiled. “It can’t be that good, if you don’t know.”

He took a step away from the bed. “I think it’s a lion, but it’s not a real one.”

“No. It’s modeled after my Christmas tree angel.”

Aaron turned to her. “Then, you really are bad.”

“The angel is a lion.”
“Oh, sorry.”
She laughed. “Apology accepted. C’mon let’s eat. I’m starving.”
She led him back to the kitchen and handed him an apron, to cover his freshly dry-cleaned shirt, and brush-cotton pants. “What’s this for?” he asked with a fraudulent look of confusion on his face.
“Your effort for the evening.” She replied sweetly and pulled the shish-kabobs from the fridge.
“If I had known you were going to make me cook...” he began.
“You still would have come.” She finished his sentence for him and handed him a clean plate for the kabobs.
He nodded in agreement and followed her out onto the deck. “I like what you’ve done with the place. You know, the aged look. You must have spent hours getting it just right. Especially the green mold.”
She pinched his arm with the barbecue tongs. “Very funny.”
He smiled and pulled the apron over his head. “Do me the honour?” he asked, turning his back to her.
Kathrin placed the platter down on the arm of the barbecue, then pulled the apron strings up and began tying them together. She could smell Aaron’s cologne, and took a deep silent breath, so he wouldn’t hear her. Aww, he smells good! She finished the bow, and stepped away, still a little light-headed from his scent. She wondered if he’d noticed how she smelled. Probably not.
She left him on the deck, while she went to finish her work in the kitchen. Everything was going really well. She took a sip of wine, and wiped the lipstick off her glass. Then she carried the salad and the rolls to the table, and placed them on the new table cloth. She grabbed her lighter, and lit the candles. She wanted a smoke really badly, but denied herself. She could wait. A quick scan of the room told her that she was done. She could hear Aaron calling her from the back, and stepped back into the hallway.
“Kathrin, they’re done.”
Kathrin appeared at the door. “O.K. I’m ready in here.”
“Should I turn the barbecue off?”
“No, let it burn for a bit longer.”
He picked up the plate and moved to the door. “Looks good,” he commented.
“Good job.”
He followed her through the kitchen and into the dining room. She took the plate from him and placed it on a block of wood. Then she untied his apron and once he had taken it off, she placed it in the kitchen. She brought in the bottle of wine and set it on the table. She sat down, and tucked one of her bare feet up under her. Then she raised her glass. “To shish.”

Aaron frowned. “To what?”

“Shish. The man who lent his name to kabobs.”

Aaron smiled. “To shish. But I don’t think it was…”

“Shh. Let’s eat.”

Kathrin told him all about the documentary, and how everything was neatly falling into place. “Nothing has ever gone this well before, and I love it. I think I may have found my niche.”

He looked up at her. “Do you ever design anything?”

“Are you kidding?”

“I bet you’d be really good at it. I’ve seen how you dress.”

Kathrin grinned. She’d take it as a compliment. They talked about friends, and Alison’s impending marriage. Of course Kathrin left out the part about needing a date for the evening.

Aaron told her about his job, his apartment on University Avenue, the people he worked with, and how investing just kinda fell into place for him. “I was actually going to be a Chartered Accountant, but it was so stressful. I wrote the final tests, got my status and then decided to call it quits.”

“After all that?”

“Lots of people do it. It actually helped me get the job I have now.”

“But what about the money?” Kathrin asked.

“You’d be surprised. I make more now, than I would be making if I had stayed.”

“Is it important to you?”


They finished dinner, and Kathrin started clearing the plates. “Let me help,” Aaron offered.

Kathrin was taken aback, but watched as he carried plates carefully to the kitchen. “I’ll wash,” he told her.

Kathrin collected the rest of the dishes as he filled the sink with soap and water. She cleaned the table and folded the table cloth, carefully removing the still smoldering candles. She watched him move in the kitchen from the living room. He was fluid, and she’d bet money that he
was a good dancer. Which would come in handy at a wedding. He rolled his sleeves up, and she could see the sinewy arms beneath. Body, 10. She was glad she'd finally called. Aaron turned towards her, and she quickly placed the tablecloth in a drawer.

“Kathrin, what about the barbecue?”

Kathrin flinched. “Oh shit! I probably don’t have any gas left.”

She rushed down the hallway, and out onto the porch. The sun had nearly set, and the streetlights were on. The night was getting a little colder, and she shivered. The barbecue was still burning, and the platter lay beside it, remains of marinade reflecting the light from the street lamps. Kathrin looked at the juice in disgust. After the plumber had cleaned the pipes he'd warned her about dumping oil and grease down the sink. She picked up the platter and decided to pour the left over marinade into the barbecue.

The dripping marinade and licks of flame merged, and shot skyward in spumes of thick, greasy smoke. Kathrin jumped hastily back from the barbecue to avoid the stench. As she spun across the deck to avoid drenching herself in the scent of burning meat, she lost awareness of other dangers lurking around her. At the moment she turned from the barbecue, a plank from the deck sent a fairly large splinter through the sole of Kathrin’s foot, between the rough underpad of Kathrin’s left foot and pinkie toe.

Kathrin let out a piercing scream, and dropped to the one Muskoka chair on the porch. The tensing of her digital muscles only furthered the advance of the splinter, and cemented the wood deep into her foot. Her continued screams of pain brought Aaron running from the kitchen. Fearing the worst, he approached full throttle, armed with the dirty tongs and a fire extinguisher he found on the counter. He evaluated the scene, glanced at his equipment, and realized their futility in the situation. Dejectedly, he released his grip on his gear. “What happened?” he asked.

“I got a splinter,” she explained in a quiet whimper.

“God, I thought you were on fire.”

Aaron went over and turned the barbecue off, then dipped down and spun the handle on the gas tank. He turned back to Kathrin, who was prodding her foot with a finger nail. “Come inside, and I’ll get it out for you. Doing it in the dark isn’t going to help.”

Kathrin let Aaron pull her up, and she hopped on one foot to the door. “I should have worn shoes.”

He half-carried her to the living room, and set her down on the sofa. Kathrin immediately turned on the light and examined her foot. Aaron peered over her shoulder. It was a fair size
splinter. “It’ll be easy to get out.” he offered. “but let me do it. After I wash my hands. I don’t want you touching it with all that grease on your hands.”

Kathrin removed her hands from her foot. She felt like an idiot. She was trying to woo Aaron, and instead had turned into a cripple right before his eyes. At least she hadn’t cried. Aaron came back in a few minutes with a towel. “Where are your tweezers? And antibiotic, and Band-Aids?” he asked.

“Bathroom cabinet,” she answered, and then scoured her mind to remember what else he might discover there.

He returned with all the necessary items, and dropped to his knees in front of her. He looked up and nearly laughed when he saw how miserable Kathrin looked. She wore the face of a ten-year old sitting outside the principal’s office awaiting her sentence. He leaned towards her and placed a kiss on her forehead. “Aw, sweetie,” he said, surprising the both of them, “don’t worry, you’ll be fine.”

“I’m not worried about my health.”

Aaron looked up. “You’re embarrassed?”

Kathrin blushed crimson and nodded. Aaron laughed. “I happen to think it’s very cute that you’re letting me play the knight in shining armor. Splinters happen to be my specialty.”

Kathrin let herself be coaxed into a small smile.

“But,” he added, “I draw the line there. I refuse to set any bones.”

He held the tweezers up, and slowly brought them to Kathrin’s foot. He lifted Kathrin’s toe gently, and ducked his head around to get a better view. What he saw was straight up Kathrin skirt to a pair of lacy pink panties. He caught his breath and looked away. Concentrate, Aaron, he warned himself. Carefully, he plucked at the skin around the wooden object until there was an opening. He grabbed hold of the splinter and pulled it out deftly. “Tada!” he grinned.

Kathrin rolled her eyes. “Congrats, doc. Should we frame it?”

“Not a bad idea.”

He applied a tick greasy coat of ointment to her foot, then placed the Band-Aid over her toe and underpad. He got up. “A glass of wine and call me in the morning.”

“Thank you, Aaron.”

“No problem. Now, you go to the bathroom and wash your hands. I’ll finish the dishes.”

Kathrin got up and made her way to the bathroom. Her face was flushed when she looked in the mirror. “Sweetie?” she asked herself, but decided to let it slide.
No doubt he had been caught up in ‘maiden-in-distress’ mode.

Aaron slapped his head with a wet hand. “Sweetie?” he grumbled.

Pretty stupid. Aaron... but, for that flash of an instant he’d totally felt it. He finished the dishes and left them to dry on the rack. Then he went into the living room and got the board game. Kathrin was taking a lot of time in the bathroom and it made him nervous. She was probably figuring out a way to get him to leave without coming across as rude. He decided to wait before opening the box.

She walked into the living room and Aaron could smell the vague aroma of vanilla when she sat down beside him. “Well?” she asked. “What are you waiting for?”

He opened the box. and started taking the pieces out. Kathrin watched him for a moment. “Should we open another bottle of wine?”

He nodded gravely. “But I warn you, if you lose the game you can’t blame it on the alcohol.”

“Same goes.” She replied as she stood up and went to the kitchen.

When she returned he had already set up the board. “I’m green.”

She handed him a glass. “Orange.”

He sneered. “Who in their right mind would want orange? That’s like choosing the iron in Monopoly.”

“I happen to like the iron.” she retorted.

He pulled the orange pie plate from the baggy. “Whatever you say.”

She won the first roll. She moved her piece down one of the spokes of the wheel and landed on green. Aaron noted her move. Science buff. She had amassed two pies by the time her first turn was up. She turned and smiled at Aaron. “Beginner’s luck.”

“We’ll see.”

Half an hour later, Kathrin had a pie plate two-thirds full, and Aaron was lagging by one piece of pie. “You have the easy box.” he complained.

Kathrin leaned in closer to him. “Newsflash. There is no easy box.”

Aaron held up his box of questions for her perusal. “Then why are the boxes marked differently?”

Kathrin heaved a sigh of exasperation. “Because when they do a print run, they need to make sure that they don’t insert the same questions twice.”
Aaron was crushed. “Fine. Take all the mysticism out of it for me.”
Kathrin laughed and launched the die. “If you want to trade boxes go ahead.”
“Why bother? It’s obvious you already memorized all the questions anyway.”
“Wishful thinking!” she said as she moved her piece around the board.
She landed on roll again. “Give me a five!”
She rolled a three. She rolled again. She rolled a two. “Yellow!” she exclaimed and
plunked her pie plate down on yellow.
Aaron watched her in disbelief. Jeremy had been right. He could tell that Kathrin knew a
lot about everything, played fairly, and was a natural craps shooter. “Give me the magnet!” he
ordered.
She laughed. “Read the question.”
He read the question. “JFK.” she responded.
He shook his head with a laugh. “Every time you don’t know the answer for yellow, you
say JFK.”
“Just like every time I don’t know the answer for brown, I say Sherlock Holmes.”
He picked up the dice and rolled. He landed on brown. Kathrin picked up the card and
read the question. “No such luck for you, however.”
They continued playing until they were tied with five pieces apiece. Kathrin was tipsy.
having consumed more of the wine than Aaron, but continued to read the cards with a clear voice.
Aaron like how her voice sounded - lucid and slightly deeper than most women he knew. No
doubt a result of years of smoking. As he thought about it Kathrin took another drag of her
smoke. Her first cigarette. Aaron noted with pleasure.
“O.K. This is it.” she said and rolled the dice.
She landed on the blue pie square. “Which city hosts the brothel area of Pat Pong?”
Aaron asked with a smile.
Kathrin smiled triumphantly. “Bangkok.”
Aaron flipped the card over in his hand. “How on earth did you know that?”
“My father wrote an article about it for a magazine.”
Aaron groaned. “Well that just figures.”
“Are we playing to the very end?” Kathrin asked while picking up the die.
“No, I admit defeat. You win.”
“Well, then you’ll have to join me in a celebratory drink.” she said as she lifted her glass.
Aaron brought his glass to hers. “Cheers.”

“Cheers. You’re not a bad player.”

He smiled. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Well,” she said stretching her arms above her head, “I’d challenge you to two out of three, but I’m exhausted. And I have an early meeting tomorrow.”

Aaron got up quickly. “Well then, I better let you get some rest.”

“Well, you don’t have to rush off right away.”

He stretched his legs. “I should. I have to be up bright and early myself.”

Kathrin fought the urge of inviting him to stay. She stood up wearily and tested her foot. It felt fine. “Well, thank you for the wine and for doctoring me.”

“It was my pleasure. Will you walk me out?”

She nodded. “Of course.”

She went down the stairs barefoot and waited on the bottom step for him to slip on his jacket. When he had done so, he turned to her. “Thank you for a wonderful evening.”

“No problem.”

He leaned in and kissed her on the mouth. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed back heartily. After a minute he pulled away. “I better go or…”

“Or what?” she asked.

“Or I won’t.”

“Then you better go quick.”

He opened the door and took a step out. He stopped. “On second thought…”

“Go. Go.” She said, pushing him out the door.

He turned around on the front porch. “Are you free Saturday night?”


He cut her off. “There’s a great jazz band playing at The Senator.”

She was about to continue with her polite refusal, but paused. “Sure. I’m free.”

“Good, I’ll pick you up at 8:30.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier for me to come downtown?”

He thought about it. “Yes, actually.”

“Give me a call.”

He stepped down off the porch. “O.K. Good night.”

“Good night.”
She shut the door, and thought of a way to break the news to Carol.

Carol accepted the explanation with brevity. Kathrin could almost see her knitting her eyebrows and scowling over the phone. "Last time," Carol warned.

"I promise."

"So you said."

"C'mon, give me a break."


"Yes ma'am."

They arranged to meet at the bar. Kathrin wore a short A-line dress, and a matching scarf. She loved dressing up to go to The Senator. It was the one place where she felt like, if given the chance, she could be a movie star. The long drapes, and smoky room made her feel as if she was entering a speak-easy. She slunk up the stairs, and entered into the bar. It was busy, but not yet packed. She found a table in the middle of the room, and sat down. She ordered a beer when the waiter came, and glanced around. At the table on her left was an older couple, and to the right two men close to her age. She wondered briefly if they were gay. She smiled politely at one of the men across the table from her. He smiled back and resumed talking to his friend. Every so often, she glanced towards the doorway. It was only a few minutes before nine. She straightened her scarf and tried to look anything but bored.

On stage, the crew was doing a final sound-check. She pretended to pay close attention to the process, while pulling a cigarette from her purse. She found her lighter, lit the smoke, then laid the lighter on the table. When the waiter brought her the beer, she paid him and checked the door again. Plenty of time. She took a sip of beer and then a drag on her smoke.

"Excuse me, miss," the man at the next table called.

She turned towards him. "Yes?"

"Can I borrow your lighter?"

She passed it to him. "Sure."

He lit the smoke and handed her back the lighter. "Thanks. Have you seen this band before?"

She shook her head. "Are they good?"

"One of the best. You wait until that woman starts singing, and she'll knock you right out of your seat."
“Is she that talented?”

The man smiled secretly. He leaned in closer to her. “If women did anything for me, be still my beating heart.”

Kathrin laughed. *Chalk one up for the straight girl.* “I’m Kathrin.”

“Hi, I’m George, and this is Craig.”

Kathrin shook hands and the three entered into a long discussion about the band.

Fifteen minutes later, Aaron arrived. He scanned the room until he saw her, and then stood at the door and watched her. He observed each one of her smiles and gestures, and noticed how elegantly she carried herself. She was beautiful, that much was true. But he wasn’t as pleased that she was talking to two men, and seemed to be enjoying their company a little too much. He walked across the room and planted a firm kiss on her cheek. “Hi, honey.”

Kathrin flushed at his display of affection. “Hi,” she said shyly.

She introduced Aaron to George and Craig, and he greeted them indifferently. “Sorry, I’m late,” he said, turning to her.

“No problem. George was just telling me about the band. He says the singer is amazing.”

Aaron smiled over clenched teeth. “I could have told you that.”

Kathrin picked up the edge in his voice. She looked at him, slightly startled, and tried to figure out what was wrong. All she was doing was talking to two gay men about the show. She realized immediately the problem. “Do you want a beer?” she asked Aaron.

“Sure.”

She got up and slipped past the table, coming up right in front of Aaron. She swooped down to his level and caught his lips in hers. As she pulled away, her mouth brushed his ear. “They’re gay,” she whispered.

When she returned Aaron smiled sheepishly at her. “Sorry.”

“First warning,” she cautioned with a seductive grin.

He had no time to respond. The drums rolled and the rest of the band made their way onto the stage. They smiled at each other and watched the band. Conversation was useless.

Aaron followed Kathrin down the stairs and out the front door. When they got outside, she turned left and walked towards the parking lot. “Aaron, they were amazing! I’m not much of a jazz connoisseur, but even I knew that they were good. I could feel her voice right down to my toes. Thank you so much for asking me to come.”
Aaron smiled. He liked watching Kathrin when she was happy. It was almost as if she was a little kid with an ice cream cone. “I’m glad you liked it.”

They reached the parking lot and Kathrin headed for her car. Aaron faltered beside her.

“What?” she asked, stopping to wait for him.

“I walked.”

“Well, if you want to go home, I can give you a ride. Or we can go for coffee. Or we can go to your place for coffee. Or we can just stand here and wait for morning.”

Aaron swallowed. “Whatever you want. But my apartment’s a mess.”

“Then we’ll go to the coffee. C’mon, I know a cute little place.”

She started walking again, then realized that Aaron hadn’t moved. “What?” she grumbled, turning around.

“I just want to tell you that I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

He looked down at the cracks in the side walk. “For, in the bar.”

Kathrin smiled. “You mean those guys?”

“Yeah.”

She moved towards him, scarf and dress rustling in the warm air. “Aaron. If you do that every time I talk to someone, you’re going to get an ulcer.”

“I just didn’t know if they were bothering you.”

“And I appreciate that. But,” she said, putting her hand on his arm and exhaling at the same time. “let’s just get this over and done with. I’m interested in you. It’s that simple. You don’t have anything to worry about. So, if I talk to some guy, and I probably will have to at some point, I don’t want you to get into a panic. O.K.?”

He looked up. “All right.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

He fell into step beside her. “So, you’re interested, huh?”

Kathrin laughed and slipped her hand into his. “So far, but you’re walking a fine line.”

Aaron laughed and squeezed her hand. “Me too.”

Kathrin felt a tiny bubble burst in her chest. She clung to the bubble as it expanded through her body. She led him to the car, and opened the door for him. Then she reversed out of the parking spot and headed for the café, which was closer to her place than his. And of course, part of the plan.
She parked on Bloor, and hurried him down the back alley behind The Poor Alex
Playhouse.  Aaron was bewildered and kept looking to his left and right.  Finally Kathrin tugged
him into an even smaller alley.  He followed her through a small door and found himself in what
looked to be a vagrants' hideaway.  All over, there were small tables and chairs, and a jagged
staircase led up to some mysterious darkness.  Aaron tried to take everything in.  "Where are we?"
he asked Kathrin, as she steered him to an empty table.

"The Green Room.  I used to spend a lot of time here when I was in school."

"Why?" he questioned.

"The atmosphere.  Of course."

He looked around.  Not much atmosphere as far as he could tell.  There were strange
objects hanging on the wall, one of which seemed to be a tuba.  Kathrin giggled, and ordered two
coffees from a passing waitress.

"I love this place," she offered.

"I can see why," he responded weakly.

"Oh come on, Aaron, live a little."

He pulled his chair in closer to her.  "There are a lot of freaks here."

"Wait until summer.  Then they open the patio and all the 'freaks' come out of
hibernation.  And watch it, 'cause I used to be one of those freaks."

Aaron smiled as the waitress set down two mugs of steaming coffee.  "I'm sure you were
a very nice freak."

"Thank you."  Kathrin stated and poured some cream into her coffee.

Aaron watched her.  When she looked up, she gave him a questioning glance.  "Not
thinking about deserting me in a café again.  Are you?"

Aaron smiled.  "I don't think I could find my way out of here."

"That's the idea.  This place is for a very few, select clients.  You should feel honoured."

He took a sip of coffee.  "I do."

She couldn't tell if he was sincere or not.  "So," she said, "my friends want to meet you."

"Really?"

"Yeah.  They want to know who it is I keep ditching them for."

"I'm sure you told them it was someone really special."

"Not in so many words.  But I think they got the idea."

"What about your family?"
Kathrin looked up. “Oh, they don’t know.”

“They don’t know about us?”

“Not that we’re dating again.”

Aaron shook his head. “I’m sorry, again?”

Kathrin plucked a cigarette from her package. “It’s kind of confusing.”

He waited for her to continue. She didn’t and he prodded her. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Kathrin sighed and lit her smoke. “Well, I sort of suggested to my mom that I was seeing someone. And your name was the only one that popped into my head at the time. But don’t worry, I broke it off.”

Aaron frowned. “Why, what did I do?”

Kathrin let out a loud laugh. “You didn’t do anything. We just weren’t compatible.”

“You know, between the two of us, we make for a very weird relationship.”

Kathrin blew smoke rings into the air. “You mean like, because you stalked me?”

“I didn’t stalk you. I noticed you. There’s a difference. And I only happened to speak to you because you were standing right next to me. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. But you, on the other hand...”

Kathrin covered her smile. “If I hadn’t told you, you never would have known. You would have thought that I told them some time during the past week.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“What are you talking about, then?”

Aaron took another sip of coffee and cleared his throat. “Do you realize that when people ask us about our first date, I’ll be forced to tell them that we went to a movie alone?”

Kathrin nearly choked on her coffee. “O.K. that was weird, I’ll admit it. But there is a very good reason for that. Which of course, I can’t tell you about.”

“Why not?”

“Because then you’ll think I’m really weird.”

“Try me.”

Kathrin rested her mouth on her hand and began rapidly chewing one of her nails. “O.K. I can be honest. But you have to promise you won’t laugh.”

“I promise.”

“Scouts’ honour.”
“Scouts’ honour,” he repeated.

“Were you a scout?”

“Get to the point.”

“I have to sit alone in the theatre so no one can see that I’m masturbating.”

She waited for a response. Not one word came out of Aaron’s mouth, which had dropped nearly to the floor.

“Is that weird?” she asked tentatively.

Aaron shut his mouth. Still, he couldn’t speak.

“Aaron?”

He blinked a few times, and tried to dislodge the image of Kathrin in the theatre from his head.

“Are you going to say anything?”

He looked at her. “Wow.”

Kathrin bit into her lower lip. “What does that mean? Is it weird?”

Aaron shook his head vigorously. “No, it’s not weird.”

“Then what is it?”

“I think, that’s the most arousing thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

Kathrin’s face broke into a wide grin. She picked up her mug and drained the last of the coffee. They sat silently for a moment, then Kathrin opened her purse. She extracted some change, placed it on the table and stuffed her smokes back into the purse. “C’mon,” she said, getting to her feet, “I’ll take you home.”

Aaron got up slowly, put on his jacket, and numbly followed her out the door, down the alleyway and to her car. Kathrin tried not to laugh. When they got to the car, she popped the automatic lock and opened the doors. Aaron looked over the hood of the car at her. “You know Kathrin, you’re an evil woman. I won’t be able to get a wink of sleep tonight.”

Kathrin smiled. “Let’s hope so.”

They slipped into her car, and Kathrin turned the key in the ignition. The car roared to life, and she pulled out and headed for Bathhurst Street. At the lights she turned left. Aaron remained silent when she turned right onto Queen and drove in the opposite direction from his apartment. They both knew where they were going.
By the time they got up the stairs to her apartment, Aaron’s shirt was unbuttoned, and Kathrin had lost her scarf. They stumbled into her place, and Aaron attempted to kick off his shoes while Kathrin began undoing his pants. She pulled him across the living room, through the dining room and straight onto her bed. Aaron fumbled with the zipper on her dress, and then allowed her to finish removing the rest of her clothing. She shucked off each layer, until she stood naked in front of him. He couldn’t believe how great her body was. Of course he’d seen evidence before, but to have her standing nude by the bed was a completely different thing. He grabbed her and pulled her onto the bed, where they lay, kissing and moving against each other in a frantic panic. Kathrin finally managed to get Aaron out of his clothing, and ran her hands down through the thick mat of curls on his chest.

“You have an amazing body,” she murmured.

He pulled her closer. “So do you.”

She slipped her tongue into his mouth, and rolled it over the fine straight edge his teeth offered her. Then she ran her tongue over the roof of his mouth. Aaron moaned and Kathrin could feel his breath moving through her own mouth. She sighed with pleasure and rolled onto her back, pulling Aaron on top of her.

He looked into her eyes. “Kathrin,” he began.

Kathrin kissed him. “Do you have any?” she asked to quicken the conversation.

He gave her a helpless look. “No, I didn’t think to bring any.”

Kathrin groaned, and Aaron moved off her slightly. “You aren’t?”

“No.”

Aaron kissed her on the mouth. “That’s all right. We can some other time.”

Kathrin covered her forehead with her hand. “It’s just that…”

Aaron soothed her. “It’s fine. I understand.”

He started to get up. “Where are you going?” Kathrin demanded.

“The bathroom. I’ve had to go for an hour.”

“Sorry.”

He smiled. “I didn’t mind.”

Kathrin could hear him run the tap in the bathroom. She stared at the ceiling, and mentally kicked herself. This just figures. But she was also slightly relieved. It would take some of the pressure off. She rolled onto her side, tucked the sheets around her body, and rested her head on
her hand. After a minute the toilet flushed and Aaron returned to the bed. He crawled in next to her and placed two frozen feet on her leg.

Kathrin screamed and kicked him away. He pretended to be hurt, and Kathrin cuddled up next to him and placed her arm over his body. Slowly her fingers traced his chest and moved over his stomach.

“Aaron?” she whispered, as her hand trailed lower across his abdomen.

“Mmn.”

Her hand dipped down and gently touched him. “Aaron?”

“Yeah?” he answered as she stroked him.

She continued moving her hand, and could feel him tensing, and hear his breath start to deepen. “We can still do everything else.”

He rolled over until their faces were a mere inch apart. He kissed her and smiled. “Yes. We can.”

And so they did.
Kathrin woke up on Sunday morning to find Aaron’s arm looping over her waist and spanning her ribcage so that his hand rested gently between her breasts. She smiled and snuggled her back closer to his warm chest. It felt good to wake and not only remember the man she was in bed with, but to know that he had slept curled tightly around her all night. She could feel his breath on her neck and his other arm twitch under her head. The company of lovers, Kathrin thought. But not true lovers, yet.

She had forgotten what a warm body felt like holding her in the morning - that sense of familiarity. No sneaking down the stairs in the middle of the night, no awkward getting dressed while the other person pretended to sleep, then exhaled the stiff breath of pent-up relief once the door shut. Just warm smells cradled in pillow cases and dry, hot hands and feet touching under the covers. She pulled his hand up to her mouth and kissed it. Against her lips’ touch it was smooth, but only when she moved her hand down to feel his fingers did she realize just how long and fine his hands were. Piano player fingers, she smiled. Just like hers, only thicker. His nails were trimmed down so that only a bit of whitened nail showed. She trailed her fingers over the moons of his finger tips, and then lightly touched his palm. There were rough calluses where the fleshy pad of his hand joined his fingers. As Kathrin pushed the tips of her fingers against them she wondered what they were from. It was strange, lying next to a man that she knew so little about, but felt so comfortable with. So in touch with. She knew that sometimes it just happened that way. But she only knew it through other people’s words and memories. She had never felt it through her own finger tips before.

When she had been with Ken, she had never even undressed in front of him. Only slipped nervously under the sheets and waited for his arms to seek her out. Never crawled over his body with such lucid movement, and never felt that she knew what she was doing. And when they fell asleep, it was her in her corner and he in his. She didn’t like him to touch her while she was sleeping. And he too had been content with that arrangement. With Aaron it was different. It was like she knew exactly what she should do. She continued rubbing her fingers over his hand. Part of her wanted to stay warm against his body until Monday morning. The other part wanted to wake him up, so he could share the warmth with her.

She thought briefly about slipping out of bed, but knew she would wake him and didn’t want to - for the moment he was still lost in sleep and she was in complete possession of him. She didn’t want him to leave. So she stayed still and thought about the previous night. It had been amazing. By the time they fell asleep at five, she was exhausted, but still burning from the fire
inside her. She could still feel his hands on her body, like hot fingerprints etched into her skin. Her body still tingled.

Beside her Aaron stirred. She stopped moving her fingers and waited. He pulled his arms from her body, and she could hear him yawn and rub his eyes. Slowly he grabbed her arm and pulled her over so that she was facing him once again.

“Good morning.”

His hair was rumpled and pillow creases lined his face, but Kathrin was aware of only his bright green eyes, and the crinkle around them as he smiled.

“Good morning,” she responded.

He stretched his arms up and spread his long fingers out. Kathrin rolled back onto her side. When he’d finished stretching he looped his arms around her and squeezed her tightly. He ran his fingers down the inside of her arm and over the smooth skin. His first two fingers stumbled over her scar and repeatedly traced the hook, over and over in the same languid movement.

“I like that,” he told her softly.

“Mmn.”

“What’s it from?”

“An oven,” she murmured.

“It’s a perfect J.”

She smiled with her eyes shut. “It’s a hook.”

He lifted her arm delicately, and kissed the scar. “It’s very sexy. I’m surprised I never noticed it before.”

He trailed his tongue over the pucker of skin. Then he grabbed Kathrin and pulled her on top of him. She let out a small shriek of surprise as he began kissing her face and neck with quick little pecks. “Stop it. Stop it,” she begged.

He let her go, and she sat upright. “My mother used to do that to me.”

Aaron shuddered. “That would drive me crazy.”

“It did drive me crazy.”

“Well then, I’ll have to plan a new attack,” he said smiling, and tugged her back down to his face.

He snuffled at her neck and let out little piggy noises. Kathrin shrieked again. “Stop!” she pleaded, laughing as his beard tickled her neck.
He kissed her firmly on the lips. “Want to go for breakfast? If it’s still morning, that is. What time is it?”

Kathrin reached for the alarm clock on the dresser and turned it until she could make out the face and arms. She gasped in surprise. “It’s noon.”

“Well, we were up pretty late. Brunch?”

Kathrin was about to nod, but stopped suddenly. “Oh shit!”

She hopped out of bed and ran naked to the bathroom. Aaron watched her, perplexed.

“Kathrin? Was it something I said?”

She rushed back in wearing her robe. “I’m supposed to be at my mother’s house in half an hour for lunch. Damn.”

Aaron sat up. “Should I let you get ready?”

She looked at him questioningly, and he realized she hadn’t heard a single word. “What?” she asked.

“What?”

She frowned. “How are you going to get home?”

He smiled. “Bus?”

“No, you can’t take the bus.”

“Well, it’s not a problem if it’s out of your way.”

“Let me think about it for a minute,” she said as she turned and glanced into the mirror over the dresser.

Her hair was completely disheveled, and she fluffed it absentmindedly. Aaron watched her reflection and the crease in his brow widened. She caught his glance. “What?”

“Turn around.”

Kathrin obeyed, and he motioned for her to come closer. She took a few tentative steps and stopped just out of his reach. Slowly he extended his arm towards her face. She ducked her head away from him. “What?”

“You’re not going to be happy,” he said as a way of answering her question.


“Look for yourself,” he responded, indicating to the mirror.
She turned and leaned against the dresser. Scanning her face in the mirror she didn’t notice anything out of place. She cocked her head to one side and examined her profile. As she turned the other way, she finally saw what Aaron was pointing out, and covered her neck in shock. When she removed her fingers she could make out a huge purple welt forming an oblong splotch across the skin. Kathrin groaned. “Oh great. My family’s going to have a field day.”

Aaron laughed. “I guess they won’t go for the birthmark idea, huh?”

“That’s pretty feeble.”

He agreed. “Well, at least I don’t have to explain it.”

Kathrin’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then she shot Aaron a nasty grin.

He looked at her, and felt panic rising in his chest. “Oh no…”

She began tugging him off the bed. “No, Kathrin. Come on,” he begged.

Kathrin scooped his clothes up from the floor and tossed them at him. “It won’t kill you.”

“It very well could.”

She put her hands on her hips. “You’re coming. That’s all there is to it.”

He realized with a shudder there was no way out.

She let him drive. While she gave him the initial directions she pulled the sun visor down and applied concealer to her neck, careful not to get it on the collar of her shirt. Unfortunately, all her turtle necks were too warm for the weather, and wearing even the lightest one of them would make her neck look conspicuous.

Occasionally she stopped covering the bruise long enough to give directions and point out the landmarks and places of her youth. By the time they neared her street Aaron knew most of the interesting and bizarre details of her childhood. Then, as he turned onto the street, Kathrin gave him a final rundown of the family.

“Jen’s married to Scott. She’s just a few inches shorter than I am, with darker hair. You’ll like them - they have some personality. Andria is the short one who thinks she’s Martha Stewart. Her husband Mark is really uptight - he’s going places, but he’s boring. They live on morals. As long as you admire his woodwork and her - well, everything else - they’ll love you forever. My mother will be too excited to say anything rational, but she’ll ask you a million questions and beg you to call her Ingrid. Agnes won’t say much. She’s the blind seer of the group. All she does is knit and listen, but be prepared: every time she opens her mouth she hits the dart on the bulls-eye. And Danielle is my personal favorite, probably because she can’t talk yet. But
that’ll last one more month the way Andria and Mark are coaching her. Once the words start coming I’m sure I’ll hate her. Nobody likes being shown up by a sixteenth-month-old.”

Aaron nodded abstractedly. He was too busy checking house numbers. “I won’t remember all that.”

“Well, then just be yourself. Here!” she pointed.

He slammed on the breaks. “Thanks.”

He reversed into a parking space and shut off the motor. Kathrin made him walk around to the back door. She pointed to the house on their left. “That’s where Mrs. Martin used to live. The first time I ever saw two people having sex. She was the local brothel.”

Aaron glanced at the house in surprise. He expected something more than just a plain bungalow. Maybe the smell of sex in the air, or at least thin panties hanging on the line. He shrugged and followed Kathrin up the stairs. She opened the back door quietly and stepped inside. She could hear her mother laughing in the dining room. They entered into the kitchen, and the door swung shut behind Aaron with a loud bang. Kathrin heard the screech of a chair being pushed backwards over the hardwood floor.

“Kathrin?” her mother called.

“Yes.”

“Well, goodness,” her mother’s voice grew louder. “why on earth are you coming through the back...”

Her voice trailed off when she saw Aaron. Kathrin took a step forward. “Mom, this is.”

Her mother moved towards him. “You must be Aaron.”

Aaron held out his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you Mrs. Connelly.”

She blushed and took his hand. “Oh, please call me Ingrid.”

Kathrin shot Aaron a look. He ignored it. “Ingrid.”

“Well, it’s nice to finally meet you. I’m glad to see you two worked everything out.”

“Mom,” Kathrin warned.

“Well come on in. You must be starving,” she said to Aaron and led them into the dining room.

“Look everyone, Kathrin and Aaron are here.”

Kathrin watched her family and tried to determine their reactions. Only Scott, when no one else was looking, shot her a thumbs-up. After the introductions, Mark got up to get another chair. Aaron thanked him and sat down, while Ingrid filled a plate for him. He smiled with
appreciation. While Ingrid urged him to eat, he managed to field most of the questions directed at him. Kathrin took the opportunity to relax, and keep the right side of her neck hidden. Everyone ignored her for the most part, but she saw Agnes contorting her head to get a better look at Kathrin’s neck.

Ingrid chattered endlessly over the course of the meal and supplied Aaron with an infinite amount of details about the family, though most of it revolved around the terrors of raising Kathrin. After what seemed like an eternity, she paused, and then to Kathrin’s dismay, said with enthusiasm: “Well, it looks like I’ll finally be able to put another leaf in the table.”

Everyone else at the table laughed, while Kathrin wished she could disappear under it. She glanced around quickly and noticed Scott’s sudden grin. “More than you know,” he muttered.

Kathrin was sitting besides him and so heard every word he said. No one else seemed to have noticed. Her fork clattered loudly to her plate. Her mother threw her a stern glare. “What’s wrong?”

Kathrin turned towards Scott, then looked at Jen. Jen’s eyes opened widely. “Why are you staring at me like that?”

Kathrin’s lower lip quivered. “Is it true?”

Jen clamped her mouth shut, and turned red. She looked at Scott, who gave her a tiny nod, then back at Kathrin. “Um, yes.”

Kathrin’s mouth dropped open. Everyone else looked from one sister to the other. “Is what true?” Ingrid asked impatiently.

Kathrin ignored her mother, and threw her arms around Scott’s neck. Then she jumped up from the table and ran around it to her sister. Jen hugged her heartily.

“What?” Andria demanded.

Mark and Aaron stared, bewildered at such odd behaviour.

“What?” Ingrid and Andria chorused.

Agnes looked up. “Isn’t it obvious?” she asked. “She’s going to have a baby.”

Ingrid and Andria stopped their repeated questioning immediately. Andria turned to Jen. “Is it true?”

Jen’s face broke into a wide grin. “Well, we wanted to wait a bit longer before we told you, but yes, we’re going to have a baby.”

Ingrid stood fixed in her spot. Slowly her eyes welled with tears, and she brushed them away as soon as they started streaming down her face. Andria jumped up and congratulated...
everyone in the room. Pandemonium broke loose, and even Danielle clapped her hands together with glee. She was enjoying her adult family members making fools of themselves.

Jen was six weeks pregnant. Kathrin nearly throttled her. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“We wanted to be sure. After the miscarriage, we couldn’t get too excited.” Scott explained briefly.

Kathrin flinched. Jen hadn’t ever mentioned a miscarriage. She caught her sister’s eyes, and Jen quickly looked away. Kathrin glanced around to see if anyone else had known. They all seemed as surprised as she was.

“I never drink on Sundays, but this time I’ll make an exception.” Ingrid said and ran into the kitchen to grab a bottle of wine.

Andria trailed after her, and the two returned with a stack of plastic cups and a bottle of white wine. They passed the cups around the table, while everyone chattered about the impending birth. Finally, they all held a cup. “Aaron,” Ingrid said. “seeing as you’re the newest guest at the table, will you make the toast?”

Aaron smiled and rose unsteadily to his feet. He composed himself and raised his cup. Kathrin could see the wine rippling against the plastic, and realized how nervous he was. He cleared his throat. “Jen, Scott. I propose this toast to you, for being brave enough to bring a new life into this world. I know, from seeing you all together today, that there is a lot of love in this family, and that will ensure this child’s future. May you both always be proud parents. And for the rest of you: Ingrid, may your second grandchild make you doubly happy: Agnes, may your knitting needles click endlessly; Mark, I’m sure your talent will make the most beautiful cradle ever, to be lovingly painted by your wife; and Kathrin, may you be the most doting aunt ever to corrupt another innocent babe. And may I be lucky enough to sit at this table again. To new beginnings!”

“Amen to that!” Ingrid praised.

Kathrin felt tears well in her eyes and her chest tightened. He actually heard every word I said. The toast had been perfect. She smiled at Aaron, and he caught her eyes. They locked for a brief instant, then he smiled warmly. Kathrin looked away for fear she might cry. She swallowed the contents of the cup with one gulp.

After a few more words of congratulations, Ingrid and her daughters got up to clear the table. Ingrid refused Aaron’s offer to help. “You three go out on the porch and do whatever it is men do. We’ll take care of everything here.”
The two weeks before the wedding were filled up with dinner parties thrown by Alison’s parents, errands and meetings. Kathrin survived the first week only by thinking about how she only had three weeks left until summer holidays. Somewhere in that time Kathrin managed to wangle an acceptance to the wedding out of Aaron, although she refused every one of his consistent lunch invitations, saying that she would make them up when she was less busy. Still, she managed to sneak in a few calls to or from him every day. She’d never been so tired in all her life, and considered herself lucky not to be the one getting married. Then again, her mother wouldn’t make a huge deal out of it like Alison’s parents had. Nothing was too good for the wedding, but Adam had stubbornly drawn the line at swans, much to Mrs. Morris’ chagrin.

To make matters worse, the Monday before the wedding Kathrin’s brake pads gave up the fight, and she was given an estimate of at least two days in the shop. She had no desire to rent a car, and figured she would just grin and bear it until Wednesday, or Thursday at the latest. When she called Aaron on Monday night, she was frustrated.

“Of course it has to happen now. It couldn’t wait a week.” She moaned into the phone.

“How are you going to get to work?”

“Streetcar. I guess. At least it’s not winter.”

“That’s stupid.”

“What is?” she asked.

“Stay here for a couple of days. Your office building’s what, like, two blocks away?”

“Aw. Aaron, that’s nice, but I can’t.”

“Why not?” he demanded.

“I don’t want to impose.”

“It won’t be imposing. I don’t use my car that often, you can borrow it. I know you have a lot to do this week.”

Kathrin glanced around the kitchen. There was nothing there to keep her home for two days. And the thought of shackling up with Aaron was slightly appealing. “O.K.”

“Great. I’ll pick you up in an hour.”

She packed most of her belongings into her weekend bag, and stuffed all her personal items into her cosmetic case. Then she racked her brain to figure out what she was forgetting and stumbled to the bathroom to find some authentic bath tablets. She didn’t want to have to substitute shampoo. She remembered to water the plants and then went into the living room to feed the fish.
The men stumbled to their feet, and walked out the front door.

"That was the most beautiful toast I've ever heard," Jen confided to Kathrin in the kitchen.

"Yes," Andria agreed, "where was he when Danielle was born?"

Jen laughed. "Not even a twinkle in Kathrin's eye."

Kathrin chose to ignore them and started rinsing the plates. Andria went out into the dining room, and her mother placed a warm hand on her arm. "I'm very happy for you Kathrin. He seems like such a nice man."

"Thanks mom." Kathrin moved away from her mother.

Jen was next on her mother's list. "Any you," Ingrid began, hugging her eldest daughter, "I'm so proud of both of you. Another baby in the family."

Jen smiled. "Thanks mom."

Ingrid went out into the dining room. Jen waited until she was out of earshot then scooted over to Kathrin. "You've been holding out on us. What a babe!"

Kathrin smiled. "He's O.K."

"O.K.? He's wonderful. And don't play coy with me, you really like him, huh?"

Kathrin grinned stupidly. "Yeah."

"I could tell just by the way you looked at him. Even Scott noticed. Not that it matters, but you have our approval."

Kathrin dropped into a low-bending bow. "Thank you."

Jen flicked a dish towel at her. "Don't start," Kathrin warned, "I'm not above beating a woman, even in your condition."

Jen laughed and jumped away. Kathrin flicked water at her. "Hey, how come you never told me about the miscarriage?"

Jen averted her eyes. "I'm sorry. I should have, but we were so heartbroken that I thought if I told anybody I would jinx myself."

"It's O.K. I'm glad it worked out anyway."

"And I'm happy for you. He's a great catch."

Kathrin grunted. "You sound like mom."

"Oh really? All right, here's a question for you then: how is he in the sex department?"

Kathrin coughed, and checked the door to see if anyone was eavesdropping. "I wouldn't know."
“You haven’t slept with him yet?”
Kathrin smiled as innocently as possible. “Hey. I’m a good Catholic girl.”
Jen burst out into laughter, then tried to calm herself. “Oh yeah. How could I forget?”

They all gathered in the living room for coffee and Aaron asked to hold the baby. He cooed and cuddled Danielle, and she took to him immediately. She clutched his hair in her tiny hands, and whooped with joy when he bounced her on his lap. It took Ingrid less than five minutes to begin a new line of questioning. “So, Aaron do you like children?”
“I love kids,” he responded enthusiastically, “I can’t wait until...my sister has one.”
“Oh, is your sister married?”
“No, but I don’t think that would stop her.”
Ingrid was taken aback, but continued speaking casually. “What about you?”
“When the time comes, I want plenty. Nine boys.”
“So I can field a ball team.”
The men laughed, and Kathrin breathed a sigh of relief. A joke. Ingrid, of course, didn’t get it. “Are you Catholic, then?”
“Yes,” Aaron said, smiling at her naiveté, “I hate to admit it, but I’m not a very good one. I really only go at Christmas.”
Ingrid smiled. “Well at least you go more than my errant daughter here,” she said pointing a finger at Kathrin.

Aaron passed the baby to Andria, and Danielle let go of his hair with evident displeasure.
“She really likes you,” Andria noted, “do you baby-sit?”
“Anytime,” he said getting up, then asking for directions to the bathroom.
While he was gone Kathrin refilled coffee mugs. He returned and approached Kathrin, gently hooking his arm around her waist and placing his hand on her stomach. “Honey, we should probably get a move on.”
Kathrin blushed. “Sure,” she said, patting his hand.
They said their good-byes, and Scott held out his hand. “So, I’ll call you this week.”
Aaron smiled and nodded. “Sounds great.”
Ingrid crossed to Aaron and gave him a big hug. “It was so nice to meet you. I’m sure we’ll see you again very soon.”
Kathrin tugged Aaron out the door. She got into the driver’s seat and unlocked the doors. Aaron got in. “You’re not mad about leaving are you?” he asked.

“No. It was a good idea,” she responded, pulling out onto the street.

“I had fun.”

“Good. What’s up with you and Scott next week?”

He smiled. “Squash game.”

“Oh,” she replied, realizing the cause of his calluses.

They drove in silence for a while, and Kathrin hummed along with the radio. “So?”

Aaron finally asked.

“So, what?”

“So, how’d I do?”

Kathrin laughed. “I’d say you went over very well.”

Same thing with her friends when they all went out the following Saturday. Aaron and Harold debated investments, and Adam finally found a male partner for endless games of pool. Aaron played well and gracefully, while keeping up his end of the conversation he was having with Jason. Kathrin was surprised to hear Jason speak more than ten words, but Aaron patiently drew him out of his shell.

By the end of the night each one of her friends had taken an opportunity to corner her and tell her how much they liked him. Alison even went so far as to demand that Kathrin bring him to the wedding. Kathrin smiled. “I’ll think about it.”

She coaxed him onto the dance floor and her earlier observation proved less than accurate. He was an amazing dancer, and took her erratic dance moves in stride. By last call Kathrin was drunk and happier than she had ever been in her life. “Are you going to take me home?” she asked him as she slipped her arms around his waist.

“Yes,” he responded with a sly grin, “but I promise not to take advantage of you.”

She smiled and ran her fingers up his back. “Even if I want you to?”

He kissed her gently. “Tonight, especially if you want me to.”

They wished her friends good night and caught a cab outside the bar. Aaron ushered her into the back seat before him, and then slid in. He gave the driver directions to Kathrin’s apartment. “Do you like my friends?”

“Yeah, I really do. Especially Harold.”
She smiled. “Good. ‘Cause Carol’s my best friend. And Harold is Carol’s lover.”

“Then that must be why they’re so happy.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re not married.”

Kathrin smiled. “I don’t think they ever will be. He’s Jewish. And she’s stubborn.”

She leaned over and rested her head on Aaron’s shoulder. “How do you feel?” he asked her.

“Drunk.”

“I thought as much,” he said, running his fingers through her hair.

She watched the streets whiz by for a moment. “When do I get to meet your friends?”

He didn’t answer her. She turned her head towards him and saw that he too was looking out the window. “Aaron?”

When he looked back at her, she saw that he was sad. She placed her hand over his and he smiled. “I don’t really have that many.”

“You have some.”

“I have a few, but they’re far between.”

“Why?” she asked drowsily.

“Most of them fell apart after my last relationship. There was a lot of choosing sides.”

She nodded gravely. “Oh. I’m sorry.”

“It’s O.K.”

“Well then,” she paused dramatically and sighed, “I guess I’ll let you share mine.”

“I’d like that.”

She was tempted to ask more about his ex, but decided to wait until a better time. She snuggled closer to him. “What about your family? You still have them. When do I get introduced?”

“One day soon.”

She frowned. “Is it me? Or is it them?”

“Definitely them.”

“O.K.,” she said, accepting his answer.

“Any other questions?”

She crinkled her nose. “Just one. When do I get to see your apartment?”
Out of the corner of his eye he saw her run her fingers through her hair. And he knew from her smell and how she felt so good close to him that it was time to move on. He kissed the top of her head. "How about this weekend?"

She looked up at him. "Really?"

"Really."

And she knew at that instant she had fallen hard.
Aaron pulled the sheets from the dryer and inhaled the crumpled fabric. It still smelled vaguely of the stiff, artificial store packaging, and was rough against his unshaven chin. He carefully folded the sheet into the laundry basket and then grabbed the liner. He brought the elastic edges together and folded the liner in half. He smoothed the creases until no jagged edging hung down. It always mystified him, how sheets came neatly tucked into small plastic package but he could never get them back into that neatly boxed shape. Over the years he'd tried various sheet-folding techniques, but the linen never re-formed the way the manufacturers had intended.

Once the liner was relatively cubed, he placed it into the laundry basket, and quickly arranged the pillow cases on top. He carried the basket out of the make-shift laundry room, reached over the massive darkroom enlarger and turned off the light behind him. He crossed the apartment and went into his bedroom. The duvet hung over the computer chair and his pillows rested on the floor. His bed was naked except for a football sized stain staring up at him. He grimaced, then forced the tension from his brow. He thought back to buying the new bed after Lily had moved in. When she had decided that a double bed wasn't large enough for her frequent nocturnal turnings and shiftings. So they had trudged through bedding store after bedding store, until she had found the perfect bed. It was solid wood and appealed to both her sense of line and shape, and his notion of masculinity. The salesman had praised her choice and invited them to try it out. Lily had needed no prodding. She had immediately shed her shoes and climbed onto the bed. Aaron watched her in surprise.

"C'mon Aaron," she called, reaching out to pull him onto the bed.

He struggled weakly, then lay down beside her. The length of the bed barely contained him, but the fact was irrelevant, as most often he slept spooning Lily from behind.

"How heavy is it?" Lily asked the salesman.

"All said, almost four hundred pounds."

Aaron calculated the weight in terms of back pain from carrying it into his apartment. Lily sent him a sly smile. "I bet it doesn't creak."

Aaron blushed beside her, and the salesman coughed behind his clipboard.

They arranged for delivery the next day. After fitting all the pieces into place, Aaron decided he liked it for its simplicity and bulk. He found the bed soothing to look at and to lie in. And Lily liked it because it didn't creak.

"Now," she said, curling up against him after their inaugural love-making session, "I don't have to think about all the other girls you've been with. This bed is untainted."
Until the morning Aaron woke up to Lily’s quiet curses. She pushed him from the bed and pulled the sheets off to avoid staining the mattress with her menstrual flow. It was too late. There, beneath the layers of cotton, a deep crimson blotch had buried itself into the fabric. She dabbed the stain with toilet paper, and Aaron stared, not knowing what to do. The toilet paper came away from the stain, and it reminded Aaron of a sponge painting.

“I’m sorry Aaron. I wasn’t expecting it.”

Aaron nodded. “Don’t worry.”

After scrubbing with soap and water and then stain-remover, the stain still clung to the mattress. Later, even after Lily went out and bought the exact same crisp white sheets with her own money, Aaron could feel the stain like a pea on the mattress.

He looked at the mattress and realized that the bed was doubly tainted. For him and for the next woman to lie on it. Which he despaired and hoped would be Kathrin. He slipped the pillows into their cases and placed them on top of the duvet. Then he unfolded the bed linen, and shook out the liner. He tucked the elastic over each corner with care and pulled the liner tight so that there were no creases. Once the liner was in place he pulled the sheet out of the basket and shook it frantically. It billowed high above the bed and floated down, landing slightly off center. He lifted the sheet again and it fell in perfect alignment with the one small wrinkle down the center of the liner. He pulled the sheet tight, then raised the foot of the mattress and deftly tucked the sheet underneath on one side, then the other. He tucked the sides in as Lily had shown him, so that a quarter would bounce evenly on the bed if he made it properly. Perfect nurse linen.

He ran his hand up the sheet and smoothed every wrinkle from the bed. He wanted everything to be perfect for Kathrin’s visit. The duvet slipped out from under the pillows, and he arranged it over the sheets. Then he gently plumped the pillows and laid them neatly at the head of the bed. He looked at the freshly-made bed, and quickly adjusted one of the pillows. He felt as if he was missing something, and turned around to find what he was looking for. Then he grinned suddenly, realizing that he was looking for a mint or a gold-foil chocolate to place on the pillows. He shook his head. He didn’t even know if Kathrin was staying the night, and there he was pretending that his place was some huge hotel. He hoped that Kathrin intended on staying, but it might prove to be an idle hope.

He scanned the room and checked to see if everything was in order. He’d dusted every stable object, cleaned the bathroom and vacuumed the living room. All he had left to do was put the fish into the oven and microwave the vegetables. And, of course, prepare himself. He
definitely needed a shave. Keeping that in mind, he went out into the living room and selected a CD from the shelf. Crash Vegas. He skipped to “Smoke” and pressed repeat. Lily had always hated the song and refused to let him play it when she was around. Something about disliking weepy lyrics, and how she would eradicate Aaron’s misogynistic impulses. “I mean,” she’d say, “it’s about some girl whose lover is a drunk, but she doesn’t have enough will-power to break away. Created by a man, and then sung by a woman. It’s sick.”

He had shaken his head. When he played it after with the headphones on he really couldn’t see what she was talking about. Hadn’t the woman left the guy in the end? He even read the lyrics to make sure he wasn’t missing anything. All in all he really liked the song, and Keelor, well Keelor was the top Canadian musician as far as he was concerned.

He checked the water level in the new plants. He had picked them up at one of the flower shops in the underground shopping concourse near work. The lady behind the counter had picked out three hardy stalks and dared him to try and kill them. And then she asked if he had just moved in to a new apartment. He shook his head, and gave her a vague response about how he wanted to brighten things up in his apartment. Her subsequent smile came with a set of love-stricken eyes. But she wasn’t too far off. He was out to impress. Certain things reflected well on their owners, and Aaron didn’t have the time to train a dog before Kathrin arrived. When he felt the soil it was more wet than dry and he wondered if maybe he’d been overzealous. But they wouldn’t drown before Kathrin came and left, so he was safe. Maybe he just wouldn’t water them for another two weeks or so.

He had two hours until she arrived and viewed his place for the first time - minus a couple of the regular features. He’d removed the family portraits from the mantle and replaced them with postcards and baby pictures that his married friends had sent him. Some of those friends he hadn’t talked to in years, but they still sent Christmas cards and snapshots of blurry little kids with dirt on their faces.

He felt as if he was disguising his apartment; wrapping up the real and displaying some other side of his personality. He’d even gone over the pictures to memorize names in case Kathrin asked. Really, he simply didn’t want Kathrin to be reminded that he had a family. He didn’t see any need to talk about them. He didn’t want to get into the whole Elaine situation anyway. As far as he was concerned she’d moved out and on with her life at twenty-one, and just didn’t get along with their parents. It happened all the time. But women had some idea that there was more to
every simple story, and Aaron didn’t want Kathrin asking a million questions that wouldn’t lead anywhere.

He had found an old ashtray under the kitchen sink and placed it on the low table in the living room. He didn’t like the fact that Kathrin smoked, but at least she kept it to a minimum around him. Not like Lily, who had always lit up for breakfast and kept chugging all day long. He pondered the thought that all the girls he had dated were smokers. But Lily had quit for over a year, so maybe there was hope for Kathrin too. Then again, in the last few months of his relationship with Lily she would come home smelling of perfume-covered cigarette smoke. She never did smoke in the apartment though, and when he had questioned her, she smiled meekly and always responded, “Just a couple,” which smelled like anywhere from four to forty. He had told her she could smoke in their place, but she had refused, re-stating the fact that she had been on the wagon for over a year.

Sometimes, on warm nights he would smell the heavy scent of Lily’s tobacco smoke and for a slashed instant look around for her. She, of course wasn’t there. Then he’d come to and realize his mistake, feeling stupid as he looked around for a phantom. But the smell was always stronger and faster than his brain, and he’d been duped time and time again. Kathrin’s cigarette smoke smelled differently - not so pungent, and even after a night out he could barely smell smoke on her. Only sometimes when he held her close and stuck his nose deep into her hair. Mostly she smelled like baking; and underneath a deep musky odour he had long associated with women, but had never been able to pinpoint as clearly as her body expressed it. It was the smell of deep, oily sex that happened on hot summer nights in some humid jungle village. And it was that smell that kept him up nights thinking about her long, firm body and how soft her inner thighs were. How warm and deep she was against his touch and his tongue.

A small shiver rapped each vertebrae up his spine. He got nervous thinking about Kathrin. They’d really only known each other for a little over a month, but he knew that the attraction between them would come to a head in no time. And he wanted it to, but he was afraid of the dark smell and the soft legs. Afraid, because he would forget everything he knew the moment he slipped inside of her. Afraid, because in that moment he would slip into the void as well. Where everything and everyone could find him. And his secret fear was that Lily would catch him there. Somehow track him down and kill all of his desire in a split second. That was really why he had stayed away from women for so long - because he was afraid of the power an absent woman could exert over him.
So far, she hadn’t found him. The night he spent with Kathrin had been great. She had managed to keep him under her control, because she had been so open with him. It was as if she knew that the second she turned her eyes away from him, he would slip away. Her eyes had held him captive. How she had kissed him eyes wide, exposing everything she had inside and daring him to take it all. And maybe, when the time was right, he would.

The phone buzzed him out of his reverie. It was Kathrin. “Hi there,” he said warmly.

“Just wanted to know if we’re still on for tonight.”

He smiled. “I am if you are.”

“Oh, I thought maybe you’d planned some way to get out of it.”

“Not on your life.”

“Should I bring anything?”

“Just you.”

He was about to elaborate what ‘you’ entailed, but Kathrin cut him off. “Should I,” she paused to find the right words, “bring my sleep-over clothes?”

The question caught him off guard. “Well, um do you need them?”

“What?”

“Are you talking about pajamas?” he asked.

“Well, that too.”

“Sure if you want, but I’d prefer it if you brought nothing to wear.”

Kathrin laughed over the phone. “I’d rather be safe than freezing.”

“I’ll keep you warm.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Nothing else?”

“Nope.”

“O.K. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

And then she was gone. Aaron made his way to the bathroom to shave and shower.

Kathrin resolved in the car to tell him. She wouldn’t have sex with him until she relayed that they were always to wear protection because of her condition. She hoped he wouldn’t ask exactly what her condition was, but braced herself for it. She talked to her partial reflection in the rear-view mirror, and reduced her thoughts to three distinct approaches: the first, a direct approach; the second, a seductive invite that would come across as absurd; and the third, some slipped in words at the last possible minute. She was leaning towards the third the closer she got to
his apartment. If it came to that. She kind of thought it would. She only hoped she wouldn’t have
to make the first move.

She fought the urge to light a cigarette. She could tell that Aaron wasn’t impressed with
her vice, but she wasn’t up to letting go of her dependency right away. Give me some time. She
turned right onto University and checked the lanes of traffic. All clear. She jutted into the empty
avenue and crossed to the furthest lane. Aaron had given her convoluted directions to his place
over the phone. His helpful clue that the building was partially round didn’t help her at all. She
scanned the signs and turned onto King. She ducked down a back alley and miraculously found the
parking garage. Aaron had instructed her to park in the visitor’s area, and she pulled in without
any problem. She shut off the engine, and then reached into the back seat to grab her backpack. It
was filled with toiletries and enough clothing to last her the weekend. If he wanted her to stay, she
was prepared. Enough fresh underwear to dress an army. An army of women, or cross-dressers
anyway.

She felt ridiculous and obvious carrying the bag into the basement foyer. She imagined
that everyone could see into her bag and assess that she was headed for a weekend of passionate
sex. She pressed the elevator button, and the door swung open right away. The elevator only went
up to the first floor, but Aaron had prepared her for it. She’d have to check in at the front desk
before she headed up to his apartment on the seventh floor. Aaron had already alerted her presence
to the doorman.

She got off the elevator and crossed the marble floor to the front desk. A middle-aged man
smiled at her. “I’m going to 711,” she stated.

“Your license plate, Ms. Connelly?”

She gave him the plate number, and tried to keep from laughing. She felt like she was
checking into a seedy motel room under an assumed name. Ms. indicated that he didn’t care
whether she was married or not, but that he would keep the secret anyway. She almost expected
him to pass her a sly wink as she turned, but he simply pointed out the way to the main elevators.

“Thank you,” she said, and moved away.

“Have a nice evening.”

She could feel her heart pick up speed when she got into the elevator and it lurched
upwards. For the past few weeks she’d been fantasizing about what Aaron’s place would look
like. The building was even more than she imagined, with its marble floors, and antique style
elevator. Everything was gilded. Like all the apartments in New York from the movies. She felt
as if she was back in time, and that she should be wearing a long gown, or walking into walls like Marilyn Monroe in “How To Marry A Millionaire”. Slightly tipsy from the extravagance around her. For some reason she’d expected something more conservative from Aaron, but he had good taste in most things, so she found no reason to be surprised.

The elevator emitted a small ring, and then Kathrin waited for the doors to swing open. Automatically she looked to her left and then to her right to determine what way she was supposed to go. Right. She stepped out of the elevator tentatively and proceeded down the hall in small steps. The carpet was thick, and she was glad not to hear her shoes bouncing off the floor. She approached the door cautiously and half expected Aaron to open it before she got there. But the whole floor was quiet, and she couldn’t hear any movement from behind any of the doors, even his. Slowly she raised her hand to the knocker, and then brought it down with a small thud.

He opened the door with a flourish and led her into the apartment. He indicated that she should leave her shoes on and took the backpack off her shoulder. He quickly dispatched it into his bedroom and returned to find her scanning the room.

“So?” he asked kissing her cheek.

She took a step forward and absorbed everything in sight. “Wow. This place is gorgeous. It puts my apartment to shame.”

He smiled. “No. Your place is more like a home. This place is just rented space.”

She had to agree. Everything looked as if it was positioned for a condo tour. The black leather couch and armchair appeared to have been cleaned with leather polish, and the table gleamed under the overhead light. “Did a little cleaning, huh?”

He blushed. “Well, a little. C’mon I’ll get you a glass of wine.”

He led her the three steps to his kitchen, and poured her a glass of red. She ran her fingers over the glass counter top in front of her as she waited. Aaron handed her the glass. “How was your day?”

“Exhausting. I’m just glad it’s Friday. And yours?”

“ Took the afternoon off.”

“Oh,” she teased, “rough life I guess.”

“I did some work here.”

She looked around. “Where?”

“My bedroom doubles as my home office. Care for the tour?”

“Sure.”
He took her hand chivalrously and led her to the front hall. He let her inspect the closet, and then he opened the bathroom door. Kathrin followed him inside and looked around the bathroom in admiration. "Holy shit! If I had a bathroom like this I'd never leave. It's huge! I think it's bigger than my bedroom."

She walked around the bathroom and watched herself move in the opposing mirrors. It made her feel like she was in a huge open space that never ended. Behind her a large shower stall with multiple nozzles was encased in glass where the length of mirror ended, and against the wall near the door, a huge bathtub gleamed white. *What I wouldn't give for a bathtub like that.* She stopped by the sink and put her glass down. "Mind if I wash my hands?"

He nodded and she turned the tap. The water sprayed out and Kathrin grabbed the new bar of soap placed on the counter. After lathering, she carefully rinsed her hands and then pulled a neatly hung towel from the rack. "You're a bit of a neat freak."

Aaron took the towel from her hands and neatly folded it back over the rack. "Guilty."

"I'm a pig." She stated the words clearly.

"Match made in heaven."

She moved to another door on her right. "Where does this go?"

"My bedroom."

She pushed open the door, and stepped into a darkened room. "Light switch?"

"On the left."

She flicked the switch, and a bright light invaded the room. She was in a narrow corridor and stepped through it into the space of the room. Aaron's computer was on her left, with stacks of papers and folders neatly labeled and arranged. A large sleigh-bed took up most of the space with its matching side tables, and when she turned around, a massive mirrored closet caught her by surprise. "Oh," she exclaimed, "nearly gave me a heart attack. You have a lot of mirrors around. Must be the narcissist in you."

He groaned. "I didn't install them. They were here."

"Sure."

On the other side of the bed, the blinds were closed. She crossed to them to see the view. It was only when she pulled them back that she realized there was a sun room attached to the bedroom. She pulled the sliding glass, and stepped into the sun room. "Jesus Aaron, I don't even want to know how much you pay in rent."
He stood at the back of the room and watched her. He was pleased with the amount of attention she was paying to detail. She stepped back into the room, and slid the door shut behind her. Then she made her way back to where Aaron was standing, pausing to admire a cluster of framed photographs on the wall. They were black and white shots of industrial areas, and she recognized the old warehouse from the corner of Parliament and King. She liked them and the use of shadow and lines really impressed her. “These are really good. Did you do them?”

“Thanks. But no. I don’t have a creative bone in my body. A friend did.”

“Well, your friend is very talented.”

He led her out of the bedroom, still holding the glass she had left on the bathroom counter. When they reached the living room, he passed her the glass, and prepared to sit down. “Wait,” Kathrin ordered, “what about the rest of it?”

Aaron stood back up. He pointed his finger behind him. “The kitchen. To your right, the laundry room, and further back, the storage room. End of tour.”

Kathrin smiled. “I’ll be willing to bet that the storage room is your secret place.”

Aaron frowned. “What do you mean?”

“That’s where the truth about you comes out. Where the mess is.”

Aaron sat down. “I believe you’d be disappointed. I don’t think the word messy is even in my vocabulary.”

“Figures,” she muttered and walked over to the fireplace.

She scanned the mantle, and smiled at the baby pictures. Then she ducked down and stared at his fireplace. “It really works?”

“Sure.”

“No shit!” she said, and moved over to the stereo cabinet.

Beside the cabinet was a three tiered shelving unit filled with compact disks. Her eyes roved over the CD’s, and she shook her head in disbelief. “They’re alphabetized.”

Aaron cleared his throat. “Most of them, but by the end of the year a few get out of line.”

Kathrin turned to him, and cast him a strange look. “How many are there?”

“Off the top of my head?”

“Yeah.”

He smiled. “Six hundred and fifty six.”

“No kidding. How do you keep track of them all?”

A guilty grin spread across his face. “I keep inventory.”
Kathrin shook her head. "I know guys like you. Jamie, my assistant does the same thing. Let me guess, on your computer."

"Yes."

"And it's in case your apartment gets broken into. Or goes up in flames. Insurance reasons."

"Right again."

Kathrin narrowed her eyes. "O.K. smart guy, then answer me this: what happens if somebody breaks in a steals your computer and your disks."

"Hard copy in the filing cabinet."

Kathrin groaned. "What is it with you men? You can't remember dates or anniversaries, but I'll bet $200 that you could tell me the last twenty CD's you bought, what price you paid, and where you got them."

Aaron laughed. "Well, at least the last ten."

Kathrin pulled a CD from the shelf. She walked casually towards Aaron, then quickly shoved the CD back into another place on a different shelf. "Are you getting sweaty?" she asked with a smile.

Aaron got up and retrieved the CD. He carefully put it back in its proper place, and turned to Kathrin. "You'd have to do something worse than that to put me in a panic."

Kathrin pursed her lips. "Like smoke?"

Aaron flashed his arm dramatically, drawing attention to the ashtray. "Knock yourself out."

Kathrin gave up, and slipped down onto the couch. "I admit defeat."

"Good. Because the truth be told, you did have me going there for a while."

She leaned back, and crossed her legs. From her position she had a clear view of the fireplace and imagined what it would feel like on cold winter nights, drinking wine and staying up until the early hours of the morning. She was damn impressed with his whole apartment. She had envisioned a typical male abode, lined with leather and dominated by a huge screen TV. Yes, he had both of those, but here and there were traces of a lighter touch. There were plants and some beautiful photographs. And of course, the pictures on the mantle. But there were no pictures of his family. She waved that off - most men didn't have a sentimental muscle in their bodies. But, even the walls weren't a stiff white. Almost a pale green, instead. He must have gotten coaching on some of the choices. Probably his mother. She imagined she'd like his mother very much.
Aaron relaxed in the armchair. "So, you approve of the decor?"

Kathrin beamed. "I could live here any day. I think that my favourite room is the sunroom, though. I'd live out there. How come you don't move your computer into that room?"

Aaron pondered the question. "I think because I'd always feel like there was someone watching me. In all the office buildings around."

"I never thought of that. But I imagine they'd get very bored of you."

"Oh really? I do some exciting things."

"Oh yeah," Kathrin challenged, "like what?"

"Like, stuff I can't tell you about, or you'd have every set of binoculars in the city aimed this way."

Kathrin took a sip of her wine. "Hm. So what're you cooking?"

Aaron jumped up. "Oh jeez. Probably burnt salmon steaks by now."

He rushed over to the oven and pried open the door. The steaks still looked relatively moist, and so he shut the door for a few more minutes. In the meantime he tossed the salad and turned the microwave to high. Kathrin got up. "Should I light the candles?"

He nodded. "That would be great."

She walked around the couch and over to the modern styled dining room table near the window. The blinds were closed and she shoved them apart to admire the view. "You know," she said turning to Aaron, "you have a pretty nice vantage point from here. Even though it's only seven floors up."

"That's what I like about it."

"Then how come you keep all your blinds closed?"

Aaron held up the salad tongs. "Well, because I thought maybe you'd like a private dinner, and not one with the entire world watching."

Kathrin smiled coyly. "Are you sure that's the reason?"

He looked up once he detected the smile in her voice. "Yes, why? What are you trying to get at?"

"Oh nothing."

"Well then, light the candles. I'm ready here. Need a refill?"

She nodded and crossed the room for her glass. Aaron brought the salad and the bottle of wine to the table. Then he returned to the oven and pulled the steaks out. Kathrin couldn't see what he was doing, so she resigned herself to sit down at the table and wait. Eventually Aaron
carried over two plates, and placed one in front of her. She smiled as she noticed the sprinkles of paprika on the edge of each plate. “Looks great.”

“Well, then it’ll probably taste awful,” he said, sitting down.

“Oh come on.”

“Seriously. But anything I serve you that looks like mush will taste amazing. It never fails.”

Kathrin raised her glass. “Well then, to food that looks great, though it may taste horrid.” Aaron nodded and clinked his glass against hers. Then he waited until Kathrin took the first bite. She nodded and looked up. “It tastes good too. Why aren’t you eating? Waiting to see if I keel over?”

“Maybe,” Aaron laughed.

They ate most of the meal in silence and it gave Kathrin and Aaron time to reflect on the situation. It was one of those comfortable silences where neither had to speak or be spoken to. They listened to some classical music that Aaron had selected. Kathrin figured it was Bach, but had no idea as to what piece. She sipped her wine, enjoyed her dinner, and inhaled the strong masculine scent that lingered in every corner.

She cleared the table and they did the dishes together. By the time they were done it was nearing ten o’clock. “So, what now?” Kathrin asked as she picked up the last wet dish.

“I guess Trivial Pursuit is out, as I left it at your place.”

“And a good thing. I wouldn’t want to beat you two consecutive times.”

Aaron bared his teeth at her. “Oh really?”

She smiled and put the dish away. As if on cue, Aaron grabbed the towel from her hand and snapped it at her. From the years of practice with Jen she was prepared, and quickly snatched the towel back. “Oh really.”

She struck a quick blow, then darted around the kitchen counter and into the living room. Aaron plucked the salad tongs from the counter, and went after her.

“On guard,” she said, turning on him.

Aaron’s face broke into a huge grin. “Isn’t it French? Like ‘en guarde’ or something?”

Kathrin stopped to think for a moment and Aaron made his move. He stepped forward and grabbed Kathrin’s wrist with the tongs. Kathrin did her best imitation of a lady in distress, and swatted him away with her dish towel. He grinned and refused to let go. “Say uncle.”
Kathrin clenched her teeth. “Never you cad! I’ll die before I do.”

Aaron squeezed the plastic tongs a little tighter. “Then you shall perish.”

Kathrin moaned. “All right. Uncle.”

Aaron removed the tongs from Kathrin’s wrist. She giggled and gave him one last swat with the towel. He advanced on her. “Well, my little pretty, now that I have you in my sinister clutches, whatever will I do with you?”

Kathrin found herself swept into Aaron’s arms. “I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

He moved in closer and placed a fierce kiss on her neck. Kathrin turned to him, and waited for his next advance. His lips crushed down on hers, and she kissed him back just as intensely. Then abruptly he pulled away and looked at her, and Kathrin knew exactly what he was thinking. She held her breath and waited for him to speak. Aaron pulled her gently back into standing position, and exhaled through his nose. Kathrin watched him without speaking, and he looked back at her. Then he loosened his arms around her waist and smiled. “Well, I’ve had my exercise for the evening.”

Kathrin was stunned. He’d had the perfect opportunity to carry her into the bedroom. And he knew it. But he’d waited an instant too long, and then the moment had escaped. She wanted to say something, anything, but couldn’t. Instead, she cleared her throat, gathered her energy and moved towards the kitchen. She hung the dish towel neatly on the inside of the door under the sink, and knew that she was turning crimson. She wanted to look at Aaron, but knew from the hurried noises he was making behind her that he too was embarrassed. She could see him through the eyes in the back of her head, running his hand over the CD collection, and trying to find anything that would cover the awkwardness. She didn’t want it to be like that. She wanted it to be like the night at her house. When she’d finally been able to look a man straight in the eyes and not feel ashamed or scared. She’d never had that before, but Aaron made her feel different than anyone she’d been with. Because she honestly felt that he didn’t want to take advantage of her. God, maybe I am going to have to make the first move.

She shut the cupboard door, and walked over to the couch. “Aaron?”

“Yeah,” he responded nonchalantly, without looking at her.

“Would you mind if I had a bath in your tub? It’s so big, I can’t resist it.”

Aaron stood up. “Really?”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind.”
"No, I don’t mind at all. It would be nice for someone to use it. I still have some things to finish up on the computer."

"Great. I don’t suppose you have any bubble bath?"

Aaron thought for a moment. "Actually, there might be some under the sink. Like a hotel sample or something. Do you need a hand turning on the water?"

Kathrin grinned. "Does it work differently than any other bathtub?"

He fumbled his words. "No, no, um of course not."

Kathrin refilled her wine glass. "I think I’ll be O.K."

"All right. Just let me know if you need anything."

She smiled and walked into his bedroom. He could hear her unzipping her back pack and then rummaging through it. Two minutes later she re-appeared at the door. "Can I smoke?"

"In the bathtub?"

She smiled. "Yeah."

He picked up the ashtray and handed it to her. "Sure."

Then the door closed and Aaron sighed. You really blew it kid. You had your shot, it was wide open with a neon sign pointing the way home, and you choked. He hoped that Kathrin would find it endearing as opposed to weak. He selected a new CD, waited until Kathrin was finished in his room, and then headed for the computer.

Once he sat down he felt better. He could hear the water running in the bathroom, and wondered what Kathrin was doing. Or rather, what she was looking like. Occasionally she hummed a few notes, and then stopped abruptly as if she thought he was listening. He turned on the computer, so she would think he was doing work. But he knew that work would be hard to do while a woman bathed naked in the next room.

Kathrin pulled open the bathroom cupboard underneath the sink, and tried to find the bubble bath. Her hands roved over boxes of cotton swabs and shampoo bottles, wash clothes and extra razors, until she found a travel bag. She slowly unzipped the bag, and searched through the contents, finally discovering two small bottles of body shampoo. Close enough. She put the bag back, and shut the cupboard. She dumped the body shampoo into the bathtub, and disposed of the bottles. Then she grabbed her own travel bag and extracted a toothbrush. It would make the wine taste like shit, but she would smoke a cigarette to get rid of the minty taste. Then I’ll be right back where I started. But at least I won’t taste like fish. She looked in her bag for toothpaste, but couldn’t find the tube, so she pulled open the top drawer near the sink. Inside was a brush, an
electric razor, a straight razor, a toothbrush, and a tube of toothpaste. She brushed her teeth quickly, and then took off her clothes. It was strange seeing her body from two different views, and in full size mirrors. She approached the tub and put her hand in the water. It was hot, but bearable. She shut off the tap and stepped into the tub. She'd already placed the ashtray, her glass of wine and her smokes on the ledge behind her, and turned off the overhead light so that only the thin strip of small bulbs over the sink glowed. She slid down against the porcelain and let herself be swallowed by the water. *Dear Lord, this thing is big enough for two, maybe even three.* Of course she had no desire to share the tub with two other people, but if she ever wanted to, she was sure they would all fit. *Aaron’s probably never been in here before in his life.* Then she grimaced. If it fit two then he probably had. She lit a cigarette and watched as the smoke rose to the vent. It felt amazing to be in a bathtub that didn’t cramp her legs, or squeeze her hips when she moved. Absolutely wonderful.

She couldn’t hear Aaron for the noise of the fan, but wondered what he was doing. Probably work. For a man who had been watching her, he certainly didn’t seem too interested. Well, that wasn’t entirely true, but she still wondered why he hadn’t made a move on her. He wasn’t shy. He should have been over the nervousness. Then again, she should have been too. So what was it? She took a drag on her smoke, and thought about it. Then she put out her smoke and tied her hair up into a knot at the base of her skull. *Well fuck, I’ve done it before.*

“Aaron?” she called out.

There was a slight shuffle in the other room, then a quiet tap on the door. “Yes?”

“I need your help.”

He opened the door and stepped inside. He glanced furtively at her, and then away.

“What do you need?”

She lifted a soapy arm from the water. “Could you get me a wash cloth? I forgot.”

“Sure.” He turned and opened the cupboard.

He crossed over the marble flooring, and handed her the cloth. “Thanks,” she said softly.

He stood there for a moment, and Kathrin steeled herself. Finally, just before he turned away, she smiled. “Can you wash my back?”

He nodded and began rolling up his sleeves. “You could do it better from in here,” Kathrin offered.

He swallowed and began removing his clothes. Kathrin watched him with a large grin on her face as he delicately folded his belongings and placed them on the closed toilet lid. Kathrin
looked at the heap she had left, and made a mental note to take more care in the future. He walked towards her naked, and she shimmied to the front of the tub to make room for him. He lifted his right foot and stepped into the bath, then slipped in behind her. Kathrin passed him the face cloth, and he doused himself with water first, and then reached for the bar of soap. He washed her back in a large circular motion, and memorized the pattern her light freckles made on her shoulders. “Is that all right?” he asked.

“Mmn.”

He rinsed her back and then placed a gentle kiss right behind her ear. Kathrin leaned back against him and they both shifted lower in the water. He passed the wine glass to her and she took a deep sip. “Want some?” she offered.

He took the glass and swallowed a large mouthful. She was slippery against his body, and smooth. He extended his legs, and wrapped his feet under her thighs. She sighed softly. “You know? I’m glad now that I finally called you.”

He smiled behind her. “I am too.”

She shifted, and turned her face towards him. “Are you happy?”

He looked into her eyes. “Yeah. You?”

Kathrin turned slowly over onto her stomach, then propped herself up on her knees. She leaned forward, and Aaron could make out only her shoulders through the foam. “Yes. Very.”

She took the wine glass from his hand, took a sip and then deposited it on the edge of the tub. Her hands ran up his legs and she moved forward to kiss him. He responded and gradually her kisses became stronger. She ran her hands over his chest, careful not to slip in the water, until her legs were against his inner thighs, and her breasts touched his chest lightly. He let out a low moan, and Kathrin could feel his erection growing against her legs. She continued kissing him, until he sat up straight and grabbed her arms. Then she was all over him and they were kissing frantically, Kathrin was warm and hot in flashes, and her body ached, and she realized that she would have to tell him. Without warning she pulled away from him and wiped her mouth. He looked at her and she plotted her points quickly.

“Kathrin,” Aaron said, breaking her concentration, “I want to talk to you about something.”

Kathrin pressed pause on her third approach and kneeled back on her knees. “What?”

“Well, I’m ah, well, oh god, this is so stupid.”

“What is?”
"I’m just really nervous."

"About what?"

"About the whole issue of sex."

Kathrin frowned. He was stealing her lines. "What do you mean?"

Aaron shrugged. "I haven’t been with a woman in a long time."

She smiled. "I haven’t had sex in a while either."

"I think your while is a lot shorter than my while."

Kathrin grabbed the wine glass. "How long are you talking here?"

"A couple years."

"Two?"

"Four."

Kathrin let out a low whistle. *He’s got me beat.* "Not since your last girlfriend?"

He shook his head. "So I’m a little uncomfortable."

Kathrin let out a weak laugh. "Me too," she told him quickly, and then realized it sounded like an excuse, "but I am interested."

"Me too."

She twirled a wet tendril in her fingers and passed Aaron the glass of wine. He took a big gulp and passed it back. "How long for you?" he asked.

"Nothing in comparison. About six months."

"Your last boyfriend?"

Kathrin shook her head. "I haven’t seriously dated anyone in over two years."

"Really? Wow, I wouldn’t have thought it was that long. Why?"

Kathrin exhaled and rolled her neck from side to side on her shoulders. "I’m not very good at relationships. As you probably noticed from the whole card escapade."

Aaron chuckled. "I still can’t believe you did that."

"Yeah, well."

He leaned over and kissed her. "So, what do two dating rejects do about the whole thing?"

Kathrin slid down in the tub. "I guess we just wait for the right time."

Aaron sighed. "Is that all right with you?"

"I wouldn’t have it any other way. But while we’re talking about it, there’s something else you need to know."
Aaron waited for her to proceed. She stared down at the water and absentmindedly traced her fingers through the bath bubbles. "What?" he asked.

"I had a venereal," she cringed at the word, "disease earlier this year."

Aaron looked at her for a moment, and then frowned. "Really?"

"Yeah, the clap."

"Gonorrhea?"

Kathrin nodded. "Sorry. I know it's probably not what you wanted to hear, but I didn't want to hide it from you."

"No, I guess I'm glad you told me. Are you O.K. now?"

She nodded vigorously. "I'm fine, but I have to be careful, or I might wind up with another case of P.I.D."

"Which is?"

"Pelvic Inflammatory Disease. It's pretty serious."

"What does it do?"

"Well," Kathrin began, "the worst case scenario paints a picture of sterility and a higher chance of cancer. But if I'm careful, I should be fine."

Aaron pulled her close. "Well then, we'll just be careful."

She kissed his lips and ran her fingers through his hair. "But it doesn't mean that I can't do the other things."

"What did you have in mind?"

She pulled away from his face. "Take me to the bedroom and I'll show you."

Aaron stood up and reached over to drain the water. He stepped out of the bathtub, and pulled Kathrin to her feet. Then he scooped her up into his arms, and carried her dripping body to his room. He didn't even notice the splatters of water over his marble floor or the wet spots on the rug in his room.

She floated out of his apartment late Saturday afternoon. He'd asked her to stay and watch some old spaghetti western with him, and she had been on the verge of accepting but the thought of a livid Carol calling her up wasn't appealing. She invited Aaron out with her, but he was set on a movie and would spend the rest of the time going over some portfolios. Plus, Kathrin needed to be up early on Sunday to do some work before she went to her mom's. She had an important meeting with her clients Monday morning.
She got into her car and beamed for no reason. She'd done it a lot over the course of the previous evening and throughout the morning. She kept kicking herself for putting him off for so long. He was quite simply the greatest guy she'd ever met.

He called to tuck her in on Sunday night, but then he didn't call Monday or Tuesday. Kathrin barely noticed. She spent the first two days of the week in La-la land, and completely zoned out during a discussion with Jamie. "You know that thing you do with your compact disks?" she asked him, as he was going over one of the segments for the documentary.

"Kathrin, what are you talking about?"

"The inventory."

He shook his head. "We're supposed to be editing this section. Not talking about CD's."

"How many do you have?" she asked, ignoring his comment.

"Three hundred and seventy one."

"My friend Aaron has six hundred and fifty six."

Jamie looked at her. "No kidding. What friend?"

Kathrin smiled. "Just a guy."

"Just a guy and you know how many CD's he has? Gimme a break."

"Well, just a guy I'm kind of seeing."

Jamie narrowed his eyes. "Seeing or dating?"

"What's the difference?" she asked.

"Dating is going out sometimes but still looking. Seeing is involved with only."

"Seeing."

Jamie's face broke into a wide grin. "I thought you've been acting weird lately."

"What do you mean weird?"

"Well," he clarified, "weird as in not weird for other people but weird for you. Like normal."

"So, I've been acting normal?"

"Yeah, which is abnormal for you."

Kathrin smiled. "Hmn," she said and looked out the window.

He realized that he had lost her attention again. "Well, good for you. Can we get back to work now?"

Kathrin looked at him. "What? Oh sure."
Wednesday morning a large bouquet of flowers arrived at the office for her. Jane carried in the bouquet and waited for Kathrin to open the card. Kathrin looked at the flowers nonchalantly. "Thanks Jane."

Jane waited. Kathrin looked at her. "What?"

"Aren't you going to open the card?"

Kathrin smiled. "Why?"

"To see who sent it."

Kathrin returned to the document she was typing. "I know who sent it. Thanks."

Jane turned slowly and left the office. As soon as the door shut Kathrin grabbed the envelope and tore it open. On a small piece of paper in Aaron's writing were the words 'My place. 6 o'clock. Sharp.' Kathrin grinned. She hated surprises.

Shortly after 4:00 Jane poked her head into Kathrin's office. "Kathrin, Mr. Richardson called an emergency meeting for five o'clock."

"Today?"

"Yes. Mandatory."

Kathrin was crushed. "Great. Thanks."

The door shut with a small bang. Kathrin grunted. Of course he has to call a meeting today, of all days. Emergency meeting, my ass! Every one of his meetings is an emergency. Shit! She fumbled for her purse and pulled out her telephone book. Somewhere inside she had written Aaron's work number on a scrap of paper. She flipped through the pages until she found the slip of paper and placed it on her desk. Then she reached for the phone. Aaron would be mad, but it was his fault for surprising her, and not making plans ahead.

The secretary at his office let her know that Aaron had just gone to meet a client and wasn't expected back later in the day. Kathrin hung up and tried his home number. The machine picked up and she listened until his message finished. "Um Aaron, it's Kathrin. I tried your office and they said you were gone for the day. I hope you get this message in time, because..." her voice trailed off as she noticed the picture frame on her desk, and saw Andria, Mark and Danielle all grinning broadly out of the photo.

She looked at the bouquet, and then out through the window by her door. All around people were walking mechanically from desk to desk, and she could see Jane telling Jamie about the meeting. She glanced at the photograph again. Fuck the office police.

"Aaron, sorry about the pause. Listen, forget it. I'll see you at six."
She hung up the phone, and watched Jamie walk towards her office, obviously perturbed. He slipped into the chair by the window, and groaned. “Another meeting. You know what it’s about?”

Kathrin saved the file on her hard drive. “No, and I don’t care. I’m not going.”
Jamie’s mouth dropped open. “What do you mean you’re not going?”
“I have plans.”
“Well, you better break them.”
“Can’t.”
“Can’t?”
“Won’t.” She looked at him and indicated the discussion was over.
Jamie held up his arms and glanced skyward. “Lord help us, Kathrin’s in love. Let me guess, I get to cover for you.”
Kathrin pulled a daisy from the bouquet. She handed it to Jamie. “Thanks.”
“But if Richardson kills me, you’ll be sorry.”
“Tell him I’ll talk to him tomorrow.” She got up from her desk, and grabbed her purse.
“Where are you going?” Jamie demanded.
“I’m going for a smoke break.”
He smiled. “I take it the smoke may last all night?”
“Definitely. I’m not sticking around here if there’s a chance of running into Richardson.”
“Good plan.”
“Thanks Jamie,” she said as she opened the door.
“No problem.”
He turned and watched her walk down the hall. Once she was out of sight, he pulled the blinds, then trotted over to her desk. He sat down in the big comfy chair, and one leg at a time, placed his feet on the desk. Then he leaned back and inhaled the sweet smell of upper management.

When Kathrin arrived in the lobby the doorman greeted her warmly. “Mr. Taun requested that you join him on the 27th floor.”
Kathrin frowned. “Are you sure?”
“Quite sure.”
She got into the elevator and pressed the floor button. It was the top floor of the building. *What does he want me up there for?* But the doorman had been clear, so she shrugged and waited. When the doors swung open, she was greeted by two bare bulbs hanging down from the ceiling.

She stepped out into the hallway and turned to find Aaron dressed in a suit, with a yellow daisy in his lapel. She glanced down to make sure that her own attire was appropriate, and was glad she'd chosen to wear a long summer dress.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

Aaron smiled. "Come this way."

He led her around a corner and to a staircase, which was clearly marked off with a sign that read "Closed due to maintenance." Aaron unclipped the sign to let her pass. "Aaron, should we be here?" she whispered, somewhat stifled by the dangers around her.

"The doorman put it up so we wouldn't be disturbed," he responded.

He clipped the sign back up after he passed, and led her up the stairs. When he got to the top, he flung open the door, and the bright June sunlight washed over the staircase. Kathrin looked out, but could see only patio slates and a wall. She stepped through the doorway and onto the roof. All around were deck chairs and large potted trees. She turned to Aaron. "Wow. I didn't know that you had a roof up here that you could come out on."

He took her hand and led her across the patio to the wall. It was about four and a half feet high and Kathrin could see the lake from where she was standing. She inched closer to the wall, and peered over the edge. She could make out Centre Island, and various boats in the harbour. She looked down quickly and felt all her blood rush to her head. Tiny little cars and moving dots blinked all over the streets, and she felt weak. "Holy!" she murmured.

"Pretty cool huh?"

Kathrin turned to Aaron, and saw all the skyscrapers swaying behind him. "This is amazing."

He put his arm around her waist, and pulled her close. "I thought you would like it."

"I feel like I'm going to be sick."

He gave her a huge grin. "That's what I like to hear."

She pulled away from him and scanned the skyscrapers. "I bet you a thousand people can see us up here."

"Well you commented on how boring I was, so I decided to live a little. Come on, I have something to show you." He said, pulling her towards the other side of the building.
They rounded the area by the door, and when they turned the corner, Kathrin caught her breath. There in the middle of the roof was a huge table laid out for dinner. She cast a look of surprise at Aaron and he grinned. "Now everyone will be able to see us eat dinner."

Kathrin approached the table. There were pieces of sterling silver cutlery, and fancy napkins, and even a bowl filled with water lilies. *Catered. Nice touch.* She slipped into the seat that Aaron pulled out for her, and waited for him to sit down. He moved off and fumbled with something she couldn’t make out. Suddenly, the sound of Miles Davis filled the air, and Kathrin bit her lip. Of all the things he could have done for her, he’d chosen the most perfect. He sat down across from her, and pulled a napkin onto his lap. She didn’t know what to say. Nothing seemed to describe her feelings in the right way. So she just smiled like an idiot, and let him pull the silver lid off her plate. She grabbed her napkin, still smiling.

"Are you going to say anything?" he asked.

She shook her head and kept smiling.

"This is probably the most romantic thing I’ll ever do for you, so enjoy it while it lasts."

He said and started eating.

"Well," she said finally, "the spell has been broken."

"Good," Aaron said through bites, "and don’t eat too much, because I don’t want you to be full when we dance later."

Kathrin looked at him and then suddenly burst out laughing. "Boy, I can hardly wait until you stop being romantic."

Aaron lifted his glass. "Romance is cheap."

Kathrin managed to avoid Richardson for the rest of the week, and by the time she saw him early Tuesday morning, it was too far in the past for him to reprimand her for not attending. Plus, Jamie had filled her in on all the menial details. What it came down to was, one of the old marketing heads was leaving and they were hiring someone new. Big emergency, as far as Kathrin could tell. It wouldn’t effect her job in any way; she’d only met the old head twice, and that was at the Christmas parties.

Carol called to remind her that the final fitting for the dresses was on Sunday, and Kathrin carefully marked it in her calendar. Like she could forget that something as important as the wedding was only two weeks away. She slapped her hand against her head the moment she thought it. She still hadn’t asked Aaron. It kept slipping her mind. With the contract, and the
wedding plans, and Jen’s updates about the baby, Kathrin had barely enough time to remember she even had someone to take as a date. And Aaron himself was gobbling up all the other time she had. She couldn’t believe it was the middle of June. The spring had flown by, and she and Jamie only had a little over three weeks to finish up the last of the graphics. Then they would be free, and Kathrin would be able to relax for two full weeks up at the cottage. She would need a break by then.

On Friday, she had a planning meeting with Richardson scheduled, and she wasn’t looking forward to it. He’d sit and nod, and ask pointless questions, and then tell her she’d done a good job. It was all gloss, anyway. Just the big boss sitting in so he could say that he had always been on top of things from the get-go. Jamie referred to the sessions as ‘top-coating’: the last coat of clear nail polish, that did nothing for the manicure, but made all the stuff underneath shine. Still, it was part of the finished product. Kathrin looked at it as dress rehearsal. She stayed late on Thursday to finish up and prepare her notes, then copied the file for Jamie, and left her disk on his desk, after printing a copy off for herself. She’d go over it in the bath.

She got home around eight o’clock and checked her messages. Carol, leaving the time for the fitting. Two o’clock. Her mom whining about losing bridge. Aaron, telling her to call him back as soon as she got in. She made something to eat, and then called Aaron.

“What are your plans for tomorrow?” he asked as soon as she said ‘hi’.

“I really only have a meeting. Why?”

“Cancel it.”

Kathrin coughed. “Excuse me?”

“Can you get out of it?”

“No. It’s with my boss. Why, what’s up?”

She could hear him moving things in the background and it took him a minute to respond to her question. “Well, I thought maybe we could go away for the weekend.”

“What?” she asked, not believing her ears.

“Can’t you reschedule? Call in sick.”

“Aaron, I can’t. I have responsibilities here. My dress fitting is on Sunday at two.”

He took a deep breath. “We’ll be back before it.”

Kathrin ran through the other million things she had to get done. A weekend away sounded good, but she’d pay for it in flesh when she got back. “I really can’t.”

He was silent on the other end of the line. “Aaron?”
“What?” he mumbled.

“Don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad. It’s just that... I thought it would be something you’d really like. I already arranged everything.”

“Without asking me?”

“I thought you’d like it better if I surprised you. Remember when you told me to live a little? Well, for the first time in my life I am, and I’m enjoying myself. Why can’t you?”

She rolled her eyes. “Is it really that important to you?”

“Yes.”

She shrugged, not believing what she was going to say. “When do we leave?”

She called Jamie right after she woke up, so that he would take her raspy voice as an indication of her sickness. “I think I got food poisoning. I was up all night puking.”

She felt terrible lying, but she had been up late, packing. Jamie panicked. “What am I going to say to him?”

“Just run over the document I left on your desk. You know everything as well as I do.”

“He’ll laugh me right out of the company.”

“He will not.”

She could hear Jamie’s girlfriend mumbling in the background. “Maybe I should reschedule it.”

“Jamie! This is your chance to prove to him that you’re good. You want a better position. Use it.”

He sighed. “O.K. But if he offers me your job, don’t blame me.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“Well, I hope you feel better. What if I need to get a hold of you?”

Kathrin swallowed. She hadn’t thought of that. “Well,” she croaked, “leave a message on my machine. I don’t think I’ll be up for answering the phone, but I’ll check it.”

“All right. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck.”

She hung up the phone and headed for the shower. All her bags were packed, and her ‘travel clothes’ were laid over her chair. Aaron refused to tell her where they were going, but that she should expect warm weather, and no clouds. As it was June, it gave her no clue as to their
destination. But they were flying there, and picking up a rental car when they arrived.

Compliments of Aaron. Kathrin was amazed at his constant need to outdo the last thing he had done. She'd never been so flattered in her life. Ken's one big surprise had been a trip to the zoo, and it had poured rain for most of the afternoon. She returned home soaking wet and smelling of animal feces. Not the most appealing perfume she'd ever worn. But Aaron, with his meticulous ways and attention to detail, made everything perfect. She couldn't get over her luck. And he was so genuine. She wondered how many women he'd treated like he treated her. Maybe it was about time she started drilling him about his past. It had been almost two months. She stopped the thought when she realized he might reciprocate. The last thing she wanted him to know was anything about her miserable past, and all the so-called men she'd dated, or liked, or screwed. All she cared about was being happy, and she was. Maybe too happy.

He picked her up in an airport limousine at seven thirty, and made her look at the ground when they got into the terminal. "No peeking," he ordered.

She nearly trampled an old lady, and tried not to laugh when Aaron apologized, stating that Kathrin, his wife, was near blind. Then he made her face away from the call board, when they sat down by the gate. Kathrin played along, and put the clues together while she sat and waited.

"I know we're not going out of the country."

Aaron laughed. "Ms. Holmes, how clever you are."

"Give me a hint."

He narrowed his eyes. "They'll talk in two languages on the plane."

Kathrin threw up her arms. "We're in Canada. They always talk in two languages."

"O.K. We could drive there in a day."

She crossed Vancouver off her list, and ticked check marks by another twenty places.

"I give up."

"Not long now."

She found out when the flight to Montreal was announced over the P.A. system.

"We're going to Montreal?" she asked, amazed.

"No."

"What do you mean no?"

"That's the first stop."

Kathrin looked at him. He seemed sincere. "You're taking me to Quebec City, aren't you?"
He smiled, and she knew her answer.

“Wow. I haven’t been there in ages. What a great idea.” She said and swooped her arms around him while planting a kiss on his lips.

“Well, if I knew you’d respond so well, I would have taken you weeks ago.”

He picked up her bag and carried it towards the boarding gate. She followed, pleased that she was allowed to use her vision again.

Aaron had arranged for them to stay at the Chateau Frontenac, and Kathrin squealed with pleasure when they pulled up to the old, copper covered castle on the bluffs. “I used to imagine I’d have my honeymoon here,” she confided in him, “but I was only twelve at the time. Now, I want Paris. So much for small-time dreams.”

The bellboy took them to their room, and Kathrin stared at the body of water from the window. “We have to get our pictures taken on the promenade. I brought my camera.”

Aaron started unpacking his bag. “Before or after the carriage ride?”

“I thought you said romance was cheap.”

“You ever paid for a carriage ride in this city?”

Kathrin turned to him. “No. Have you?”

He shook his head. “No, actually. I’ve only been here once, and it was for business.”

Kathrin swallowed the lump in her throat. “So, what first?”

“Let’s go for a walk.”

They meandered down the small streets, and stopped to look in the artisans’ quarters. “It hasn’t changed that much from when I was twelve.” Kathrin said while glancing through some ink drawings.

“No, I don’t imagine it has.”

“I like that. When I was in Montreal a few years ago, I picked up that lion’s head. You know, the one from that painting?”

He nodded.

“I wonder if it’s still there?”

“The lion?”

“No, silly. The antique store.”

Aaron took her hand, and turned her body towards him. “You look good here. Happy.”

“I am.”
They had dinner in a small restaurant, and walked the promenade under the stars. Then they went to bed, his arms looped around her, and woke late when room service arrived at eleven. Kathrin stretched while Aaron tipped the young man at the door, and then carried the tray of coffee, muffins and fruit salad over to her. “Relax for awhile, and then we’ll reenact the battle on the Plains.”

Kathrin looked at him questioningly. “Are you serious?”

He grabbed a muffin from the tray. “I heard it through the grape vine that there’s a class trip of eighth graders heading out there at one o’clock.”

After suffering through a bruised knee dealt by a solid blow from an overzealous thirteen year old, Kathrin returned from the field defeated and tired. She crawled onto the bed, and prepared to die or sleep, whichever came first. When she woke up it was seven o’clock and Aaron was nowhere to be found. Instead a note lay folded on the bed. She flipped it open and found that Aaron had gone for a walk and would meet her in the hotel dining room at eight. She took a shower, then pulled a satiny slip dress onto her freshly vanilla scented body. She looped her hair up into a loose bun, and secured it with a Chinese barrette. The air had grown muggy, and she wondered if there was a storm brewing. At five minutes to eight she stepped into the hall, and made her way to the dining room. Aaron was seated, wearing his linen suit, at a small table in the corner. She approached and noticed that a few stares fell her way. Well, that’s a good sign.

Aaron stood up when she got to the table, and waited for her to sit down before he returned to his chair. “You look great,” he said approvingly.

She threw him a perfect smile. “Thank you. You look very nice yourself.”

Aaron straightened his tie, and Kathrin appraised him while he looked down. There was something different about him, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. She ordered a bottle of wine, and leaned back in her chair.

Aaron talked briefly about the afternoon stroll he’d taken. She sipped on her glass of wine and listened to him talk. When the waiter came they ordered the specials, and Kathrin felt the wine going straight to her head. She hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

By the end of the meal she was tipsy, and asked the waiter to bring her a strong cup of coffee. She didn’t want Aaron to clue into her debauchery. But she noticed herself moving her chair closer under the table and taking her feet out of her shoes, as if she were in the third person. When the waiter returned with her coffee, she took the opportunity to slip her foot against Aaron’s leg. He eyed her warily, and she smiled as she raised her foot and brushed it up his pant legs.
Aaron glanced around, but most of the patrons had left the restaurant. He leaned in closer to Kathrin. "What are you doing?" he whispered.

"Trying to seduce you. Let me know when it starts working."

Aaron grabbed her foot under the table and rubbed his thumb over her arch. Kathrin let out a soft whimper, and relaxed against his pressure. She stirred her coffee slowly and maintained eye contact. Aaron looked away uncomfortably, and then back at her. "O.K. It's working."

She smiled maniacally, and flexed her toes. "Really?" she asked innocently.

Aaron blushed. "Yes. Do you want proof?"

"Yes. How are you going to prove it to me?"

"How do you want me to?" he prompted.

She removed her foot from his hold, but continued staring at him. "I want you to take me upstairs and sleep with me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yep. More than I've ever been. And sooner rather than later."

When daylight arrived, Kathrin had added a bump on her head and bruised lips to her list of injuries amassed over the weekend. The bruises were matter of course, and the bump, a matter of poor balance. Still, she reached over and pulled herself closer to Aaron's back. Whatever the complaint, it was worth it. She'd finally slept with the man of her dreams. And it had been good. Not quite good enough, but good, nonetheless. She inhaled his back, and tasted the salt from his dried sweat. He smelled like vegetable soup. A strong, pungent odour of sweat and passion that lingered on his back and under his armpits. She liked how he smelled, and wondered what the smell of her was like after sex.

When she woke up, it was ten, and Aaron was dressed and had already packed their bags. He kissed her, and she smiled radiantly. "Do we have to go?" she moaned.

"You have an appointment. Remember?"

She groaned and rolled over. "Cancel it."

"Get up, sleepy." He said gruffly, and pulled the sheets from her naked body.

"You're just lucky I'm in a good mood," she warned and sat up.

"And why are you in a good mood?" he said slyly.

"I don't think I need to tell you."

"C'mon, you have twenty minutes."
She smiled all the way to the shower. And then the car. And then the airplane. And then the second airplane. And then in the cab home. And then when Aaron kissed her goodbye. And all the way up the stairs. When she got inside her apartment, she went to the fishbowl and dropped some food into it. The fish swam quickly to the surface. She stashed her bags in her bedroom, and reached for the phone, hoping Jamie hadn’t called.

“Hi, it’s your mother. They told me you were sick, so I hope you’re feeling all right. Give me a call if you need anything.”

“Hi, it’s me. Just wanted to remind you about the fitting. Two o’clock sharp. See you Sunday. Are you coming out tomorrow?”

“Hi, it’s your mother. It’s Saturday morning. Where are you? Are you sick? Please call.”

“Kathrin, Carol. Call if you want to go out tonight.”

“It’s mom. I can’t get a hold of you. I’m starting to worry. Maybe you were just playing sick? Call me.”

“Hi Kath, it’s Jen. Mom’s worried. Call her.”

“What happened to you last night? We waited for you to call. I guess you were with Aaron. Anyway, if you need a ride today I’ll come get you. Bye.”

“Kathrin. It is now Sunday. I’ve been calling all weekend. If you don’t call me back by dinner I’ll come over and break the door down. I guess you’re not coming for lunch. I expect a call.”

Kathrin erased all the messages, and checked the clock. She was late. She’d call her mother after she got back. Alison was going to be pissed. She picked her purse off the table and ran to the bathroom to brush her teeth. Her toothbrush was still in her overnight bag, so she ran some toothpaste over her teeth and tongue with her fingers. It would have to do. Oddly enough, she didn’t feel guilty about not calling her mom, or missing the Saturday night ritual. She ran into the living room and looked at the fish. “I don’t care,” she told them, “I don’t care about how my mother could have had a heart-attack thinking about me. I don’t care if everyone is pissed off that I’m late. I don’t care, and you know why? Because last night I had sex. Sex. SEX! S-E-X!”

The fish didn’t seem to care too much either. “Fucking fish!”
The two weeks before the wedding were filled up with dinner parties thrown by Alison's parents, errands and meetings. Kathrin survived the first week only by thinking about how she only had three weeks left until summer holidays. Somewhere in that time Kathrin managed to wrangle an acceptance to the wedding out of Aaron, although she refused every one of his consistent lunch invitations, saying that she would make them up when she was less busy. Still, she managed to sneak in a few calls to or from him every day. She'd never been so tired in all her life, and considered herself lucky not to be the one getting married. Then again, her mother wouldn't make a huge deal out of it like Alison's parents had. Nothing was too good for the wedding, but Adam had stubbornly drawn the line at swans, much to Mrs. Morris' chagrin.

To make matters worse, the Monday before the wedding Kathrin's brake pads gave up the fight, and she was given an estimate of at least two days in the shop. She had no desire to rent a car, and figured she would just grin and bear it until Wednesday, or Thursday at the latest. When she called Aaron on Monday night, she was frustrated.

"Of course it has to happen now. It couldn't wait a week." She moaned into the phone.

"How are you going to get to work?"

"Streetcar, I guess. At least it's not winter."

"That's stupid."

"What is?" she asked.

"Stay here for a couple of days. Your office building's what, like, two blocks away?"

"Aw, Aaron, that's nice, but I can't."

"Why not?" he demanded.

"I don't want to impose."

"It won't be imposing. I don't use my car that often, you can borrow it. I know you have a lot to do this week."

Kathrin glanced around the kitchen. There was nothing there to keep her home for two days. And the thought of shacking up with Aaron was slightly appealing. "O.K."

"Great. I'll pick you up in an hour."

She packed most of her belongings into her weekend bag, and stuffed all her personal items into her cosmetic case. Then she racked her brain to figure out what she was forgetting and stumbled to the bathroom to find some authentic bath tablets. She didn't want to have to substitute shampoo. She remembered to water the plants and then went into the living room to feed the fish.
She fed the fish a five-star meal of fish flakes, and got the rest of her stuff together, making sure she had three decent outfits to wear to work. She thought about having a shower, but when she checked the clock she realized she didn’t have time. Aaron’s place would have to do, and the thought of taking a shower in his edenic bathroom appealed to her. Another thought struck her and she giggled. She’d always had a terrible habit of wiping her stray hairs down the shower wall so they wouldn’t clog the drain. Aaron would have a hissy fit if he ever saw. Then again, it might be kind of interesting to see what he would do.

He had cleared a spot in his closet for her on the right side. She hung up her pant suit, and then unpacked her cosmetic gear in the bathroom on the counter. Aaron watched her and pursed his lips together. When she looked up she saw his slight grimace. “What?” she asked.

“Could you put your stuff in a drawer? I emptied the second one for you.”

Kathrin laughed. “Sure. Wouldn’t want to mess the place up.”

He took her overnight bag and placed it on the top shelf of the closet, out of the way.

When she was relatively unpacked they had a quick dinner, then Aaron went to his computer, and Kathrin watched a little television. She realized it was time for bed when she woke with a start, and a new program was on T.V. Then she groaned, remembering that she had promised Jamie she’d go over the stuff they were working on.

She climbed into bed with her laptop, and started going over the most recent segment. They had decided to finish the graphic section of the documentary with a little flourish about the future of fashion - new technologies and techniques. Kathrin thought it worked well as a ‘closer’, and she had been doing some research of her own. Out of Jamie and Richardson’s eager eyes, she’d been working on her own little project. By scanning drawings into the computer she could manipulate pixel colours and textures, changing the designs in less than a minute. Though it went against traditional design thinking it seemed like a great idea to her. Kind of like the etching plates she’d had when she was younger. Where she could take a new plate, insert it into the little plastic frame and create a whole new look in seconds. It could save a lot of time. Not only that, but if someone was interested in picking up a few designer pieces, they could see in a matter of minutes what that clothing would look like with other pieces. A whole ensemble could be viewed by any prospective client in less than ten minutes. Kathrin firmly believed there had to be a market for a computer program like that. But she wasn’t talking to anyone about it. She wanted to pass it by Mama Fashion first.
Aaron slipped into bed beside her, smelling of after-shave and soap. Kathrin smiled over the laptop at him. He snuggled down against her arm, and scanned the screen. "What are you doing?"

"A little homework," she replied.

"Oh," he said, shifting his head, "how much longer are you going to be?"

Kathrin smiled. "Why?"

"Can I turn off your computer?"

"Yeah. I'm kind of tired."

He sat up quickly and shut the laptop. Then he placed it on the bedside table, and turned back to her. Slowly, his hands moved over her t-shirt and down to the cotton boxers she was wearing. He slipped his hand under the elastic and started pulling them off. "Not too tired I hope."

She let him kiss her, as his cool hands slipped down and over her hips, taking the boxers with them. As she shuffled them off her feet, he began pulling up her t-shirt. "Aaron, the light."

He looked at her oddly, and then shut off the light. "I didn't think you were shy."

Kathrin smiled in the darkness, and relaxed against his touch. But inside her heart was thumping loudly against her ribs. She couldn't explain to Aaron that she could no longer look at him. Everything had changed.

She spent the entire week at Aaron's, even after she picked up her car. It was easier to walk over to her building, than drive in from her place. And if she wasn't at home, she didn't feel guilty about not answering the phone. It seemed like every hour there was a new crisis with her family, or about the impending wedding. She was actually more productive around Aaron. Every night she would crawl into bed with her laptop while he was getting his stuff ready for the next day. And every night, he would slip into bed, turn off the light, and then they'd have sex in the darkness. She felt better not seeing him, only feeling his hands move over her. And only when he was safely asleep could she address what she felt, and why she couldn't watch him making love to her. Only then could she run through the events of the night with such sudden clarity that it scared her. How she liked when he first rolled over and started kissing her, and pulled her in really close to him. Almost like suffocating, but in the best way possible. That was when she felt closest to him - in terms of physical and abstract contact. She felt herself becoming more and more aroused, because it was so personal. When the kisses became more urgent then she would wait with baited breath to see what he would do. And it always seemed a cold and calculated decision - a sudden
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thought on his part that it was the moment. By that point she’d started slipping away. She’d already started thinking about the consequences of the actions.

The point of penetration was what she liked best. The initial feeling of him finally inside of her made her relented. She enjoyed trying to keep pace with him, and feeling them move together, and having his body inside her. But then it changed. It felt like she slipped into another person. Like she was aware of everything going on around her, but that it wasn’t really her - more like watching it from a third person’s perspective. And she tried to forget her thoughts by kissing him with her eyes closed tightly, and he wouldn’t see that she was thinking about other things, and that her mind was racing through analysis, and chaos - turning the whole thing into some kind of mental game. Every once in a while, she’d feel really good inside, and then she’d remember what she was doing. It would take her by surprise because she was too far gone to fully appreciate it. And then she’d wish that he’d hurry up and be finished, so that she could have him back to herself. Because after, he’d always take her in his arms and hug her, and she’d feel herself again. And then he’d slip into sleep and she’d live it all over again.

She knew Aaron would find a thousand ways to analyze it all, but she knew the real reason. It was like the first time she had said she wanted to have sex with him, and she couldn’t look at him over the table. Because even though she wanted it - she wanted to be with him fully - it was too close to the real thing. It scared her. She liked Aaron, but she didn’t want to let him in, she didn’t want him to have something over her. And by not seeing him, he wasn’t real to her. Not completely.

Of course he was aware of the sudden change in her. He knew she liked him, and liked having sex with him, but the energy she’d displayed at first was dwindling. He wondered if maybe she felt that he was rushing her into it. Like she felt she owed it to him. But he didn’t clue into it until Thursday, when he’d tried yet again to undress her with the light on, and she’d pulled away, pretending to be busy with her laptop. Only later, when she’d reached over and shut off the light, had she begun to touch him. And then he’d understood that in some way she was uncomfortable. And after the sex, right before he fell asleep, he resolved not to touch her until she was ready again.

The wedding rehearsal went off without a hitch, though Carol proved to be a pain. Every time she moved, her freshly painted nails were scanned and checked for chips. Kathrin thought they were all going to have nervous breakdowns. They returned to the Morris’ home for a late dinner, and Alison barely touched her plate. None of the women had any appetite at all, but the
men shoveled the food away like it was their last meal. Mr. Morris stood up to propose toasts at least five times, and Kathrin nearly choked on her straight soda water with every sip. She didn’t want to drink at all, until after the ceremony.

Alison got up and presented her bridesmaids with small delicate gold bracelets and Kathrin put hers on. It lay flat against her wrist, and clasped together at the back. Inscribed on the inside were the words friendship - marriage of true minds. Kathrin smiled. Only Alison would use a Shakespearean sonnet on her wedding gifts. Kathrin thought back to the sonnet and realized that if she were to pull words they would be ‘love is not love’. That was how it always worked out for her, even if she was reciting out of context.

They left the house fairly early, and Kathrin accepted Carol and Harold’s invitation to go with them early in the morning. It seemed strange that all her friends were in the wedding party, and only she was stuck with a relative stranger as her usher. Adam’s brother. Kathrin wondered if she had a serious partner, would he be taking a place in the party. She felt left out. At least Aaron would be there later. He had an early golf game with a client in the morning, and he had told her he couldn’t break it. She didn’t mind, she’d only given him two weeks’ notice anyway. But she hoped he would be done in time to attend the ceremony at two. He had promised to try.

When she got back to Aaron’s apartment, he was cleaning his irons with a chamois cloth. He kissed her forehead. “So, how was it?”

“Oh, good. Lots of toasting and celebration. Carol wouldn’t do anything for fear she’d chip her nails.”

Aaron laughed. “Did she?”

“No yet, but she has over twelve hours left. I’m sure there’ll be at least one by the next time I see her. Oh shit!”

“What?”

“I forgot to tell them I’m staying here tonight. I better call.”

She grabbed the digital phone on the bed, and dialed Carol’s number. Harold answered.

“Hi, is Carol there?”

She could hear some muffled noises and then Carol picked up the phone. “What’s up?”

“I forgot to tell you, I’m staying at Aaron’s.”

“Oh really?” Carol asked drawing out the words in an attempt to stress her interest.

“Yes.”
Carol covered the phone, but Kathrin could hear her relay the information to Harold. He laughed heartily, and Carol returned. “Well, I would say someone is interested in Mr. Atlas.”

Kathrin let out a tiny laugh and Aaron looked at her questioningly. She shook her head at him and turned her attention back to the phone. She gave Carol directions and told her she’d be standing out at the front of the building. When Kathrin hung up Aaron was looking at her.

“What?” she demanded.

“Why were you laughing?”

“No reason.”

“Sure.”

She ignored the comment and went into the bathroom to get ready for bed. She’d taken to undressing in the bathroom, though she wasn’t exactly sure why. She felt a little uncomfortable in front of Aaron, although she’d never been prone to embarrassment before. She couldn’t get all those thoughts out of her head. When she crawled into bed Aaron was reading the newest Dick Francis book. Kathrin hated Dick Francis. Everything she needed to know about horses he had covered in the first two books. And she preferred literature to spy fiction. *You snob.* She ducked under the book and lay her head across Aaron’s chest. He bobbed down to deliver a quick kiss, and then resumed his reading. Kathrin shut her eyes, but she wasn’t the least bit tired. In fact, all of a sudden she was starving. “Have anything good in the fridge?” she asked.

“No. Are you hungry?”

“Famished.”

“At this hour?”

Kathrin rolled her eyes. “What, it’ll make me fat?”

Aaron put his book down. “I’ve seen you eat. You stuff as much into your rake-like body as I do. I’m not worried you’re going to get fat.”

“Are you hungry?”

He smiled. “A little.”

“Let’s order Chinese, and eat in bed.”

Aaron looked appalled. “In bed?”

She swatted his arm. “I promise to vacuum any crumbs after.”

“You’re on.”
She ordered from her favorite place, taking care to remember the hot and sour soup. It was her absolute favorite. "I could live on this stuff," she told Aaron when the food arrived and she pulled the paper bags onto the duvet.

"Napkin," he ordered, passing her a few.

She tucked one down her t-shirt, and the placed another over her lap. "Did you ever play in mud?"

"Absolutely not."

"I figured."

She finished the soup and ate voraciously. Aaron stared at her in amazement. He had never seen a woman consume so much food at one sitting. He chalked it up to the hollow leg Kathrin no doubt was hiding somewhere. "Don't you ever get indigestion?" he asked her.

"Nope. But my tummy makes some pretty cool noises. What about you?"

"Anything hot kills me."

"How's the soup?"

"Good. Hot. You're getting the water bottle if I need it in the middle of the night."

Kathrin laughed and popped the end of her spring roll into her mouth. Then she leaned over and kissed Aaron on the mouth. "Gross," he said pushing her greasy mouth away from his own.

Kathrin wiped her face off. "You don't want to kiss me?"

"Not with that stuff in your mouth. Swallow, then try it again."

She swallowed and leaned over, kissing Aaron, and slipping a warm tongue into his mouth. He nearly choked as Kathrin ran her slimy fingers over his shirt, but found her touch slightly appealing. He put his soup down on the bedside table, and pushed some plates out of the way. Then he kissed Kathrin hard. She kissed back and started taking off his shirt. "Whoa," he said, pulling the fabric back over his stomach, "not with all this stuff here."

Kathrin smirked. "You need to get over this clean thing you have going."

Aaron looked at her. "And you need to get over this darkness thing you've got going."

She tensed. She hadn't realized that he'd noticed, but then felt dumb comprehending there was no way he could not have caught on. "What do you mean?" she asked defensively.

"Oh come on Kathrin. You won't let me anywhere near you unless the lights are off. What gives?"

Kathrin wiped her hands on her napkin. "Nothing."
“Do you feel I’m rushing you?”

Kathrin shook her head immediately. “No. Definitely not.”

“Then what?”

She frowned and looked down. He took her face in his hand, and lifted her eyes to him, but she looked away as soon as he let go. She began twirling her hair with her fingers.

“You know,” he said, “when you get uncomfortable, you refuse to look at me and you always do that whirly thing with your hair. Like a defense mechanism.”

She nodded, but didn’t speak.

“How come you can’t look at me?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” She said the words quietly and began to put the lids back on the foil dishes.

Aaron sighed in exasperation. He wanted to force her to look at him, and tell him everything she was feeling, but he knew it was pointless. She wouldn’t talk until she was ready to. And if he pushed her she’d only retreat further into her shell. In some ways she was so similar to Lily. His Lily who had worn a face of deep disturbance for months before it ended, and when he asked her anything she’d shut off. Look away and tell him to leave her alone. When he’d finally forced her to talk, she’d been like a wounded animal. Full of hatred and denial. He didn’t want that to happen with Kathrin. He wanted her to face whatever demon she had to face, and let him know when things were O.K. He wasn’t going to push her too.

He watched her carry the plates to the kitchen, and got up to brush his teeth. In the bathroom he looked at himself. He appeared as he always had before. Strange that when he looked at old pictures from his youth, he couldn’t recognize himself in the person standing in front of the photographer. He had never noticed the changes taking place as he was growing up. Every time he had looked into the mirror he had seen the same face. But when he looked back over those years in retrospect, his physical attributes had never seemed the same. He wished he could swallow up the past - all those changes, and live only with the present face. And he wished Kathrin could do it to.

When he returned to bed, Kathrin was facing the other way. “You going to brush your teeth?” he asked.

“No.”

“No?”

“I don’t feel like it.”
He sighed. “Kathrin, what’s wrong? Did I say something?”

She didn’t respond. Instead she clutched the sheets tighter to her body and exhaled. He stepped over to the bed and slipped in under the sheets, careful not to touch her. “Listen. I’m not going to pry. but I wish you would tell me what’s bothering you. So maybe I can do something about it.”

He waited through the silence, and then finally reached over and shut the light off. She wasn’t going to say anything. He faced her back, and could vaguely make out her form in the darkness. It felt odd, being so close to her and yet so far away at the same time.

She cleared her throat. “I can’t look at you.”

He frowned and moved closer to her body. “Why not?”

“I’m afraid you’ll see what I feel.”

He slipped his arm over her and pulled her against his body. She was shivering slightly. and he ran his arms over her shoulders which were covered with goose-bumps. Her words had made him feel like he had swallowed a snake that was still swirling through his stomach and chest. Pricking his heart with little fangs. He remained still and silent for some time while the feelings calmed down inside of him.

“Maybe,” he said finally. “you’ll see that I feel the same way.”

Kathrin found his hand in the darkness and squeezed it. He kissed the back of her head, and breathed slowly against her hair. In his mouth, his next words were burning the tip of his tongue. He clenched his teeth tightly together to keep them from spilling out.

The service was beautiful and the weather made the day perfect. Every once in a while Kathrin would adjust her dress, and turn slightly to see if Aaron had arrived. The church fans spun lazily and she could feel beads of sweat collecting at the nape of her neck. Several women in the church were fanning themselves with the wedding programs.

Alison looked beautiful, and could not stop smiling. Kathrin wondered if she had smeared vaseline over her teeth like the synchronized swimmers always did. Adam choked on his vows a couple of times, and Kathrin swore she saw tears welling up in his eyes. She couldn’t imagine being that happy. She vowed that when her time came she’d skip the whole formal thing and throw a clam bake instead. No shoes, no veil, only a bouquet of wildflowers and enough corn to feed all the chickens at the Maple Leaf hen houses. The thought made her smile. Who am I kidding? My family would kill me.
Carol caught her eye as they were walking down the aisle to the front doors. They both smiled and then stepped outside. “Gotta love Catholic services in the middle of the summer, huh?” Kathrin laughed. “At least we’re not wearing tuxedos.”

The bubble blowing had begun. Kathrin grimaced. It was all too fairy-tale romantic for her. The ring bearer was chasing the two flower girls across the lawn. Alison and Adam were posing for the photographer. Everything was perfect, except that Kathrin couldn’t see Aaron anywhere. Carol followed her eyes. “Not here, huh?”

Kathrin shook her head. “He said he’d try, but I guess he must have gotten caught up in talking business.”

“Well, don’t worry about it. He probably didn’t want to come alone.”

“Yeah, but maybe I should call him.”

Carol shook her head. “Nah, you’ll see him at the reception. Plus, it looks like we’re being called for the photo shoot.”

They crossed the lawn and were ushered into a limo by Steph and Harold. They drank champagne and joked around with the driver, and Kathrin tired to lure him into conversation.

“So,” she joked, “I bet you’ve seen it all.”

He looked at her through the rear view mirror. “I would say so.”

“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever seen?” Kathrin demanded.

“Hard to say.”

“Oh come on. Tell me.”

“Well,” he smiled, “I’ve seen a bride have sex with someone who was definitely not the groom, but that was by accident. They didn’t know I was here.”

Kathrin laughed and wanted to know all the details.

“You’d be surprised. I’ve gotten to the point now, where I can pretty much tell if it’ll last or not. A lot of couples spend most of their time fighting in the limo. About family affairs, or ex-lovers that show up. You name it, I’ve heard it. It would make you think twice about getting married.”

Kathrin looked at Steph. “How was your limo ride?”

Steph smiled. “I believe that’s when we consummated our union.”

Kathrin’s mouth dropped open. “Really?” she said, and the memory of Jason’s moaning nearly made her crack up.
Jason blushed crimson, and stared out the window. "I wonder." Harold asked, "what Alison and Adam are doing now?"

Carol laughed. "That's gross. I don't even want to think about it."

They brought their glasses together, and Steph turned to Kathrin. "So, did Aaron come? I didn't see him."

"No. He had a business golf game. But he's coming later."

They arrived at the public garden where they were shooting the photographs. Kathrin and the other two women went over to help Alison out of the other limo, to Harold's comment of "knock before you open the door."

The photo session went well, and by the time they were finished it was nearing five. They had an hour to get to the hotel, have their make-up touched up, and get down to the reception room. Of course, Kathrin had persuaded Alison to have the reception at her uncle's hotel, and the Morris' had approved. The rest of the evening would go off without a hitch.

When they grouped together for the receiving line, Kathrin kept turning toward the stairs to find Aaron. He was nowhere to be seen. She was dying to run to the public phone, but knew that she had no time. Instead, she greeted a few hundred people that she didn't know, and maybe forty that she did know, including a guy she had slept with at university. She pretended not to remember and smiled at his date. Once everyone was inside, they walked into the room, and sat at the head table. Kathrin glanced around and noticed a few empty seats. At least Aaron wasn't the only one who'd chosen not to attend. Secretly she was angry, but she smiled, and shrugged nonchalantly when Carol mouthed across the table, asking where he was.

She waited until after dinner, when all the speeches were said, and then bolted for the bathroom as soon as she could. She pulled down her nylons and lowered herself towards the toilet seat quickly. She couldn't believe that he hadn't shown up. He was going to get it, when she got a hold of him. For a second she wondered if he was mad at her from the night before. She dismissed the thought, because everything had been worked out before they fell asleep. He wouldn't miss a wedding to prove a point, or anger her. Then she thought that maybe something had happened to him. She tensed, and flushed the toilet, then headed for the hotel lobby. On her way down, she saw her uncle. He moved over to her, and asked her how everything was going.

"Fine," she responded quickly, "Listen, I don't want to be rude, but I need to make a phone call right away."
“That’s all right. By the way, the reception desk left me a note for you. I wanted to bring it up before, but you had already started dinner.”

He handed her the note and she quickly unfolded it. Immediately she felt better. It was a message from Aaron, saying he was ill and to call when she got the chance. No rush. “Thanks,” she said, kissing her uncle’s cheek.

She went over to the phone, and felt horrible about having thought he was trying to upset her. She dialed his number, and he picked it up on the second ring. “Hello?” he said groggily.

“Hi there, how are you feeling?”

“Awful. I’ve been throwing up all day.”

“Oh no. What about your golf game?”

He coughed. “I made it three holes and then I started puking. I think it was something I ate. I’m really sorry about the wedding.”

Kathrin smiled. “Don’t worry. Should I come home?”

“No,” he said slowly, “I’m fine. You just have a good time.”

Kathrin took his listless response as a signal. “Aaron if you’re sick, maybe you need someone to take care of you. It’s no problem.”

“I’ve survived all day without you, a few more hours won’t hurt.”

She checked the hotel lobby for a clock. It was just after nine. “Tell you what? I’ll dance a bit, and by home by eleven.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to.”

“O.K.”

“See you soon. Try to get some rest.”

Kathrin walked back upstairs quickly. She could hear an oldie coming from the sound speaker and realized that the first dance had started. She opened the door to the room quietly and snuck in to see Alison twirling around with her father. Alison had made him practice for weeks. Kathrin skirted the dance floor, and slipped down beside Carol. “He’s sick,” she said.

Carol gave her a sympathetic squeeze on the shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

They watched the dance, and clapped when it was over. Immediately a more contemporary song came on and Carol grabbed Kathrin. They went out onto the dance floor and started moving. Alison and Steph joined them, and even Jason and Adam danced. “Why is it that men only dance at weddings?” Steph asked.
"Because they figure if they ever want to get married they have to," Carol answered later. Kathrin moved off the dance floor and went to get a coffee out in the hall. She didn't want to feel drunk if she was going to take care of Aaron. She had liked how the word "home" sounded on her lips. Not 'your place' or 'your apartment', but 'home'. Still she wondered if that was rushing things. Taking something for granted before she really knew how Aaron felt about it. Before she really knew how she felt about it. The week had been great, but she hadn't taken a step back to review the relationship yet. Maybe she needed some time. After the previous night, it was clear to her that the whole commitment issue hadn't been broached. For all she knew, Aaron was still looking for the perfect someone, and she wasn't it.

As she was standing by the coffee maker, Alison's aunt came up to her. "What a beautiful wedding," she stated.

Kathrin agreed.

"It's so nice to see two young people finally getting married. It makes me fall in love all over again."

Kathrin grinned and nodded. Aunt Elizabeth had apparently had one too many.

"Speaking of young people," Elizabeth continued, "you should really meet my son. I don't think you've been introduced."

Kathrin saw Carol walking through the doors and flashed her the 'save me' signal. Carol swooped over. "Elizabeth, How are you?"

Elizabeth smiled and pulled her into the conversation. "I was just telling, Kathrin isn't it, about how I love weddings. And how she should meet my son, as she's the only one of you girls without a date."

Kathrin swallowed and threw a tight smile over to Carol.

"Oh Elizabeth, Kathrin's boyfriend couldn't make it. He's ill. But don't you worry about her. She'll be fine. Actually I was just coming to get her. They're playing our song."

Kathrin smiled and excused herself. "Thank you," she said, once they were out of earshot. "I've met her son. He's a social reject."

"Well," Carol laughed, "if his mother is trying to set him up, he must be. So, what's wrong with Aaron?"

"He thinks food poisoning, but I bet it's one of those flu bugs. Anyway, I told him I'd leave early."

"Not too early."
“No.”
“Good. Let’s dance.”

Kathrin waited until the bouquet was launched and caught by a rather overweight, older woman well into her fifties. She and Carol tried to keep a straight face. Then Alison and Adam departed for their room, as they had a two a.m. flight to catch for Hawaii. She bid them goodbye. She wouldn’t see them until after she got back from her vacation. The party settled down to a dim roar, and Kathrin decided to leave before another older man asked her to dance. She said goodbye to the Morris family and told Carol she’d call her later in the week before she left for the north country. Then she went outside and hailed a cab.

Aaron hadn’t thrown up in a few hours when she got to the apartment, and she made him force some water and bread down his throat. He claimed to be feeling better, but his forehead was clammy against her touch, and he still looked a little green. “My poor guy,” she said smoothing his hair against his head.

He smiled as she carefully tucked the sheets around his body. “You look beautiful.”
Kathrin twirled in her dress. “It’s too bad you feel sick. I had a great evening planned.”
He groaned and Kathrin laughed at him. “Don’t worry. I’ll give you a rain check.”
“How was the wedding?”

“Perfect. Though I can’t say I expected it to be anything less. Thank God they didn’t opt for the country club. It was really intimate, even though there were a couple of hundred people there.”

“Any cute men?”
Kathrin laughed. “Yes, but none that satisfy my yearning for taking care of poor, sick invalids.”

She sat down by him and felt his forehead. “I think you have a little bit of a fever.
Probably a bug. I can’t get sick, so I’m going to sleep on the couch.”
Aaron looked up. “Really?”

“It won’t do us any good if we’re both sick.”
He nodded weakly. “What if I need you?”

“I’m sure I’ll hear you. Now, go to sleep.” She stood up, and made her way to the bathroom.

By the time she returned Aaron had fallen asleep. She didn’t want to wake him, so she rummaged around through several drawers and then the closet where she found a blanket. When
she pulled it out, she heard a small bang. She looked into the closet and saw several picture frames. Quietly she took them out, and looked at them. They were of an older couple, and a young woman. The last picture was an earlier shot and had the couple, the woman and Aaron smiling in it. Kathrin frowned. *Why on earth would he put the family pictures away?* She wondered how long they had been in the closet, and then scanned the last picture again. It seemed like such a loving group, and she wondered why Aaron didn't like talking about them. Of course the picture looked at least five years old, so maybe everything had happened since then. She resolved to ask Aaron when he was feeling better.

She place the picture frame back into the closet and slid the door shut. Then she reached over Aaron and took the pillow from the other side of the bed. The movement jolted Aaron awake and he looked at Kathrin dazedly. “Shh!” she whispered.

He smiled up at her, and pursed his lips for a kiss. Kathrin kissed his forehead instead. “The garbage can is by the bed. Call if you need anything. Good night sweetie.”

She clicked off the light. Aaron rolled onto his side towards her. “Kathrin?” he called sluggishly.

She moved closer to the bed. “Yeah?”

“Thanks,” he mumbled, and she smiled, stepping out into the hall, “I love you.”

The words stopped her in her tracks, but she fought the urge to go back into the bedroom. He was sick and probably had no idea what he had said. She climbed onto the couch, and pulled the blanket up to her neck. And then she let the warm feeling inside her, take her to sleep.
Aaron woke up Sunday morning feeling like a new man. He rolled out of bed and headed for the kitchen to get something to drink. It was only when he stepped out into the living room that he remembered two things: Kathrin was sleeping on the couch, and she was covered in the blanket from the closet. He realized immediately that she had seen the pictures, and he silently smacked his hand against his side of his head. Way to go Aaron. Like she was never going to remind you that you had a family, anyway. He wondered what Kathrin had thought when she’d seen them. Of course, there was an off-chance that she’d... no, there was no way she would have missed them, they were wrapped in the blanket.

He tiptoed by her and went to make some coffee. Well, it was bound to come out sooner or later. He had no desire to get into it on a beautiful Sunday morning near the tip of July though. Kathrin stirred on the couch when he opened the cupboard, and twisted her head to catch a glimpse of him. “Feeling better?” she asked and stretched her arms up.

“Ten times better.”

“I feel great,” she offered, “this couch is actually pretty comfortable.”

Aaron laughed. “Well, it should be. It’s a pull out.”

Kathrin groaned. She hadn’t even thought to check it the night before. She smiled at Aaron, and lifted herself from the leather. “What are you making?”

“Coffee. Want an omelet? It’s my specialty.”

“Sounds good. Let me take a shower first though.”

She got up and walked towards the hall entrance. “Hey,” Aaron called as she stepped into the bathroom, “you going for lunch today?”

“No, I thought I’d be hung over so I canceled. Why?”

Aaron poked his head around the corner. “I thought maybe we could go for a walk through The Beaches.”

Kathrin nodded. “That sounds good.”

She shut the door behind her, and Aaron turned his attention back to the coffee. Maybe they’d finally be able to talk. He realized that he hadn’t been up front with her, and he was going to have to give her some information if he expected her to be honest with him. He wasn’t sure exactly how to broach the subject, but maybe he’d just let her ask questions. After all that time, it might be good for him to get some of his thoughts out. He’d refused to talk about it to anyone, to tell about Lily and what it put his family through. His mother had asked him a million times to go out and get help. Not that she felt there was anything wrong with him, but it might make him feel
better. Aaron didn’t like the thought of turning to a stranger for advice. No one could tell him how he could go about feeling better. It was something he’d had to do for himself.

Kathrin washed her hair and thought about Aaron’s last words. She almost felt as if she’d imagined the whole thing. She kept plugging in words that would have sounded like ‘I love you’ to her. All she kept coming up with was the childhood saying of ‘elephant chew’ or ‘elephant shoe’. She couldn’t even remember how the saying went. But she knew that he had really said it, she’d heard the words clearly. But he wasn’t acting as if anything had changed, and she knew that if he even remembered saying anything to her, he’d act differently. She told herself to stop analyzing. Maybe she’d ask him on the walk. *Lord knows I have a million questions for him. Especially about the pictures.*

She dried her hair until it was only slightly damp, and then put on a short cotton dress, and her sandals. She’d take the day off, and then really clamp down on her work later that evening. The final presentation was on Thursday, but the designers and the director had already seen most of the stuff. She couldn’t foresee any changes. The only thing they hadn’t seen was the concluding segment, and she felt it would go over well. The designers were a lot easier to please than she had initially anticipated. So, she was relatively relaxed, and starting to get excited and nervous about talking to Aaron. Every few seconds a new question would pop into her mind, and she tried to organize each one so as not to forget any.

The omelet was really good, and Kathrin gulped down her coffee quickly. She cleaned the dishes while Aaron got ready for the outing.

**Q**

The walked the boardwalk for the afternoon, and then headed up to Queen Street for a drink. Neither one of them had made any attempt to shift the conversation into personal mode, and Kathrin spent most of the time talking about her idea for the design simulator. Aaron thought it was a great idea. “Are you going to pitch it at the meeting?” he asked, as they turned onto Queen.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll wait until I get back from vacation.”

Aaron looked at her. “When are you going on vacation?”

“Next week. I already told you that.”

He frowned. “I don’t remember you telling me.”

“Yes. I’m going with Andria up to the cottage for two weeks. Remember? She’s signed me up for a weekend pottery course too. Should be fun. Don’t you remember me mentioning it?”

He racked his brains. “Vaguely.”
Kathrin took his hand. “I’m surprised you forgot. You seem so detail-oriented.”

“Wait.” he said. “that means I won’t see you for almost three weeks.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t get a chance to tell you, but the business meeting yesterday, even though I got sick, went over really well. The client wants me to go to New York for three days, and give some talks to the board. If I can swing it, then they’ll be the third largest investor we have.”

Kathrin smiled. “That’s great Aaron. I’m really happy for you. When are you going?”

“Tuesday.”

“Well. we’re not leaving until Sunday, so we can still have a couple of days together.”

Aaron tugged her hand and they crossed the street to a small restaurant with patio seating. They slipped through the wooden gateway, and Aaron found a table in the shade. “I used to come here a lot.”

“Isn’t it kind of far out of your way?”

“My sister lives near here.”

“Mine too.”

They sat in silence until the waitress took their order. Aaron placed an order for two Guinness drafts, and Kathrin pretended to vomit. “I’ll be drunk halfway through,” she said.

“They are heavy beers, but not overly alcoholic,” he returned.

She smiled. “Sure, like I’m going to believe you.”

“So,” he began. “I was thinking, if you want to stay at my place for the days I’m gone, you can.”

Kathrin frowned. “Why?”

“Well I know you’re busy, so it might be more convenient.”

“Aaron I’ve been living at your place for a week already…”

“I’m just saying. I’ll give you my keys anyway. That way maybe you’ll be able to pick me up at the airport.”

“Ah.” Kathrin said, understanding. “an ulterior motive.”

“Plus. you may need to water my plants.”

Kathrin laughed and moved out of the way of the incoming pints filled with thick brown beer. “Well. I’ll stay there on Wednesday. The meeting starts at eight-thirty. That way I can get fifteen minutes more sleep.”

“Great.”
Kathrin took a sip of the beer. It wasn’t half bad. “Really, I should love this stuff, with my Irish ancestry.”

“It’s one of the finer things in life, I believe. Along with fresh sheets, yo-yo’s and spring rain.”

Kathrin gave him a look of surprise. “Why is it you’re so romantic at the weirdest times? Well, every once in a while I let it all hang out. Even though I know you find that hard to believe.”

She thought back to his words, and grinned. “Yeah, sometimes you surprise me.”

“Why the maniacal grin?”

She sipped her beer. Not the time, she thought. “No reason. So, Mr. Mysterious, when are you going to take me to meet your family?”

Aaron was well prepared for the question. “I thought you’d ask me that.”

“Why?”

“You tell me.”

She paused dramatically, then leaned back in her chair. “It wouldn’t have anything to do with me stumbling across your poor family locked up in the closet.”

Aaron laughed. “Of course it wouldn’t.”

“Why on earth are they there?”

“Well,” he began, “it’s a long story. I felt stupid having them up the first time you came over, so I replaced them with other things.”

“Oh, so having pictures of babies all over your mantle isn’t stupid?”

“I thought it was touching.”

Kathrin smirked. “It was kind of cute,” she admitted, “but that doesn’t answer my question.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, my mother is as anxious to meet you as you are her. I’ve told her everything about you. My dad didn’t really say anything, but I think he’s curious.”

“And Elaine?”

“I mentioned your name in one of our brief conversations. She’s not big into details, but I’m sure she figured out that you were more than just a name.”

“Well that makes me feel pretty special.”
Aaron reached his hand across the table, and ran his fingers over hers. "Kathrin, my family is a strange bunch. They have very rigid views, that don't change for anyone. I'm just afraid they'll say something without even realizing it, and you'll run away."

"Aaron, I'm not dating your family. I'm dating you. Right?"
He looked at her. "What do you mean?"
"We are dating, right?"
"Well, I would hope so. Or else the past two months have been a waste of time."
"I was just making sure. I don't want to find out that you're not really interested."
He took a deep drink. "Could you even think that? God Kathrin, even though you do some strange things, I have never been happier in my life."
She cast him a narrow look. "Never?"
"Never. What are you getting at?"
She shook her head. "Nothing."
"Come on."
"Well," she said, looking down, "what about your ex?"
Aaron swallowed. They were entering the area he had feared. "I was very happy with her. But that was over four years ago."
"But don't you ever think that you would like to be with her again?"
"That's impossible."
"It's not impossible. Feelings just don't disappear. Don't you ever feel like you want her back?"
Aaron smiled grimly and looked out into the road. Sometimes he wanted her back so badly he could taste it in his mouth. Even when he knew how happy he was with Kathrin. But the way he wanted her back wasn't like regaining a lost love. It was bringing her back from the dead. But Kathrin didn't need to hear about it. She'd feel better if he had an ex, and not a memory. Ex-girlfriends were finite, they took up a certain amount of space. A memory haunted un-measurable distances, and would only grow in Kathrin's mind.

"No," he said firmly, looking into Kathrin's eyes, "it's over."
"Why?" she asked simply.
A huge gash was spreading through his gut. He fought the wound. He was not going to tell Kathrin. Not yet. "She became very depressed, and I couldn't do anything to help her out of it. In the end, she left me of her own accord."
“Have you spoken to her since?”

“No.” He said and knew that he was lying.

He’d spoken to her every night for four years in his dreams. For the first year in his nightmares. And the last three, at odd times when he couldn’t stop her from entering his mind. At first he’d tried to tune her out, but she came back stronger and more vivid. When he woke up in the middle of the night and thought he saw her walking through the bedroom, when he touched himself sometimes and he could feel her breathing beside him, though no one was there. And sometimes it comforted him, and sometimes he was pacified, but most often it scared the shit out of him.

Kathrin smiled. “I’m glad.”

And she felt relief wash over her. Aaron had gotten over his past, and now he was free to be with her. “Do you remember what you said to me last night?”

Aaron frowned. “No, what?”

“When I said good night?”

He glanced around. He couldn’t remember anything, except her going into the bathroom. Kathrin watched him and realized that he had no recollection of saying anything to her. He was ill.

Give him a break. “Nothing. I can’t really remember. It was just this cute thing you said.”

He laughed. “Was it about you being my Florence Nightingale?”

Kathrin played along. “Yeah, something like that.”

Aaron took another sip of his beer. He only remembered thinking that, but he must have said it later. “So,” he said, changing the topic of conversation, “two weeks without me, huh?”

“It won’t be so bad.”

“I’m offended now.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. But the time will fly by.”

“For you maybe.”

Kathrin looked at him. “Well, you’ve got your squash games, and work. I’m sure you’ll be fine. I’m not that important to you, am I?”

Aaron thought about it. Since he’d met Kathrin, she’d been the most important thing in his life. He planned evenings for them while he was at work, thought about her constantly, and wanted to spend every minute with her. Yeah, she’s pretty important. He didn’t know what he’d do without her for two weeks. Since she’d moved in, and that was a loose way to describe it, he’d had
no bad dreams, and no visions of Lily. And he could feel the void growing smaller with every passing day. "And if I say yes?" he asked.

"Then you're safe."

"And if I say no?"

"Then, it'll be the last thing you ever say."

"Hmm. I like it when you get feisty."

Kathrin picked up her glass and drained the contents. "You ain't seen nothing yet."

Aaron left some money on the table, and they started walking back to the car. He wrapped his arm around Kathrin's waist, and was pleased that a few pedestrians glanced at them. He was sure they looked like they were in love. And sometimes he even felt like he was.

When they got back to his place, Kathrin started packing up her belongings. She needed to get started on her work. Aaron was of the exact opposite opinion. "Why do you have to go so soon?" he whined.

"I have a lot of work to do."

"But you're not going to see me..."

"For three days," she grunted, as she stuffed her clothing into the bag.

"Shouldn't you be folding that stuff?" Aaron asked.

"Why? It's going in the laundry anyway. It all reeks like smoke."

Aaron lay down on the bed. "Well, maybe you'll think about quitting while you're away."

She gave him a cold stare and he burst out laughing. "Easy, killer. It was just a thought."

"With you around, I need a vice!" she claimed.

He brushed off her comment. "You don't even realize how easy you have it. All you have to do is smile, and I forget every flaw you have."

"What flaw?" she demanded petulantly.

He grinned and rolled onto his back, clutching a pillow over his stomach. "Well, I don't know about you, but I could do with a five minute quality snuggle, before you leave."

She put down the shirt she was holding, and crawled over Aaron, straddling him with her legs. She carefully pulled the pillow out from under her, and sat looking down at Aaron. "You're nuts."

He shifted slightly. "Yeah, well with you around I'd have to be. Are you going to miss me?"
“Maybe.”


He pulled her close to him, and kissed her neck. “That’s a bit better. But I still think there’s room for improvement.”

She kissed him, and wrapped her hands behind his neck. “Yes. I’ll miss you. Is that better?”

“Not yet,” he said, reaching for the bottom of her dress.

She shifted slightly and he pulled her dress over her head. Underneath she was wearing tiny bikini briefs and a cotton bra. Kathrin smiled and dipped her body so that she rubbed up the entire length of Aaron’s torso. She buried her head against his neck and reached down to fumble with his belt. When he began taking his clothes off, she looked away and waited patiently until he returned to her. He pulled off her underclothes, and dropped her bag onto the floor. She remained seated on top of him as he began kissing her neck, careful to avoid his eyes, but in a way that he wouldn’t notice. He didn’t and after reaching into the drawer on the bedside table, soon he was inside of her, breathing heavily. She could feel him begin to sweat, and swaddled her body tighter against his. Then he suddenly pulled out and rolled her over onto her back. She shut her eyes as they began moving again, and turned away from him. His thrusts were quicker and she could feel him grabbing her waist with a firm hand. He dipped in to catch the edge of her lip, and she turned to kiss him. When he pulled away she turned her head back on its side. “Don’t Kathrin. I want you to look at me.”

She forced herself to face him, and scanned his full chest with her eyes. Then she looked up into his face. His eyes drilled into hers, as his mouth contorted into a freakish pucker, and then his eyes shut briefly. When they opened again they were out of focus and it took a split second for him to find her again. “God, you feel so good,” he whispered.

She couldn’t turn away from his eyes. Something kept her vision glued on him, watching every muscle distort itself as he struggled to hold on to whatever control he had left. Kathrin was mesmerized by his face, and how strongly he felt everything that was going through his body. And then slowly, the heat filled up her feet, and she found herself meeting him, move for move. A slow moan coursed its way up from her throat, and she looked at him, realizing that she too was making the same strange faces. For the first time, she didn’t want him to stop, didn’t feel like she was having sex. Rather she felt like she was actually involved in what they were doing. She gripped
her arms tightly on his shoulders, and watched as her nails dug into the firm skin. And then he was kissing her, never letting her out of his sight for one minute, until he couldn’t contain it any more, and his eyes shut tightly while he grunted and called her name in desperation. She watched every jerk in his body, and felt each spasm as if it was happening inside of her. When he was done, he lay limply on her chest, and the sweat from his forehead, rolled onto her breasts. She could feel a tingling run lightly over her skin, and exhaled the warm air from her chest. He kissed her again and again, remaining inside of her, and she finally shut her eyes, and listened to them breathe.

Aaron looked up at her. “I’m sorry,” he said simply, “I wanted you to, but I couldn’t help it.”

She smiled. “It’s O.K.”

“No it’s not. But next time, I promise.”

She felt empty when he got up from the bed and went into the bathroom. She looked down at her chest, and noticed the blotches of red skin covered with sweat and some of Aaron’s chest hair. Carefully she plucked the hair off her chest. She wasn’t surprised that he hadn’t brought her to orgasm. She was surprised that he’d brought her to her body, and not let her drift out into space. It was like she was awake and alive. And that was more important to her than achieving release.

She wanted desperately to spend Monday night at Aaron’s, but he had too much stuff to go over before his meeting in New York. She’d hinted that she would stay out of his way, but he refused to acknowledge her intimations. The most she got out of him was an invitation to drive him to the airport. She figured anything was better than nothing, and told him she’d pick him up just after six.

When she got to the building, Aaron was waiting bleary-eyed and dazed. “I’ve been up most of the night,” he said, “but a snooze on the airplane will take care of that.”

There were a few cars on the Q.E.W. headed west, and Kathrin spent most of her time dodging the rising sun in her rear-view mirror. She passed Aaron her coffee, and he took a small sip. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

“I was thinking that maybe we could spend some quality time when I got back. Like not get out of bed for the whole weekend.”

He placed his keys in the container between the front seats, and leaned over to kiss her face. She could smell his cologne, and inhaled loudly. Something about the morning seemed so
weird to Kathrin. Almost like she was a cute little wife taking her husband to the airport. It almost made her gag at the thought, but somewhere deep inside it felt good too.

“So, you want anything from New York?”

“Statue of Liberty,” she responded with a smile.

“The Statue, or a statue?”

“A little one will do.”

When they got to the airport, Kathrin pulled up in a no parking zone, and jumped out to help Aaron collect his things. Then he stood patiently as she straightened his tie, and planted a quick kiss on his mouth. “Be good,” she ordered and went back to the driver’s door. She waved, and ducked inside the car. Aaron picked up his stuff and started walking through the sliding glass doors. Kathrin watched as he entered the airport, and then was about to pull out when she saw him moving back towards her car. He put his bags down, and opened the door. “I decided I needed a better good luck kiss than that.”

Kathrin laughed and leaned over to his face. He took her face in both of his hands and kissed her firmly on the lips. Then he smiled shyly and slowly took his hands from her face. He hesitated a moment and stayed bent into the car. “Well, I better get going.”

“Yeah, don’t want to miss your flight.”

“Thanks for the ride.”

“My pleasure.”

She looked through her side-view mirror and waited for him to shut the door. “Kathrin?”

She turned back towards him. “Yeah?”

“I love you.”

And then the door shut and he was walking through the glass doors again, as she tried her hardest to start breathing again, and unclench her fingers from the steering wheel.

All day long she reviewed the parting scene in her head. Thinking about how she could have answered him, or said something. She had thought in past weeks about how she’d felt about Aaron, and how she’d felt the night he’d been sick. Fleeting moments she felt something she couldn’t describe, but had never really thought of those feeling as love. But suddenly she knew that what she felt for him was definitely something more than friendship, or like. And he’d been so patient with her and all the problems she came with, even if he didn’t have an inkling of what they were exactly. But she wasn’t sure that it was love - or the right kind of love. She cared for him,
but she cared for Jamie, and wasn’t sure if she cared about them differently. Of course, there was nothing more than friendship with Jamie, and she was attracted to Aaron. Like she’d never been attracted to anyone before. Yet, still there was hesitation in her mind. At least he hadn’t demanded a response from her. And she had three days to sort out her feelings before he would expect an answer.

She realized what it was after lunch. How secretive he was about his family. Every family had problems, but he still hadn’t told her what exactly had happened. She had thought initially that it couldn’t be that bad, but his constant attempts to skip the subject had started her wondering. *I mean, if he would go so far as to take down their pictures.* Probably some stupid squabble, that everyone was too stubborn to get over. Kind of like when her family argued. She decided that she needed to talk to someone, and Carol was the safest bet.

Carol was surprised to hear from her. “You’ve been a hard person to get a hold of. I thought maybe you’d skipped town with your new man.”

“I need to talk.”

“Oh God,” Carol groaned, “you dumped him.”

“Worse.”

There was a long pregnant pause. “Kathrin Connelly, have you finally fallen in love?”

“I don’t know, but I want to be sure. Will you meet me after work?”

“I better. Before it’s too late. Five thirty. Usual place.”

Kathrin hung up the phone. Carol would figure everything out for her. All she had to do was show up.

&

Carol was sitting at their usual table when Kathrin arrived. She had already ordered them drinks, and wasted no time getting down to the nitty-gritty. “So, what happened to spawn this?”

“He told me he loves me.”

Carol’s eyes widened. “No shit? I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a man saying it first. What did you say?”

“Nothing, he left before I could even think about saying anything.”

“Well, what would you have said?”

Kathrin lit up a smoke. “I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about it all day. I mean, he’s the perfect guy. He’s nice and funny and patient…”

“What about sex?”
“It’s getting better every time.”

Carol scowled. “Well then, what your problem? This guy is exactly what you’re looking for. He’s the corvette. Is that what scares you?”

“What?”

“That he’s too perfect. That he’s the one you’ve been waiting for.”

Kathrin leaned back and looked at Carol across the table. “I never thought of that. But no, I’m not scared of commitment.”

Carol nearly choked on her wine. “This, coming from the woman whose longest relationship lasted eight months, and the last two were spent with another man.”

“Carol, that was two years ago!” Kathrin argued.

“True, but look at your past. You never gave a shit about anyone. All of a sudden, some decent guy shows up on the scene, and you’re suddenly afraid of getting involved with him. What else does it sound like?”

Kathrin pushed her fingers through her hair. “I don’t know. But he still hasn’t taken me to meet his parents, and changes the subject when I mention them.”

“So what? Not everyone has the close-knit family that you have Kathrin. Some people hate their parents. Some people’s parents hate them. And some people’s parents hate their children’s lovers. I know that from experience.”

“Yeah, but Harold’s parents like you, they’re just upset you’re not Jewish.”

“Upset is an understatement. All I’m saying is that just because he doesn’t want you to meet his family is no reason not to get involved. So tell me the truth, do you love him?”

Kathrin sighed. So much for Carol figuring it all out. She was still as confused as she had been before. “I don’t know. Honestly.”

“Well, what’s your gut feeling?”

“I don’t have one. Usually I would, but I don’t.”

Carol swirled her glass around, and shrugged. “Well then, maybe you should take some time off from him and figure it out. Don’t let him know what you’re doing, of course. If you can’t survive without him, then you know how you feel. Isn’t your vacation coming up?”

“Yeah, next week.”

“Well, there you go. Tell him you’ll call him when you get back. Two weeks will let you know. If you’re calling him the first day, it’s love.”

“I guess.”
“You guess? I should charge you for these consultations.”

Kathrin laughed. “What are you talking about?”

“You meet some guy, totally ignore your best friend for two months, and then expect her to solve all your problems.”

“I haven’t been ignoring you,” she said and watched Carol’s eyebrow arch up, “have I?”

“A little.”

“Really? Oh Carol, I’m sorry. I haven’t meant to.”

“I know how it goes. Don’t worry. But this Saturday night, you better pull your dancing shoes out.”

Kathrin blushed. “I can’t. I promised Aaron I would spend the weekend with him.”

Carol threw up her arms. “I can’t win. Seventeen years of friendship, and I get shafted for a guy you don’t even think you love.”

Kathrin got up and threw her arms around Carol. “Thanks for being my friend even if I am a pain in the ass.”

“Sit back down and don’t make a scene. All I’m saying is that you better love this guy, because if you don’t, I’m not sticking around to be ignored when the real thing happens!”

Kathrin plopped down in her seat passionately. “Don’t worry, if he’s not the one, then I give up.”

Carol laughed and grabbed for the smoke pack. She stared at the cigarette for a moment before she lit it. “Harold hates it when I go out with you. He says I smell like a burning brewery when I get home. Are you ever going to quit?”

Kathrin groaned. “First Aaron, now you.”

“Oh Aaron first, huh? Even though I’ve been telling you to quit for years.”

Kathrin bared her teeth. “You are the pushy one today, aren’t you?”

“Hmm. So, you been to any good movies lately?” Carol asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“I’m healed.” Kathrin laughed triumphantly.

“Let me guess: Aaron cured you.”

“Yep.”

“Well that seems to follow. How?”

“He went with me.”

Carol nearly fell out of her chair. “While you were...” her words trailed off and she supplied some vague hand gestures to express her thoughts.
"Well, he wasn’t near me, but I couldn’t stop thinking about him."

"You are so twisted. Where’s Aaron now?"

"In New York for a couple of days."

"You know he is totally sexy. Think of how gorgeous your kids will be."

Kathrin coughed. "Will be?"

"Would be," Carol rephrased.

"That’s better. Now, let’s change the topic. How’s Harold?"

Carol moaned. "He’s started Schwinning at the Jewish Community Center. You know how stupid he looks on those stationary bikes? His sister’s bright idea."

Kathrin laughed, and allowed herself to be distracted from her thoughts of Aaron.

She finished up at work late on Wednesday and drove her car to Aaron’s place. It seemed even quieter than usual. When she got up to his apartment all the lights were out, and she quickly turned on every one. The rooms seemed so much lonelier without him there. She paced in the living room, until she could stand the silence no more, and selected an old Madonna CD. Then she grabbed an opened bottle of wine from the fridge, and carried it to the living room table. By eight o’clock she had finished her first run-through for the presentation, and decided to take a bath. As she picked up her glass of wine the phone rang. Kathrin stood frozen for a moment, and wondered what she should do. Aaron hadn’t told her not to answer the phone, but she wasn’t sure if he would want her to. Then again, maybe it was Aaron calling. He hadn’t called yet.

She waited for the fourth ring and then lunged for the phone. “Hello?”

“Hon.” A male voice crackled over the line.

“Aaron?” Kathrin asked tentatively.

There was a brief pause, then “Kathrin, I can’t hear very well. Are you there?”

“Yes, I’m…”

“I can’t hear you. I need a favour. I need you to go into my computer. I forgot one of the documents. It’s under the contracts folder. Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” she yelled into the phone.

Suddenly, the line went clear. “Good. Get the TTR contract. Do you have a pen? I’m going to give you an e-mail address. O.K.?"

“Hold on,” Kathrin put the phone down and retrieved a pen from the table, “O.K.”
He gave her the address and then had her repeat it back to him. "Can you send it through your laptop?"

"Yeah, but I’ll need to use your phone line."

"No problem. I need it tonight."

"Got it."

"O.K. I can’t talk, it’s really busy here. But everything is going great. I think they’ll sign. I’ll see you tomorrow night."

"Aaron?"

"Yes?"

"Do I need a password?"


"O.K."

"O.K. Gotta go."

"Bye."

"Bye."

She hung up the phone slowly, letting the cord gently unravel over her fingers. Something about the phone call left her feeling empty - not wholly needed. Yes, he needed her to get something for him, but the duration of the phone call made her uneasy. Like talking to her mother - completely to the point but void of meaning. Only a direct purpose and then goodbye. Then again, he was probably out with the clients, so he couldn’t disappear for a long time. Still, a little more emotion would have been nice. She took the paper with the address on it, and was about to go into the bedroom when the phone rang again.

She went back to the phone, and picked it up. "Hi, what else do you need?"

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line. "Hello?" a female voice asked.

Kathrin cleared her throat. "Hello?"

"I’m sorry. I think I have the wrong number. I’m looking for Aaron."

"This is his place."

"Is he there?"

"No, he’s in New York. Can I take a message for him?"

"Yeah, this is his sister Elaine. Who’s this?"

Kathrin smiled. "It’s Kathrin."

"Kathrin? Are you like a friend from work or something?"
The words took Kathrin by surprise. Surely, Elaine would remember what Aaron had told her. Still, she didn’t want to seem too sure of herself. “I’m taking care of the apartment while he’s away.”

“Oh. How long is he gone for?”

“Just ‘til tomorrow.”

“Oh, O.K. Well, just tell him that I called to see if we were still on for Saturday. He hasn’t returned my phone calls.”

“Saturday. All right, I’ll let him know.”

“Thanks. What’s your name again?”

“Kathrin.”

“Thanks Kathrin.”

“Bye.”

She hung up the phone before Elaine had a chance to respond. *What the hell?* Kathrin sat down on the living room couch and took a long sip of wine. Aaron had told her that Elaine knew about her, yet Elaine didn’t show any remembrance of having heard. She clearly didn’t even know who Kathrin was. And Aaron had also told Kathrin that he rarely talked to his sister. Kathrin couldn’t make heads or tails of the conversation, but felt completely bewildered. *Why would he lie to me?* Kathrin felt slightly sick to her stomach. *C’mon, there’s got to be a reason.*

Kathrin wanted to call Aaron and demand to know what was going on, but he hadn’t even left her a forwarding number. And it wasn’t something she could send in an e-mail. The client would laugh him right out of the board room. She had no choice. She would have to wait until he came back, and then ask him. She resolved not to think about it. She had her own affairs to deal with, and she was sure Aaron could explain everything with a rational reason. Still, the thoughts nagged at her head the whole time she was in the bath. She chided herself for being foolish. It was a mix-up. Or maybe Aaron was trying to reconcile with his sister. Kathrin smiled. *That’s it. He’s trying to make up with her, so that she’ll be back in his life again.* It made perfect sense. They had talked about wanting people back in their lives that Sunday. And maybe Aaron hadn’t told Elaine about her so his sister wouldn’t think that there was an ulterior motive for their reunion.

Kathrin felt much better by the time she got out of the bathtub. It was all so simple. Aaron didn’t want Kathrin to feel that he was keeping her away from his sister, so he had lied to her. She could forgive a lie like that, if it meant that Aaron was trying to re-build a burnt bridge.
She flicked on his computer and let it warm up while she got into her bed-clothes. She still had a bit of work to do, but would be able to do it in his bed, after she sent the file.

Once the computer started, Kathrin quickly typed the password into the keyboard. The desktop icons appeared, and she scanned the desktop. There was no shortcut to the folder, so she opened the explorer panel, and searched the folders. The contract folder was right near the top, and she opened it. Then she found TTR near the bottom and opened the file. She briefly scanned the document, and checked to make sure there weren’t any others like it. Then she searched the table for a disk to save the file on, but couldn’t find one anywhere. The only things around were the filing cabinet, which was locked, and two drawers in the desk. She opened the first drawer and found some disks, but all of them had writing on them. The second drawer yielded nothing, so she shut it with a small bang, and looked back into the first drawer. She picked up the top disk, and looked at the label. In Aaron’s neat printing were the words “Photographs - L. S.”

Kathrin shoved the disk into the hard drive. She’d just save the document on disk and erase it after she was done. It took thirty seconds to save the contract on the disk, and then she took the disk to the living room and fed it into her laptop. Carefully she plugged the laptop into the phone line, and dialed in remotely to the company server. When the program had accepted her password she prepared the e-mail, and attached the document, making sure that her e-mail address was highlighted in case there were any problems. The document went through fine, but she saved the contract in her own files just in case she got a call at work during the day. Then she carefully erased the document from the disk. As she was looking through the file names, she stumbled over a list of .tif files. Several of them included Aaron’s name. She opened her presentation program and then clicked to view the first image labeled “Aaron - August 10”. Immediately a black and white photograph flashed onto the screen with Aaron sitting on a beach, smiling into the camera. It was a great picture, though his eyes were pinched tightly closed against the sun’s brightness.

Kathrin opened the next image to find Aaron smiling with a large lab puppy in front of a Christmas tree. She couldn’t make out where he was, but it seemed to be in someone’s house. The next one was another of Aaron, walking down the beach in a warm woolen sweater. Behind him, leaves swirled across the stretch of beach, and he was smiling as the wind ruffled his hair. Kathrin nodded. The pictures were good. Not just candid shots, but very well planned and laid out. It wasn’t until she got to the last one, that she realized what had been eluding her in the others. In the corner of the scanned picture were two tiny initials: L.S. She had seen the initials before, and glanced suddenly around the room. There, in the photograph above the mantle was the same
insignia. Kathrin shook her head. Whoever Aaron’s friend was, he or she was certainly a great photographer.

She closed the files, except for the one of Aaron walking down the beach. It was the one she liked best. She looked around the room, and then burst out laughing. She had been looking for someone watching her. Quickly she saved the file on her laptop, and then removed the disk. She carried it back to Aaron’s drawer and slipped it in on top of the other disks. Then she shut off the computer. Aaron wouldn’t mind that she’d saved the picture. He’d probably be flattered. But more, Kathrin wanted to find out who the photographer was. If she needed some shots of models scanned into her design simulation, she knew where she would turn.

She crawled into bed, taking her laptop with her, and reviewed the material again. By one o’clock she was exhausted, and decided to call it quits for the night. She had everything down cold, all she had to do was attend.

The presentation went as smoothly as Kathrin had planned. She and Jamie flew through the old segments, and showed the clients where they had edited old parts, and introduced new ones. The first two hours passed quickly. Finally Kathrin ran the last section. The designers responded positively. In fact, most of the designers had ideas of their own about how to make the last portion of the graphics shine. “You know,” one of the designers confided after the presentation, “I’ve been working on something like that for the new line. Do you think we could incorporate it?”

Kathrin smiled magnanimously. “I think that would be a great idea.”

She gave them two weeks to come up with the final designs for the last segment, and then she’d put them all together when she returned from holidays. When Richardson left, she winked slyly with the eye turned away from the designers. He smiled, and poked a thumbs up between the flaps in his suit jacket. Raise, she thought silently to herself, and hoped Richardson picked up on her telepathy.

The rest of the group broke up at noon, and Kathrin kindly invited Mama Fashion to join her for lunch. She had decided during the meeting that she couldn’t wait until she got back from holidays. Mama smiled, and barely flinched when Kathrin grabbed the laptop from the desk. All morning long she’d had a sneaking suspicion that Kathrin was up to something.

They strolled down the busy summer streets and ended up at the Movenpick. Kathrin had already called to book a table, and a slim-waisted waiter ushered them to their seats. They chattered about the documentary and Kathrin took a few compliments with ease. It wasn’t until they had
finished lunch and were drinking their coffees that she finally broached the subject. Mama watched the simulation patiently, and listened until Kathrin was finished speaking, before she responded.

"It's a good idea. Might revolutionize the whole fashion industry. I don't know much about this computer stuff, but my guess is, it would turn high quality merchandise into a catalogue."

Kathrin tried to determine what exactly she was saying. "Is that good or bad?"

"It's good. A few high-brow clients would turn their noses up, but overall it would provide access for people who wouldn't attend the shows. You know, if you can put it on that superhighway thing."

Kathrin laughed. "All you would need is a web-site. But what about stealing designs? Would it happen more?"

Mama laughed heartily. "People have been stealing designs for centuries. It doesn't matter. It still gets the name of the line out. Faux Chanel, faux Armani. The name is stressed, not the fraud. The more people who rip off designer labels, the more the designer is pleased. Normal people can't afford to dress like movie stars. But they establish the trends. Then the rich, who can afford to buy the designs, reinforce the trends, and reflect well on the designers. It's a vicious circle."

Kathrin smiled. "What about you? Would you be interested?"

The older woman leaned back in her chair, as a deep, dimpled smile appeared around her lips. "Me? No. I'm too old to change my ways. My clients average around fifty years old. They wouldn't know a computer if it slapped them in the face. Most of them don't even have bank cards. They like credit and cash," she paused, and watched the frown spread across Kathrin's face, "but...I happen to know an innovative new Japanese designer who would eat it up. Listen, Kathrin. I like you. You're talented, and ingenious, and fresh. And you have an eye for what works. I can't guarantee anything, but I'll talk to him. If he's interested, he'll let you know. If not, I tried."

Kathrin fought the urge to jump up and smother Mama Fashion with kisses. Instead, she smiled broadly. "I would appreciate that. Is he in Japan?"

"A Japanese designer in Japan?" she shook her head, "New York."
Kathrin snapped her laptop shut. The business section of the luncheon was closed. She flagged the waiter down to get the bill, and pulled her credit card from her wallet. Mama Fashion stopped her, and produced a large roll of bills. “I insist.”

Kathrin refused her offer, but Mama was persistent. “After all you’ve done for me, it would be my pleasure.”

Kathrin smiled. “I haven’t done anything. And lunch is a bribe. I still have a favour to ask from you.”

“What?”

“My sister loves your work. She would be so honoured…”

Mama Fashion waved her plump arm across the table. “What size is she?”

Kathrin fumbled. “Oh no, she doesn’t want anything. She just wants to meet you.”

“To meet me? Well, that hasn’t happened in a long time. Tell you what? You send me her measurements, I’ll send something, and then we’ll all arrange a time for lunch.”

Kathrin beamed. “You are the most amazing woman.”

“I used to be a bitch. I must be mellowing in my old age. But you, you remind me of myself when I was younger.”

“When you were a bitch?”

“No. Before I became a bitch. When I had dreams and hopes, and knew how to get them. I only became a bitch after I could afford to. My advice: don’t get too successful.”

They stood up. “Thank you,” Kathrin said simply.

Mama Fashion kissed the tip her finger and then pressed it against Kathrin’s forehead.

“Take care.”

They walked out to the street and Kathrin helped her into a cab. Then she strolled down to Wellington, and stepped into the sunlight. And she breathed in the sweet air of summer.

She picked Aaron up from the airport and drove straight to a small Italian restaurant. Over dinner with Aaron, she couldn’t contain herself. “It was so great. The way she makes you feel is overwhelming. And they all loved it. They want to do the whole ending like I planned. Every one of them. And Vic, the older Italian designer, well he started talking silver and poly-synthetics. I nearly died.”

Aaron laughed. “I can’t get over how into this you are. So, what about the simulator?”
“She’s not interested, but she’s getting some Japanese designer to consider it. I didn’t catch his name, but if he likes it, I could get all the new upcoming designers into it. I know it. You know when it just feels right?”

“Yes, I know exactly how that feels,” he said pointedly.

Kathrin stopped babbling. “Oh, I feel like a shit. Here I am yapping my head off and I haven’t even asked you about your trip. How was it? Did they sign?”

He grinned. “They signed.”

“Oh Aaron, that’s so great. You know what? We need champagne. To celebrate this day.”

She ordered a bottle from the flushed young waitress, who looked at them, and then scanned Kathrin’s finger for an engagement ring. “Sure, I’ll be right back.”

Kathrin laughed. “Well, I’m glad you’re back.”

“I’m glad too. How was the week? My place didn’t burn down, did it?”

“No. I was very good. You got the file all right?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

He looked at her. “So, how did it feel, staying at my place without me?”


“What?”

She caught his eye and looked away. “You got a phone call.”

Aaron flinched visibly. “From who?”

She leaned in towards him and dropped her voice. “I don’t want to accuse you of anything.”

“Who called?” he said quietly, with force.

“Elaine.”

He swallowed. “What did she say?”

“Aaron, she didn’t know who I was. You told me you told her about me.”

“What else did she say?”

“She said you haven’t returned any of her calls.”

“What did you say?”

“I didn’t know what to say. You told me that you hardly speak to her. She thought I was someone from work. Didn’t you tell her about us?”
He rubbed his fingers against his temple, as if soothing the muscles and muttered “what a bitch” under his breath. Slowly, he glanced at Kathrin, and saw how upset she was, even though she was trying desperately to hide it. “I can’t believe this! Of course I told her Kathrin. I can’t believe she would actually do this.”

“Do what?” Kathrin demanded.

“It’s her way of playing a game with you. She thinks that it’s fun to scare people in my life away.”

“Why? Why would she do that?”

“I don’t know - as a test? To see how you’ll react? To upset me? Don’t you understand?” His voice was growing louder by the minute, and Kathrin tensed in her chair.

She looked around the room as he continued. “This is the reason why I didn’t want you to meet them. They push and they push, and they play these stupid games, until everyone I’ve ever cared about leaves.”

Kathrin watched him as his face flushed crimson, and she swore she saw tears in his eyes. Oh God, don’t cry. Please don’t cry. She took a deep breath, as the sudden realization hit her.

“Is that what happened with-”

“Lily. Yes, that’s what happened with Lily.”

Aaron was about to continue speaking, when the waitress returned with a bottle of champagne in a wine trolley. Kathrin eyed the champagne warily. She had no desire to celebrate any more. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know. It just upset me when she acted like that. But you should have told me. Prepared me or something.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

She reached across the table and held his hand. She didn’t know what to say to make everything better. She thought fiercely, and then decided what they had to do. “I want to meet them.”

“What? After what I just told you.”

Kathrin squeezed his hand. “Especially after that. Aaron, you told me that you loved me the other day, and I’ve been wondering since then if you really meant it. If you want us to have a commitment, then you have to accept me for good or bad. And I have to do the same. I can’t do that until I know what I’m up against.”

“Even if you hate them?”

“Yes. Even if I hate them.”
He sighed deeply and wiped his eyes with his napkin. There seemed to be something in them. "All right. Saturday night. But I want to make one thing clear to you. I am not my parents."

Kathrin got up and walked around the table to him. She knelt down beside his face, and took it in her hands. "And I am not just someone."

She kissed him lightly on the lips, and then flashed her eyelash against his cheekbone, confirming the promise. She would take them by storm, if she had to.
He sat at his chair in the office, twirling his pen in his hand, keeping the phone within arm's reach. He felt that at any moment he might pick it up and make a phone call, but the urge hadn't hit him yet. So, he waited, and looked over the paperwork from the TTR meeting, reading the fine print at a turtle's pace. Every so often someone would poke their head in and congratulate him on the New York success. It was as if they were surprised he'd made such a valiant effort.

He too was mildly surprised. Up until the recent months his job had been that - a job. He neither loathed it nor liked it. He viewed it as punching a time clock, and getting paid well. But he had never had the drive that the other guys had had. Then, without warning he'd suddenly become the guy who cracked jokes at the office, and took clients out for lunch, and sold the pitch. He'd become the senior executive the bosses had initially hired him to be. But he still didn't love it. He hadn't ever had the drive like his father had wished him to have.

When he was younger his father would tell him what a great lawyer he would make, and then the two of them would go into business together and become partners. But Aaron and the lawyer talk didn't jive. He liked numbers. How crisp and clean they looked on lined paper, and in boxes, and pie-charts, and on tax returns. He knew very early on that he would have to do something that involved numbers. Numbers gave answers. They were like a jigsaw puzzle. As long as you kept trying and manipulating the pieces, they would eventually fall into place. He could solve anything if he just picked at it long enough. And in some ways he felt his life was like that. Not leaps and bounds, but careful plotting to get a neat final picture.

And yet, Kathrin wasn't like that at all. She was feral, and alive, and worked with whim and fancy. She was spontaneous, and mysterious, and did things to get a reaction. He wanted her, but didn't know exactly why he wanted her. She didn't fit into his blueprints, and yet he didn't think he could survive without her. He knew that he was in love with her by carefully probing each of his feelings, and determining how happy he was. But he still couldn't pinpoint exactly why. Not why he loved her, but why he had fallen for her in the first place. And why he was going to pull her into his life.

He looked at the phone again, and suddenly dreaded the thought of picking it up. He felt as if his happiness was secure only as long as he didn't call, didn't invite his parents to wreak havoc on his life again. He knew that all they had were good intentions for him, but every time he let them in, they started pulling him again. First it had been in regards to him quitting the CA firm, then about him dealing with his loss, and then about how he was slipping away from them. But he was sure, that it had started long before all of that. From when his father would dress him up in a
coat and tie, and take him to the office on Saturdays. And when his mother would cry when his
dad couldn’t go away on vacation with them because a big case had come up. And then when his
father had been hired as a CEO, and not a lawyer, but still never came home until eight at night.
There were so many reasons why he’d shut the door on his parents. And so many reasons why he
didn’t want to open it again, and drag Kathrin into the lions’ den. On their territory, they were
predators, and stalked and hurt anything that got in their way. They had almost devoured him, and
most certainly maimed Elaine.

And then he felt silly for overdramatizing it all. His parents would be fine with Kathrin.
They wouldn’t eat her up and gobble her whole. He was over-indulging himself with more
fantasy than reality. Kathrin and his mother would probably talk about fashion, and he and his
dad would go down and shoot a few games of pool, like they’d done at so many family
gatherings, and Christmases. And Elaine - he almost laughed out loud. Who was he kidding?
Elaine wouldn’t come. He took a deep breath and almost reached over to the phone. Might as
well get it over and done with. He couldn’t do it. Couldn’t make the leap to the phone.

In the end he didn’t have to. Sometime after two, the phone in his office rang, and he
picked it up. “Aaron Taun,” he stated with authority.

“Aaron? It’s your mother. I know you don’t like it when I call you at work, but your
father just told me. Congratulations.”

Aaron began doodling on a piece of scrap paper. “Thanks mom. How did Dad find out?”

“Well. Edward called him this morning to tell him. We’re both very pleased for you.”

He let her lead the small chat, and was quickly surprised at how many words she could fit
into a sentence. Even without taking a breath. Finally, she ran out of things to say, and paused.
“You know, your father and I are sorry we missed you on Father’s Day.”

Aaron blushed crimson. He had called his father on the Monday after the holiday,
because he had forgotten. Of course. Kathrin should have reminded him, but to her it was just
another Sunday, even though Ingrid celebrated. “Yeah, me too.”

“Well, I know how busy you are. Anyway, we had a wonderful dinner at the golf club,
and we ran into some old friends. It was such a pleasant time. Listen to me rattle on. I haven’t
talked to you in so long. What’s new?”

He gave her a brief summary of his life, excluding Kathrin. Mostly he talked about
business, in terms she couldn’t understand. That way she wouldn’t ask questions. She listened
politely until he was finished, and then butted in. “That sounds really nice Aaron. You know, we should get together, and you can tell us all about it.”

“Actually, I was going to call you about that. I was wondering if you were free tomorrow night for dinner?”

His mother paused. “Really? That would be wonderful. Why don’t you come to the house?”

“Sure. But I’ll be bringing a guest.”

She paused again, but for longer than the first time. She tried to figure out what exactly he meant, and he could almost see the smile that suddenly thickened her voice. “Oh Aaron. You’ve met someone! I’m so pleased. Tell me all about her.”

“Her name’s Kathrin Connelly.”

“Is that Irish?”

“Yes.”

“And what else dear?”

And then he let her pull his teeth out. He told her as little as possible, because whatever he said would be all around the gossip table the next morning at the club’s brunch. Finally his mother was sated. She told him at least five times how happy they were and how much they were looking forward to the visit before he hung up. Aaron grimaced as he placed the phone back into the cradle. He hated it when his mother used “we” in reference to herself and his father. It made him feel like they were one person, and it creeped him out. He picked up his pen, and began twirling it again, as the knots in his stomach tightened. You’re in over your head boy.

He had told Kathrin to be ready by seven, but arrived on her doorstep half an hour early. She came to the door in the bathrobe. “I’m not late, am I?”

Aaron shook his head and stepped inside the doorway. “I was ready, and my apartment seemed kind of empty, so I thought I’d come by early.”

“Oh good. Well, come on up.”

She led him up the stairs to her apartment, and sat him down with the T.V. remote and a diet Coke, while she went into her bedroom to get changed. Aaron flipped through channels, only to find that there was nothing on, so he started wandering through the living room and then meandered into the kitchen. He’d never really had the opportunity to browse through Kathrin’s stuff unattended. All over the kitchen table were scraps of paper and sketches done by Kathrin’s
own hand. There was no rhyme or reason to the mess, and Aaron rolled his eyes with exasperation. I don’t know how she can live like this. He thought briefly about the two of them living together, and nearly died. She would have to shape up before he let her stay for longer than a week. And the week she had stayed had nearly sent him into a fit. Not that Kathrin was overly messy, but her attitude was ‘make a mess now, clean it up when you get the chance’. Even the way she hung her bed-clothes on the back of the bathroom door was haphazard. He hadn’t said anything to her, but every day he’d carefully re-arranged her boxers so that they hung neatly on the hook.

He heard Kathrin humming in her bedroom and moved toward the other door that led out into the back hallway. He paused to organize the pictures on the fridge, and straightened the towel looped through the door handle. He was trying his hardest not to go into Kathrin’s room, but finally gave up and entered into the hallway.

When he got into Kathrin’s room, she was dressed in a short skirt, and a tight sweater. He swallowed his words, but the look on his face was easily recognized by Kathrin.

“What?” she prodded.

“You’re not going to wear that, are you?”

“Too revealing?” she asked.

He smiled tightly, and moved towards her closet. After scanning her clothing he removed a large corduroy jumper and pulled it out. “What about something more like this?”

Kathrin laughed. “That was Andria’s maternity dress. I was planning on using the material as scraps.”

Aaron looked up and down her body. “It’s not that you don’t look great...” he began.

“But your parents will have heart attacks.” Kathrin finished his sentence for him.

“Well...yeah.”

Kathrin stepped over to Aaron. “What do you want me to do? Wear a habit?”

“No, of course not. I just think that maybe this once, you should dress a little more conservatively.”

Kathrin groaned. “Aaron, you’re asking me to disguise myself.”

“Only this time. I swear.”

She sighed, and pulled the sweater off her body. Then she scanned the closet, and pulled out a pair of dress pants, and a stiff white cotton blouse. She tugged off her skirt and quickly
changed her clothing. When she was done, and had tightened a slim silver belt around her waist she turned back to Aaron. "Better?" she asked.

"Much."

She looked in the mirror. If anyone she knew saw her, she'd never live it down. She felt like a primary school teacher. Well, if I'm going to act for the evening, I might as well do it right. She reached into the desk drawer and pulled out a pair of glasses from the recesses of the drawer, filled with plain glass. They were left over from a production she'd been in when she was at school. Quickly she tugged her hair into a bun, and then faced Aaron, putting the glasses on.

"Will this do?"

He shook his head at her dismissively. "That's not funny Kathrin."

"Well," she laughed, "that's what I feel like. A Hallowe'en costume."

"Take off the glasses. You look great."

Kathrin pushed him lightly against the wall. "So, now do you want to tell me why you really came over early?"

Aaron felt his ears burning. "What?"

"You wanted to make sure I was properly attired, didn't you?"

"Don't make it sound like a bad thing."

"This time only," she warned, "But don't ask me to ever again. Understood?"

He nodded glumly.

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She held the expensive bottle of wine in a pretty bag on her lap for the ride over to the Tauns' house. Aaron hadn't told her exactly where his parents lived, but when they turned north on University and headed up Avenue road past Bloor, she wasn't surprised. In her head she kept going over what information Aaron had given her about his family. His father acted mostly as an advisor to a large corporation, but he had been one of the top corporate lawyers in Toronto for over twenty five years. His mother hadn't worked for almost as long, but was an active member of the high-brow social scene - which meant she attended a lot of parties, opening nights, and events, so far as Kathrin could make out. Elaine was a sous-chef at one of the trendy downtown restaurants. Kathrin grimaced. As far as she could tell Aaron's family led a charmed life.

He turned off Avenue, and steered the car down a series of small avenues. Finally he turned onto a winding road, where hundred year old maple trees obscured the streetlights. Kathrin craned her neck to get a look out the window, and every house they passed was more beautiful than
the one before it. He finally pulled the car into a short driveway, and Kathrin gasped in
astonishment. Before her, a large Tudor loomed against the trees, and ivy snaked its way up the
front of the house. The front lawn was manicured to perfection, and a trail of rosebushes followed
the curve of stepping stones up to the large wooden door. Kathrin cast a suspicious eye at Aaron,
who smiled meekly. "What?"

"You didn’t tell me you were loaded."
Aaron shook his head. "I’m not."
"Your family then."
"I’ll have my father go over his investment portfolio with you."
Kathrin scoffed at him. "Well Mr. Taun, are you ready to face your family?"
He gave her a sour smile, and opened his door. Inwardly Kathrin thought how glad she
was that she bought an expensive bottle of wine, though it was probably nothing compared to what
the Tauns were used to. She was surprised not to see any cars parked in the driveway. "What
about Elaine?" she asked as she slipped form the car.

Aaron waited until she cleared the car and got to his side. "I don’t know if she’s coming
yet. But don’t say anything. It’ll just upset my mother."
"O.K." she said slipping her hand into his.

They walked a few paces up the stones, and when they climbed up the porch stairs, Aaron
removed his hand, and turned to kiss her. "Don’t worry, you’ll be fine."

She didn’t notice how badly his hand was shaking as he brought the door knocker down
against the wood. There was no sound from within for a few moments, and then they could hear
the tap of heels across the floor. A small woman with a sleek bob answered the door, and it took
Kathrin a second to figure out that it was Aaron’s mom. She was very polished, and her hand
gracefully showed off an elegant ring with a diamond almost the size of a dime in it. Kathrin
steered herself for the greeting, but all Mrs. Taun could see was Aaron. She pulled her son into her
arms, and squealed with pleasure. "Oh, you look so fabulous, Aaron. Let me see you."

Aaron stepped back and let his mother appraise him. She held his hands tightly, and
passed her eyes up and down his body. Then she pulled him into her embrace again, and hugged
him fiercely. "You’re father will be so happy to see you," she exclaimed, as she turned her head
into the doorway, "James, hurry up, Aaron is here."

Kathrin stood and watched the interplay, feeling slightly uncomfortable, but more in awe
of how happy Mrs. Taun was. It was like she hadn’t seen her son in years. Aaron suddenly
cleared his throat, and looked at his mother. Kathrin could hear footsteps across the floor, and
tried to catch a glimpse of the person coming down the foyer.

"Mom, I want to introduce you..."

Mr. Taun's voice cut through Aaron's introduction. "Son. Glad you could make it," he
said, extending his arm.

Aaron grabbed his father's hand and shook it. Kathrin took the moment before Mr. Taun
saw her to absorb his face. He looked very much like Aaron, only not quite as tall, nor as broad,
but had the exact same bright green eyes.

"Dad, good to see you. I want to introduce you to Kathrin Connelly," he said stepping
back.

Kathrin moved forward and extended her arm to Mrs. Taun. "Nice to meet you," she said,
and slowly lifted her eyes to look at Mrs. Taun.

Mrs. Taun's eyes grew wider, and she paled before Kathrin's look. All the pep and
warmth in her smile had vanished. Kathrin's own smile died on her face in response. But then it
was over, and Mrs. Taun grinned broadly. "Hi, Kathrin. It's very nice to meet you. Aaron's told
us so much about you. I feel like I already know so much."

Kathrin smiled. Maybe she had just imagined it. She turned to Mr. Taun and shook his
hand. She almost thought she felt a shiver run though him when he touched her, but his eyes gave
away nothing. He smiled, and ushered them inside. Aaron moved into the foyer first, feeling
slightly at odds. Something had happened there, in that first moment, but he had no idea what. He
took the bottle of wine from Kathrin's hands, and presented it to his dad. "Kathrin brought this for
you."

"Thank you," his mother said curtly, barely making eye contact with Kathrin.

Aaron took Kathrin's hand and led her into the foyer. "How about a tour, first?"

"Sure."

"Do you want something to drink?" Mr. Taun asked.

"A glass of wine for me. Kathrin?"

"Red, please," she said looking at Mr. Taun.

He held her eyes intently for a moment, then nodded. "Of course. I'll be in the kitchen."

Kathrin followed Aaron through the house, and smiled when he took her through the
upstairs rooms. After a brief glimpse of the master bedroom and the guest room, he marched her
down the hall to his old room. It was decorated with a Tears for Fears poster, and Kathrin held
back a giggle. On the wall, was a bookcase filled with trophies. Kathrin went over to the bookcase and read the plaques on the trophies. She frowned. "I didn't know you played tennis."

"I don't really. Not anymore. Do you play?"

Kathrin let out a laugh. "Get serious. Do I look like a tennis player to you? I've got limp wrists."

He crossed to her and put his arms around her waist. "Are you O.K.?"

She didn't want to tell Aaron about his mother's first reaction to her, because she was no longer sure what had transpired. "It'll get better."

"Good. I'm glad."

They continued the tour, and ended up in a huge living room off the front foyer. Kathrin looked around and felt suddenly as if she had been there before. She wandered over to the huge fireplace, and quickly scanned the mantle. There were a few soap stone carvings displayed on it, and she touched the cool stone with her fingers. When she turned back to Aaron, her eyes lit on a small table that sported two large silver picture frames, and several smaller ones. She crossed to the frames, and bent down to study the two largest. One was a graduation picture of Aaron. The other looked a little more recent, but it was clearly not a professional portrait. In the picture, Aaron's parents were standing in front of the Christmas tree while he held a cute lab puppy. Immediately Kathrin realized why the room looked so familiar to her. It was like the picture she had seen from Aaron's floppy disk.

"What a cute puppy," she commented, and Aaron smiled across the room.

"Daisy."

"Is she here?"

"No." Aaron shook his head, and Kathrin noted a sudden sadness crept into his voice.

"What happened to her?"

He moved closer to the photograph. "My dad was bitterly allergic to her. We had to give her away."

"Oh, that's so sad. I love dogs."

"Me too. I never had one though. My mom was always afraid it would ruin the furniture."

Kathrin laughed. "Our first dog bit a hole through one of the laundry room doors. After she died, we were only allowed cats."
Aaron let out a small laugh, as Mr. Taun came into the living room with two glasses of wine. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

“I was just telling Aaron about my first dog.”

“Ah,” Mr. Taun said, turning his attention to the picture frame, “Daisy. What a royal pain in the neck.”

Aaron laughed, trying to conceal his nervousness. The last thing he wanted to do was get his dad started so early. Kathrin smiled. “Yeah, sometimes I guess they are, but they’re so cute.”

Mr. Taun tossed her a lukewarm smile. “I could tell you stories about that dog keeping me up nights, and you wouldn’t think she was so cute.”

“Dad,” Aaron commented, “Kathrin, doesn’t need to hear your stories about Daisy, right now.”

He glanced at Aaron, and then laughed. “You’re probably right. Mrs. Taun wanted me to tell you that dinner’s ready. Should we go into the dining room?”

Kathrin was about to remind him that Elaine hadn’t arrived, but remembered what Aaron had said. Instead, she followed the two men into the dining room, which was gorgeously contained by a row of ficus trees that line the perimeter of the hardwood floor. Around the room nearly twenty candles spread their light over the table. She was awed at the effort put out by the Tauns, but still managed to notice that there were only four places set for dinner. Apparently Elaine wasn’t joining them. Aaron helped her into her seat, and the three of them sat down. “Should I see if your mother needs help?” Kathrin murmured quietly to Aaron.

“Mrs. Taun will be fine,” Mr. Taun answered, having overheard the question.

Kathrin smiled feebly. In a few moments, Mrs. Taun came out of the kitchen, carrying two plates which she put in front of Mr. Taun and then Aaron. She went back into the kitchen and returned a moment later with two other plates, one of which she placed before Kathrin. Kathrin smiled and thanked her, then looked quickly at the plate. There was barely enough on her plate to feed a bird. She took a quick peek at Aaron’s plate out of the corner of her eye, and noticed that his was amply loaded with a large chicken breast and two roasted potatoes as well as a large helping of vegetables. Mr. Taun’s was the same way. Only Mrs. Taun’s plate looked similar to hers.

Aaron bowed his head as his mother said grace, and looked at Kathrin’s plate out of the corner of his eye. He knew that Kathrin was having a silent conniption fit about it. He should have warned her about his mother, and how she believed that all women were only supposed to eat
enough to barely keep them alive. He promised himself to take Kathrin out after they left his parents’ place. Once the grace was said, Aaron and Mr. Taun commenced eating without delay.

Kathrin did everything she could not to wolf down the meager amount of food on her plate. She looked around at the other diners, but all of them seemed only aware of the plates in front of them. “This is delicious,” she commented, to open up a path to conversation. Aaron mumbled something through a full mouth, and Mrs. Taun smiled. Only Mr. Taun didn’t look up. Kathrin realized that her conversation wasn’t welcome. In fact the only thing he said the entire meal was, “Mrs. Taun, more potatoes please.” And then his wife scampered quickly into the kitchen with his plate.

Dinner took only twenty minutes, and Kathrin was still famished when Mrs. Taun suggested they have coffee in the living room. Kathrin got up to carry some dishes into the kitchen, but Mrs. Taun pulled them from her arms. “I wouldn’t dream of letting a guest help. Now go into the living room, and I’ll be out in a few minutes. Then we can talk.”

Kathrin sat down in a small armchair near the fireplace, and felt completely idiotic. No matter what she tried doing, nothing seemed to satisfy Aaron’s parents. But she promised herself that she wasn’t leaving until she knew that they liked her. Meanwhile, Aaron and his father had started talking business, and though Aaron kept looking over to her with an apologetic look on his face, Mr. Taun didn’t even seem to notice that she was there. She sighed with relief when Mrs. Taun brought the coffee service out on a large steel trolley, and carefully served her husband a coffee with one teaspoon of sugar. Then she passed Aaron a black coffee, and finally turned to Kathrin. “What do you take dear?”

Kathrin smiled. “Just cream please.”

“Is milk all right?”

“Oh that’s fine.”

“We don’t keep cream in the house,” Mrs. Taun explained, and Kathrin felt that it was somehow a direct insult.

She took the teacup and saucer and balanced them on her lap. Mrs. Taun poured herself a black cup of coffee, and started to move over to the armchair opposite Kathrin. Before she had taken two steps, Mr. Taun stopped her. “Will you please put a little more sugar in my coffee?”

“Dear, I put the same amount in as I always put in,” she replied with a hesitant smile.

“And I’ve always told you it’s not enough.”
Kathrin’s eyes shot open wider. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She kept her face tilted towards the ground and refused to look at Aaron. She would just pretend that she was deaf.

Once Mrs. Taun added more sugar to her husband’s coffee, she sat down in the armchair near Kathrin. Kathrin gave her a warm smile, and Mrs. Taun responded in kind, but Kathrin sensed that it wasn’t heartfelt. “So Kathrin, Aaron tells me that you’re a designer.”

“Well, a graphic designer. I do my work on computers. Working with animation and photographs. Things like that.”

Mrs. Taun looked at her. “You’re a photographer?”

“No. I change photographs so that they look real on a computer screen.”

“Oh.” Mrs. Taun smiled, and tried to look like she understood what Kathrin was saying. Kathrin didn’t flinch. No one over forty really understood what she was talking about.

Even her mother had no real idea as to what her daughter did.

“Well,” Mrs. Taun beamed at her, “I’d like to see your work sometime. It sounds very interesting.”

Mr. Taun laughed at the other end of the room. “You don’t even know what she does.”

“Well, it still sounds interesting.” Mrs. Taun said politely.

“Tell me…” Mr. Taun’s words were cut off by a series of deep coughs, “sorry, that went down the wrong way. Tell me Kathrin, would it be better to invest in a computer company or in natural resources?”

Kathrin frowned. “I really wouldn’t know.”

“No. Of course you wouldn’t. No one really knows. That’s my dilemma. I didn’t know that Microsoft would make me more money than I would know what to do with. So I played it safe,” he grinned.

“Well, that’s the thing with technology, you never…” she said.

“Yes,” he said, cutting her off, “you never know what’s going to be the next big thing.”

Kathrin nodded, feeling slighted by his abrupt interruption. She wanted to leave, but didn’t want Aaron to get upset. As far as she was concerned there was no hope. His family wouldn’t ever like her, the way things were going. She engaged in idle chit-chat for the next half-hour, saying as little as possible, and nearly cried with relief when Aaron suggested they leave. His mother let them go with a promise to come back any time. Mr. Taun bid them goodbye gruffly, and Kathrin was happy to see him leave the foyer. She stepped outside, and realized how badly she
needed a smoke. As she waited for Aaron on the front porch, a thousand fragmented thoughts drifted before her eyes.

He finally pulled away from his mother’s embraces, and ushered Kathrin down to the car, without a word. Kathrin heard the front door shut behind them, and let out a long silent breath.

Once Mrs. Taun shut the door she stepped into the living room to get the trolley and collect the cups and saucers. Her husband relaxed in the leather lazy-boy, and watched her pick up the saucers. “So?” he asked.

“She seemed nice, didn’t she?” Mrs. Taun asked pleasantly.

He shut his eyes. “Is that all you thought?”

“I don’t want to get into it. As long as he’s happy.”

Mr. Taun stood up. “Well, I’m going to bed,” he said and walked out into the hall.

Mrs. Taun sighed and wheeled the trolley into the kitchen. Then she washed the plates, and tidied up the kitchen alone.

Kathrin leaned her head against the head rest and stared out the window. She felt horrible. Beside her Aaron remained silent, but could feel Kathrin’s spirit falling. He had known that it was going to be a bad move, but she had wanted him to take her there. She had no one to blame but herself. Still, he felt sorry for her. She was not prepared for it and he hadn’t really primed her for it. He wondered if she was mad at him, and her frequent sighs seemed to indicate that maybe she was. Still, she didn’t say anything, or give him any indication that she wanted to talk. So he remained silent. He didn’t say anything until they approached Queen. “Are you staying at my place?” he asked quietly.

“No. Take me home please.”

His heart started pounding. “Kathrin, I’m sorry.”

“It’s O.K. I don’t want to talk about it now.”

“Please, Kathrin. Say something.”

“I don’t want to talk about it now!”

He dropped her off in the driveway, and waited while she jumped hurriedly out of the car and walked briskly to the front door. She fumbled with her key in the lock, and then slipped inside. Dejectedly, Aaron pulled the car out onto the road, and drove away down the street. He made it to the corner before he changed his mind. Then he looped around the block and parked his car in front of her house. He wasn’t going to let her leave like that.
She answered the door after he jabbed the buzzer five times. "What?" she demanded. "Can we talk?"
"I don’t have anything to say."
"Well, can you at least yell at me?" he pleaded.
She led him up to her apartment in silence. When he shut the door behind him, she pounced. "They hated me."
"They didn’t hate you."
"Yes, Aaron. Your mother gave me some weird look when you introduced me, and you father wouldn’t even let me finish a sentence. For God’s sake, he didn’t lift a finger all night."
Aaron lifted his hand and then let it drop into his lap in defeat. "What do you want me to say? My family’s very traditional. Men talk and women..."
"Clean up after them!" she retorted.
Aaron felt his patience give. "Kathrin, you’re the one who forced me to take you there! I didn’t want to but you kept pushing and prodding me. Do you want me to apologize? Say I’m sorry? I can’t!"
She threw her arms up. "No, of course I don’t expect you to apologize to me. It’s just your poor mother..."
"I didn’t force her to do what she does!" he exploded, "She made the choice and she sticks to it as much as my father does. And I don’t think it’s any of your business!"
Kathrin’s face turned paler, and she set her teeth in a rigid snarl. "Fine. I’m sorry, I guess I don’t understand."
"How could you? You’ve never had a father!"
Kathrin felt as if she’d been slapped. "How dare you say that to me?" The words slipped out like a wound from her mouth, and she sunk down onto the sofa.
Aaron regretted the words. He moved over to her, and tried to place his arm around her shoulder, but she shrugged him off vehemently. "Don’t touch me."
"I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that."
"Can you tell me that’s healthy?"
Aaron shook his head. "I don’t think it’s healthy, no. But that’s what they’ve chosen, and so they have to live with it. We don’t. Why are we fighting about this?"
Kathrin shrugged, and began pinching her lip with her fingers. "I don’t know. I just feel so mad. Like I should stick up for something here, even if I don’t completely understand it."
He looked at her, and she sighed. “I’m sorry Aaron, but I don’t think I’ll ever get along with your parents. And from the looks of it, I don’t think they’ll ever like me.”

He smiled and kissed her eyelid. “I don’t care. I’m not going to spend the rest of my life with my parents.”

And instead of feeling better, Kathrin swallowed his words, digested their meaning and then they knifed the inside of her stomach.

It wasn’t any better on Sunday. It felt like a black cloud was following her every move. She packed with a heavy heart and kept postponing her goodbye phone call to Aaron. She didn’t want to talk to him. Part of her wished he would just disappear, or go up in smoke before her eyes. And then Carol’s words kept floating back to her, and she decided that she really did need some time apart from him so she could evaluate everything that had happened.

When she finally called, he asked to her see her before she left, but she refused on the grounds that she was too busy and he’d only distract her. She knew that he didn’t believe her, but she couldn’t bring herself to lie and say that it wasn’t because of the previous night. Even when he’d left late the night before, she hadn’t set his mind at ease. She simply didn’t know what she felt, and she refused to tell him what he wanted to hear if it wasn’t the truth. And he too had remained silent, knowing that if he pushed her to hard, she would unravel.

So when she finally got into Andria’s car at their mother’s place after lunch, she felt lonelier and sadder than since before she’d met him. And for some strange reason, the drive out of the city felt oddly like saying goodbye.
When they pulled onto the long winding road that cut through the deep expanse of forest, Kathrin's eyes stayed glued to the window. The greenery flew by in smears of colour occasionally brightened by the sun. They finally pulled up in behind the cottage, and Kathrin was struck by the tears welling in her eyes. For some reason, as she looked around the property and smelled the deep woody scent, she felt her father's presence there.

The cottage looked the same as she remembered, except for a fresh coat of paint, and a million wildflowers dotting the landscape. Andria had planted them the previous years, and they had obviously come back in hordes. Kathrin pulled her bag out of the back of the car, slung it over her shoulder and then grabbed a box of food from the trunk. Andria was taking care of Danielle, and Mark was struggling to carry as much as possible in his two arms.

They approached the cottage, and Kathrin felt a flood of memories rushing to the surface of her mind. All the smells and sights attacked her heart, and she felt weak against their powers. It was like she'd never left. When Mark finally put his load down to unlock the door, Kathrin stood behind him, shaking with anticipation. She couldn't wait to step inside and feel the coolness of the cottage. She could trace the hint of mustiness already in the air. Finally, Mark stepped inside and Kathrin followed. The building was dark and cold, even with the outside temperature well into the eighties. All the blinds were closed, and Kathrin dropped the box and her bag down onto the table, then proceeded to pull the blinds and open each window. Gradually, sunshine invaded the dirt covered glass and displayed the months' old dust to its fullest. Kathrin wiped her nose to rid her nostrils of the grit that had flown up them, and wiped her hands on her jeans. It was obvious that their first chore was to clean the entire place from ceiling to floor.

Andria set up Danielle's playpen out in the shaded area of the porch, and then plopped her daughter into it. Danielle clapped her hands and gurgled happily, even when Andria disappeared into the house. The adults spent an hour cleaning the place, and Kathrin was amazed at how many things had changed since her youth. Andria and Mark had put in a septic tank, and hot water poured from the sink. There was a shiny new toilet, and even a phone. The old cottage had finally caught up with technology. The only thing missing was a television set, but Kathrin didn't mind. She had brought three new hard covers, and couldn't wait to get into one. She vacuumed and scrubbed until she felt like her fingers were going to fall off, and take her spine with them. And even when she and Mark finally called it quits, Andria kept working. She hated to be idle, even for a moment. Finally Danielle got hungry, and Andria gave up the fight, knowing her daughter wouldn't take kindly to being slighted because of a little excess dust in the corners.
They managed to organize the freshly cleaned fridge in a matter of moments, and Andria bossed Mark out to the barbecue, while telling Kathrin exactly how to oil the potatoes. Kathrin didn’t bother to comment. She could survive her sister’s domination for two weeks. After all, she had endured it every year of her life until she moved out of the family homestead. Andria wasn’t nearly as over-bearing since marrying Mark, or maybe it only seemed that way through Kathrin’s cloudy memory. She found it comforting, the way Andria and Mark behaved together. They chatted tirelessly, and kept touching each other while trying to keep Danielle occupied until dinner was ready. *Sure, they’re not fun, but at least they like being together.* After the evening at the Taus it was nice to see any two people so obviously interested in one another’s lives. For her part, she kept silent, only asking for directions to the tin-foil, and answering questions with terse one-word answers. Andria didn’t seem to notice.

They sat down for dinner at six-thirty, and Kathrin found that she was exhausted from her manual labour. She didn’t know how Mark and Andria could keep up the banter, and take care of Danielle after their day. *But, then again, Andria runs on this kind of stuff.* The food was great, but Kathrin was too tired to fully appreciate it. All she wanted was for dinner to be over so she could slip into bed, and read a book or something - anything as long as it didn’t involve exertion on her part.

“Are you feeling all right, Kathrin?” Mark asked when they finished up their meal.

“Yes, fine.” She responded quickly, hoping to end the conversation.

“You’re probably run-down,” Andria commented, “but these two weeks will really help.” Kathrin nodded. “You’re probably right.”

She slipped out of her chair, and began clearing the plates. In her mind, she knew precisely what was making her feel so out of sorts. It was Aaron. But she angrily rejected the truth. The last thing she wanted to think about was Aaron. It just made her mad all over again. Not specifically mad at him, but mad about the whole dinner disaster. She couldn’t understand how Aaron’s mom could be so spineless. Especially when she seemed like such a nice woman.

Kathrin filled water in the sink, and let the hot steam rise up against her face. You’re not going to start already. Compose yourself, and do the dishes.

Andria came into the kitchen while Mark put Danielle to bed. “So, what’s really bothering you? Aaron?”

Kathrin turned around. She couldn’t believe how transparent she was - if Andria knew that she was thinking of Aaron. “Yeah, I guess,” she responded.
"You miss your honey. I understand. But it's only two weeks."

Kathrin nearly laughed. It wasn't that she missed him, she was just upset about everything going on with him. "No, it's not that."

"What is it then?" Andria asked and leaned over to pick a crumb off the counter.

Kathrin shrugged and turned back to the dishes abruptly. "Nothing," she said curtly.

She only realized how uncivil her tone sounded after the word was already out. Andria picked up on the tone immediately, and felt her heart heave to her throat. She bit her lip with force, and didn't say anything for a few seconds. Then she sighed. "Listen Kathrin, I know we've never been close, but if you need to talk about something, I'm not a bad person for listening."

Kathrin placed the stemware into the sink. No. They had never been close the whole time they were growing up, and Kathrin had liked it that way. She and Jen had always been the ones to stay up and chat late into the night. Andria went to bed, or left the room to paint, or sculpt, or rearrange something. She never seemed interested in anything other than her artistic projects. "I know," she responded, hoping that it would be enough to pacify Andria. It wasn't.

"Kathrin. Why can't you tell me? What do you think I'm going to say?"

Kathrin thought about the question for a moment. It wasn't that Andria would say something stupid, it was more that Kathrin was afraid she wouldn't understand, or that she would judge her. "It's just personal, that's all."

Andria frowned and placed the jug of milk back into the fridge, then shut the door with a bit more force than was needed. "You know something?" she asked, facing the back wall, "I'll tell you something personal."

Kathrin pulled her wet hands out of the sink, and turned towards her sister's back.

"You know how badly you two made me feel growing up? Like I wasn't good enough to talk to or share anything with. Like I was, pardon my French, a piece of shit, that you two didn't want to step on. I tried to do things so that you would think I was worth your time, but you just ended up hating me even more. Like Jen. I tried to do everything to please her, sometimes I'd even clean her room, or other chores. And you. I thought that if I made things you'd think I was an artist like you."

Kathrin stepped closer. "I'm not an artist."

"Yes you are. All I do is copy things. You create things. You were always making puppets, and thinking ideas. I just recycle things. You think I can draw to save my life?"

"Your quilt is the most beautiful thing I own." Kathrin offered.
“It’s a copy of a pattern I saw in a magazine!” Andria retorted as she spun around to look at Kathrin. “All I ever wanted was for you guys to include me. I always figured that Jen thought she was too old to hang out with me. But I never understood why you hated me. And now, you still can’t even talk to me. How’s that for personal?”

Kathrin froze for a moment. She didn’t know what to say. In some strange way it was a complete reversal. She’d always thought that it was Andria who considered herself too good for them. That they would never live up to Andria’s ideals. But she couldn’t find the words to say that. “I’m sorry,” was all she could say.

Andria turned around. “I’m sorry, too…because, everything else in my life is perfect, except for that.”

Kathrin had never seen her sister look so unhappy. Usually, Andria was always smiling, unless she was chewing Kathrin out for upsetting their mother. Kathrin took Andria’s arm, as Andria continued speaking. “I thought that maybe with this whole fashion documentary, you and I would get closer. I guess I was wrong, as…”

Kathrin cut her off. “The two of us are here, aren’t we?”

Andria paused and looked deeply into Kathrin’s eyes. “Do you think?”

“Yes.”

Andria smiled slightly. “You know, Mark was the one who suggested I invite you. He’s known how unhappy I’ve been. He thought that now was a good time.”

“Why?”

“Because, you’ve been so different in the past few months. It’s not something I can put my finger on, but it’s like you’re happy for the first time. Really happy. And we think that it’s Aaron. That you can finally be nice to everyone around you, because he’s nice to you.”

Kathrin stepped back. She hadn’t thought about that, in all of her analysis. Like the whole Velveteen Rabbit thing. You’re not real until someone makes you real. She let out a sigh.

“What?” Andria asked.

Kathrin went back to the dishes. “Put on a pot of coffee. It may be a long night.”

Andria realized suddenly what that meant. and jumped over to the kettle.

They carried their mugs carefully down the sloping rock face that the cabin was perched on, and made their way to the water. The sun was still about half an hour from setting, and Kathrin inhaled the rich yellow smell of dusk. Mark had opted out of joining them, realizing that
some sort of bonding process was occurring, and so he sat with a small smile on his face, and cracked open an old Stephen King paperback that reeked of mildew and age.

Kathrin looked out to the water. To the west a shock of gold expanded over the lapping dark blue waves, which hit the rocks like dominoes, one after the other. The wind had picked up slightly, and it cut to the heart of her t-shirt. She handed her coffee to Andria and then untied her sweater from around her waist and pulled it over her head, as the wind blew her hair across her face. “Can we still get to the hill from here?” Kathrin asked.

“Yes, Mark cut a path last summer through the woods. Come on.”

Andria led her to the path, and the two slipped into the forest, crossed the mat of pine needles, and started up the steep rock to the top of the hill. Decades earlier someone had set up a tenting platform at the top, and Kathrin had spent hours acting out plays on the high stage during the summers. When they climbed up to the tenting platform, one of the steps had rotted away, but the rest of the platform was secure. Kathrin stepped onto the platform and crossed to the west side of it. She slipped down against the wooden railings, and swung her legs over the edge, while her arms folded themselves across the lowest railing plank. Kathrin smiled as she thought about the platform and all that it had been for her in olden days. “Remember, the time we did the witches’ brew up here?” Kathrin asked Andria.

“Yeah, we thought we were so original. I remember the first time I read Macbeth I thought that someone had stolen our idea.”

Kathrin laughed. “Oh come on! Our potion was way better.”

“Vinegar and baking soda, with blue food colouring?” Andria laughed.

“I bet there are still stains on the wood.”

“The three of us had fun up here. That’s why I liked it so much. I used to get so excited, when I thought about the summer. You guys were forced to play with me up here.”

Kathrin smiled. “You know what, though? Up here it didn’t seem like we were forced at all.”

“Yeah. You know, you don’t realize how happy you are, until you have to leave.”

Kathrin sat up on her rocky crag, and thought about the snakes losing their skins, and the knotty pines, their inhibitions. She saw the jagged tree line, and watched the sharp branches stretch their lean, dark limbs across the moss. Andria was right. It was as if the world of the cottage forced them to lose their guards, while tiny white moths flitted across the night sky, and the Canadian flag turned quickly when caught by the wind. And in so many ways they were all like
those snowflake flowers, bouncing on their stems with small white buds closed, until they chose to open. She took a sip of her coffee, and then lit up a smoke. Andria knew enough not to mention the smoke. Instead, she peered out into the water as the sun moved closer to the tree line on the other side of the bay.

Then Kathrin started speaking. “I don’t know what to do.”

“About Aaron?”

“Yeah. Yes and no. It’s not really him.”

“Well? What is it?”

Kathrin related the events of the previous night, while Andria kept staring out into the impending sunset. When Kathrin stopped speaking Andria sipped her coffee silently, and stood up. “Kathrin, I don’t see a problem here.” she said, as she walked heavily on the wooden planks.

“What do you mean? How can you not see the problem?” Kathrin demanded, as she craned her neck to get a better look at her sister.

Andria shrugged vaguely. “So his parents are a little too traditional. So what?”

“So what?”

“Well, yeah it sounds a little medieval, but they’ve probably lived like that so long, that they don’t even notice. So you don’t see them that often. It’s not a big deal.”

“But what about Aaron?”

“He seems to have already given up on them, from what you’ve told me. It’s not like you’re going to be the cause of tearing his family apart. Is that what you’re worried about?”

Kathrin shook her head. “No. I don’t know what I’m worried about. It’s just that, I mean his sister didn’t even show up.”

“Well, plans change. Listen, I know it’s really none of my business, but is it his family you have a problem with, or him? Because it seems like you’re making excuses for why this shouldn’t work.”

“That’s stupid. Of course I want it to work.”

“Really?” Andria prodded.

“I don’t know. I mean, it’s just that I don’t understand why they all seem to hate each other so much, but then put up these fronts like everything’s O.K.”

“Do you think he’s hiding something from you?”

“Like what?”
"I don’t know. Maybe he’s got some skeleton in the closet, that he can’t bring himself to share with you yet. Maybe he’s afraid that he’ll scare you off."

"I’m already scared."

"Well, then you have to deal with it. Just ask yourself one question. Are you willing to accept everything he is? I don’t want to imply anything here, but I think it’s probably starting to get serious. Would you consider marrying him?"

Kathrin laughed heartily. "It’s not that serious. It’s really far from that serious."

Andria looked at her. "Does he know that?"

"Andria please, I just met the guy."

"Yeah," she nodded, "but when I met Mark, I knew within two weeks that he was the one."

"The one, the one. You and Jen and mom, all you guys talk about is the one. Maybe he’s one of the ones. Maybe there never will be a one...

"Or maybe you’re afraid that the one will turn out to be like his father."

Kathrin’s mouth snapped shut as she realized that Andria had spoken the words that had been lurking in her head all day. *Fuck, I hate her.* "Well," she acknowledged, "it’s possible. I mean, the rest of his family is so strange, maybe he is too."

"And maybe that’s why he didn’t want to take you there. Maybe he thought you’d react the way you did. Maybe his dark secret is his family, and that if you know you’ll bail."

"That’s ridiculous. I wouldn’t do that."

Andria turned a level stare towards her sister. "What about Ken?"

"Andria, that’s different. Ken wanted me to marry him."

"And what if Aaron wants you to marry him?"

"Yeah, right."

"Think about it hard Kathrin. You better be sure what you want, and make sure he knows what that is. Because if this guy falls in love with you, and you don’t think you’ll ever feel the same way, it’s better to let him know now."


"He already told me he loves me."

Andria let out a low whistle. "What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"Do you love him?"

"Ahh. Why does everyone keep asking me that? I don’t know."
“Well, maybe you should tell him that you don’t know. The sooner the better.”

Kathrin watched as the last trace of sun dipped below the horizon. Part of her wanted it never to reappear again. First, Carol told her not to tell him anything. Then Andria told her to tell him everything right away. She didn’t know what to do. “I hate this!”

Andria laughed. “Just do what you know is right. But remember, the best thing is always the hardest.”

Kathrin looked at her sister, and had no idea what she was talking about. “All right,” she agreed, not exactly sure of what she was agreeing to. “but do me one favour? I don’t want his name mentioned the rest of the time we’re here. Then I promise that as soon as I get back to the city, I’ll tell him whatever my decision is.”

Andria extended her hand. “Promise.”

The rest of the week flew by, and by the first day of the pottery workshop, Kathrin was tanned, rejuvenated, and hopeful. She forgot about the whole dinner incident, concentrated on Danielle, and even spent a few days restoring the old hideout she’d made in the back of the forest over a decade earlier. Which really meant that she started it all over again. If she got it ship-shape by the time she left, she’d haul Andria out there, and show her where she’d slipped off to for entire days during their summers at the cottage.

Andria drove to the community center, and they pulled into the lot. There were four other cars already parked, and the two got out quickly. Inside the large open building, which looked more like a warehouse than a community center, they found five other women seated near a cluster of pottery wheels. The other woman were all older and seemed to be townies. Kathrin smiled. It was going to be an interesting weekend.

She’d never used a pottery wheel before, and her first five attempts were terrible. Even though Andria and the instructor helped her in every way they could, she still couldn’t grasp the basics. But she liked the feel of the cool clay in her hand, and how it slipped through her fingers like a paste. And the smell was heavenly. It was almost like chalk, but more solid under her nose, and it smelled cold. Like walking in winter, when a sudden draft of air brought a burning fire across the sky. And there was a hint of rusted metal that finished off the smell. Kathrin couldn’t get enough of it.

Finally, the instructor instructed Kathrin to give up on the vase she was trying to make, and suggested a fruit bowl instead. Kathrin grinned. “That, I think I can do. In fact, I would probably make some great ashtrays.”
Their goal was to get as many pieces finished as possible by the end of the first day, so they could dry them, and then spend the second day glazing the pieces before firing them in the kiln. Kathrin was miffed at the process. She wanted to take her fruit bowl home with her right away. Still, she sat and watched the electric wheel turn, as she placed another block of clay on the wheel. Her second piece was better, and she managed to make it into a barely lopsided vase. And then, she decided that wine glasses were the way to go. She ignored the instructor’s warning about the difficulty, and formed two small bowls with her fingers. They were relatively the same size, and Kathrin carefully knifed a series of rings down the sides. Then she asked Andria to come over to the table. “How do I attach the stems?”

Andria smiled at the honour of being asked to help. “Let the bowls dry while you do the bases. Then when the bases are done, you should attach them to the bowls. But make sure there aren’t any air bubbles or they’ll explode in the kiln.”

Kathrin returned to her work happily. She crafted two stems so they looked like thick vines growing up from spreading roots, and formed the tops of the clay bases into three pronged leaves for the bowls to sit on. Then she needed a smoke. Just before the workshop ended for the first day, Kathrin set the bowls into the bases, and carefully wet the clay to make sure they joined together tightly, without any air bubbles. When she stood back, she found that she had something to admire. Even the instructor was impressed. “Well, you’ve improved ten fold. Good work.”

Kathrin smiled. She looked at the goblets, trying to decide what colours to use so that they’d match Aaron’s apartment. Her smile vanished when she realized what she was doing. God! She’d been doing so well all day long. She hadn’t even thought about him once. All of a sudden, when she was least prepared, he had slipped into her thoughts again. And Kathrin wondered what that meant. She thought about it the whole ride back to the cottage.

The next day, she saved the glasses for last. She decorated the fruit bowl with bright heavy glazes, which her mother would love. Then she painstakingly drew a geometric design up the sides of the vase. It looked pretty decent, so she decided that she would keep it. And finally, she chose a light purple tone for the goblets, and covered the base with a cloudy earth green glaze. She was upset that she couldn’t mix the glazes like paints, but was still pleased with the results.

She watched as the instructor lowered the goblets into the kiln, and said a silent prayer that they wouldn’t crack. Andria finished around the same time, and the two decided to grab ice cream cones on their way back to the cottage. They’d have to pick the pottery up the following day.
“So?” Andria asked as she licked the drips of lemon sherbet from the side of her sugar cone. “I know I promised, but have you thought about you-know-who?”

Kathrin gave her a dirty look over the top of her chocolate ice cream. “I don’t know who you-know-who is, and even if I have I still have a week left to decide.”

“You’re no fun!”

Kathrin smiled as they walked back to the car. “You’re just mad I won’t tell you.”

Andria laughed, and then turned solemn. “I’m serious, Kathrin. And you’re treating it too lightly.”

“I don’t know. What else do you want me to say?”

“Nothing, I guess.”

“That’s right.”

When they got back to the cottage, Mark and Danielle were hanging out playing cards on the deck. Or rather, Mark was playing cards for Danielle. “I don’t know how she does it,” he lamented. “but she’s beaten me four out of five times.”

Danielle let out a raspberry, which seemed to be directed at Mark, and continued to salivate all over her cards.

Andria picked her daughter up. “Are you kicking daddy’s butt? What a good girl.”

It wasn’t until dinner that Mark mentioned that one of the guys on his softball team had called him. “The tournament that got rained out in May has been re-scheduled.”

“Oh.” Andria said. “that’s good. You must be happy.”

Kathrin groaned. “Yeah, you get to play around with a bunch of middle-aged men who call each other ‘Slider’, have belching contests, and slap each other on the butt.”

Mark laughed. “We’re not that bad, and no I’m not happy about it.”

“Why not?” Andria asked.

He turned serious. “Because they rescheduled it for this weekend.”

Andria sucked in her cheeks. “Really?” she asked, trying not to let her disappointment show. “Well, I guess there’s nothing you can do about it. Really?”

Mark nodded. “Yes, but I told him I wouldn’t be able to make it.”

“Oh Mark, that’s silly. You’ve been looking forward to that tournament since the end of last season. We’ll just have to cut the weekend short.”

Mark cast a sorrowful look towards his wife. “But I know how much this vacation meant to you.”
Kathrin realized that they were both waiting for her to intrude in some way. “Don’t worry about it. It’s only two days. It’s not like we have to leave tomorrow.”

Mark smiled. “You won’t be mad?”

“Of course not.”

In fact part of her was ecstatic. That meant she could see Aaron sooner, and present him with her gifts. Andria seemed to read her mind. “Wait a second. Just because we have to go, doesn’t mean Kathrin should suffer. Kath, why don’t you see if Aaron wants to come up for the weekend. Then you’ll have a ride back.”

Kathrin could have jumped up and hugged her sister, but she threw her a cool look instead.

“I don’t think so. Maybe.”

“Aw, c’mon.”

Kathrin shared a little smile with Andria. “O.K. Maybe I’ll call him.”

Andria made a sweeping gesture towards the phone, and Kathrin eyed her warily. “I’ll call later. After six.”

“It’s Sunday. When you call doesn’t matter,” Andria smirked, “so we’ll leave you alone.”

While Andria tugged Mark and Danielle down to the rocks, Kathrin stared at the phone for some time. Her heart was racing underneath her t-shirt, and her hands felt clammy. She had wanted to call so badly all week, but knew that she couldn’t call until she had made some kind of decision. And up until Andria had tempted her, Kathrin hadn’t been sure what that decision was. Even as she picked up the phone, she wasn’t quite sure what she was feeling. It wasn’t until she dialed the numbers with shaking fingers, and Aaron’s low voice came over the phone, that she knew.

“Aaron? It’s Kathrin.”

“Hey! I was hoping you’d call. How’s everything?”

She smiled. “Great. We’re having an awesome time.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“What?”

He cleared his throat. “I was hoping you’d be miserable without me.”

“Well, actually I am, sort of. That’s why I’m calling. Do you want to come up this weekend?”

He was silent, and Kathrin wondered if she’d actually said the words. “Aaron, do you?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”
She laughed. “Great. Andria and Mark are leaving on Friday, so we can spend the whole weekend together.”

“Really? I was actually looking forward to seeing them. And Danielle.”

“Oh. Well, I don’t know what to say.”

“I do. Why don’t I come up on Thursday night? I can take the day off, and then at least I’ll get to see them.”

Kathrin bobbed her head, and realized that Aaron couldn’t see her. “Sounds great.”

“Good. Well, then I’ll call you Wednesday to confirm and get the directions.”

“O.K. The number is...” her voice trailed off, “actually, I don’t know what the number is. Why don’t I call you?”

“Great. All right, I’ll talk to you later.”

“O.K. Bye.” She said, hanging up quickly.

Partially she hung up out of fear that he would tell her he loved her again, but mostly because she didn’t think she could stand talking to him for another moment without spewing out words that would make her sound like an idiot. The butterflies in her stomach were going crazy, and she went to the kitchen to get a glass of water. She gulped it down quickly, nearly choking herself in the process, and shook her hands out in front of her while water streamed down her mouth. You’re pathetic. One phone call and you fall apart. Pull yourself together for Christ’s sake. It’s not like you haven’t spent a weekend together before.

When Andria, and Mark returned with Danielle, Kathrin was reading on the couch. “How was the sunset?” she asked lightly.

She didn’t fool Andria for a minute. “When’s he coming?”

“Thursday night.”

Andria grinned diabolically. “The next four days are going to be Hell for you.”

And they were. Kathrin found herself pacing the deck each day, and putting a lot of effort into getting the hideout finished. She didn’t really care if she finished it or not, but she was trying to keep busy so the time would fly by. The four days took longer to pass than the entire first week. Every night Kathrin hopped into bed earlier and earlier, trying to extend her sleep time each day. The more time she was asleep, the less time she was thinking about Aaron.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, Thursday broke clear and hot. Kathrin had talked to Aaron the night before and everything was set. She spent the morning drawing the sun to her body, and then when the sun became too hot, slipped into a pair of overalls and went down the narrow
path she’d cleared the first week to her forest fort. She smiled as she realized how childish it all was - the way she was trying to be some wilderness scout. But the fort had come along nicely. She’d driven two thick dead branches into the ground, and woven thinner branches around the posts. Then she’d filled the gaps with fern and thick wildflower stalks. The original fort contained two trees that, over the years, had grown over each other, forming a dense wall on the east side. In the two weeks, Kathrin had erected two new walls, so that only one side remained open, and the structure took more of a triangular shape than a square. And in a childhood remembrance she had made a large flower crown to wear on her head while construction went on. When she was ten it made her invisible. At twenty-eight it made her invincible. She completed the roof by five, and headed back to the cottage for dinner. Aaron wouldn’t be arriving until well after seven. She took her bathing suit from the clothes line and changed in the shed by the water. Then she dove into the water and swam fiercely until she was about a hundred metres from shore. She treaded water for a while and looked back towards the cottage as the waves lapped softly on her neck. It felt good to be in the water - like she was lost in some crystalline tunnel where she couldn’t hear much of anything, but could see everything around her so clearly.

She swam leisurely to shore, and pulled herself up onto the dock to absorb the last strong rays of afternoon sunlight. She lay back on the wooden planks, and hummed to herself. For the first time that day she felt at one with herself. She breathed a few deep pants, and stared up at the sky. Her body tingled, and the bay water had left her skin smooth and her hair soft. She loved bathing in the lake with her biodegradable shampoo, and then diving into the water as a means of rinsing her hair. And she loved the sudden shock of plunging into the morning water, that was only barely touched by the sun. Mostly she loved the smell of moss as it heated up on clear days and the fresh scent was released in the evaporating dew. She loved everything about the cottage. It was a shame she’d missed out for so many years. Going there was the best thing she could have done.

After dinner, she slipped into her nicest pair of shorts, and the one t-shirt that wasn’t ratty, then stepped onto the porch with Danielle. The baby smiled as Kathrin spun lazily on the deck, and dipped the child with fluid movements. Andria watched her through the screen door from the kitchen sink and smiled at Mark. He returned the smile and wrapped his arms around his wife’s belly. “This has been a good vacation, right?”

She leaned back into his arms. “The best.”
Aaron found Kathrin still dancing when he pulled up to the cottage. He turned the car off, and Kathrin hopped down the stairs with the baby still in her arms. "Hey."

He smiled as he approached her and took off his sunglasses. "Hi there," he said giving her a small kiss on the lips, and then dropping another on Danielle’s dark hair, "you look exquisite. Like out of an old western when the hero returns home to his picture-perfect wife and their beautiful baby."

Kathrin laughed. "Yeah, but the cowboys never arrive in their BMW’s in the old movies."

He went around to the car to pull his leather weekend bag out. "Nor their designer luggage."

The two of them walked up to the cottage, and Andria and Mark came out to greet Aaron. Then Andria ushered him into the kitchen where she had a plate of dinner waiting for him. "I figured you’d be starving," she offered.

"I am. Thanks."

They all kept him company while he ate and Kathrin presented him with her wine goblets. "You made these?" he asked in wonderment.

"All by myself," she gloated.

"Wow. Good job. Actually, when I think about it I’m not surprised. You probably love getting dirt under your nails, and slathering yourself with mud."

"Clay," she corrected.

"It’s all dirt to me."

Andria suggested that they all go up and watch the sun set from the platform, and Aaron was awestruck by the view. "If I had this place," he commented, "I’d be up here every weekend."


As soon as the sun set Danielle grew tired, and uttered a few cranky cries. The group returned to the cottage, where Aaron relaxed on the couch with Kathrin, and after putting Danielle to bed, Andria and Mark returned to their nightly game of gin rummy. Kathrin waited out the hours, until Andria finally yawned and stood up. "Well, I’m done."

"Me too," Mark concurred, and wished both Kathrin and Aaron good night. Kathrin could hear them in the bathroom, and then the creak of the bed as they settled down for the night.

"So," she said, "what do you want to do?"

Aaron grinned mischievously. "I don’t know. I haven’t seen you for nearly two weeks, but what I want to do might not be appropriate."
Kathrin laughed. "Kinda like having sex at your parents’ place. Why don’t we go for a skinny-dip?"

Aaron’s jaw dropped. "Wow. Something about seeing you naked in the moonlight is very appealing."

She giggled and looked towards the hallway to determine if Andria or Mark could hear anything. She doubted it. Grabbing Aaron’s hand she stood up, pulling him with her, and then went to get two towels from the bathroom while he waited in the living room. On her way back she plucked a flashlight off the counter, and tossed a towel to Aaron. "Let’s go."

The water was smooth against her naked body, and her thoughts flashed back to the last time she’d gone skinny dipping. She still loved the feel of the water moving around her toes and between her legs. With someone there it was even more exhilarating. After several laps out into the deeper water and then back again, Kathrin came to rest at the dock ladder. Aaron swam over to her, and placed his arms around her, grabbing the ladder. She clung to his body while her feet rested on a ladder rung, and kissed his wet face. "I’m glad you’re here."

He removed one hand from the ladder and trailed it up her stomach to her breast. "So am I."

Kathrin brushed a strand of wet hair from her face, and kissed him again. The air felt slightly warmer than the water, and it felt good against her head and hair. "So,” she said, kissing him again, "I guess tonight we must be good. Don’t want to wake anyone."

He smiled. "We could make do out here."

“Oh no. There’s no way I’m dealing with any creepy crawlies in the bush."

He laughed. "Now, where’s your sense of adventure?"

Kathrin shook her head. "I left it in the city. Up here, I just relax."

He pulled her in closer to him. "You wouldn’t consider making an exception?"

Kathrin grinned and pulled herself up onto the ladder. Quickly, she climbed the rungs and jumped out of the water. The air gave her a small shiver, but was tolerable. More than tolerable. "I know I’m going to regret this, but I know just the place."

She led him down the path behind the cottage, and beamed the flashlight through the trees until she found the fort. Aaron looked at her, puzzled. "This place looks newly built."

Kathrin grinned. "I fixed it up this week. Won’t you come inside?"

Aaron stepped in tentatively behind her. There was enough space for both of them, but the ceiling was too low for them to stand completely upright. Kathrin laid out the wet towels on the
dirt, and sat down. Aaron followed suit. The flashlight flickered when he bumped it, but the yellow light returned and cast an eerie glow across the fort. Aaron propped it up so that it shone away from their eyes, but still gave them enough vision to see. As they were so deep within the forest, without the flashlight they'd be completely blind. Kathrin could hear the occasional rustles of small animals running across the forest floor, but for the most part everything was silent. Not silent, like standing in a hallway, but silent like being on a mountain top. There was a slight breeze, but nothing more.

Aaron reached over to touch her, and she found herself charged with a strange energy. She reached over and kissed him, and he gently pushed her back down onto the wet towels. And then in the silent darkness he undressed her and she undressed him. His motions weren't lust driven. He touched her softly, and hesitantly, as if she might strike out at him. Kathrin received the caresses in silence, and moved closer to his warm body. His hair was still slightly damp, and as he moved down to kiss her breasts Kathrin could feel it across her neck and chest. And then Aaron began kissing her stomach and waist, while he ran his hands over her thighs. And when he touched her Kathrin felt a shock go over her body, and she twitched slightly. Aaron looked up at her. "O.K.?"

"Mm-hm."

He continued to touch her delicately and Kathrin twisted under his weight. She could feel her own arousal mounting, and didn't feel the least bit uncomfortable. In fact she felt more relaxed than she had ever. And she realized that it was because of where they were, and how nothing seemed more natural than Aaron moving over her body in the darkness of the forest in the middle of the night. She let out a slight gasp, and pulled Aaron's mouth to her lips. "I want to have sex with you," she stated, not worrying how the words came out.

Aaron paused for a moment before speaking. "I don't have any protection."

Kathrin kissed him again. "It's O.K. I want you to."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

He pushed against her pelvis and slowly moved into her. She arched her back and lifted her legs into the air. Aaron moved slowly, unaccustomed to the feel of her interior walls without anything in between his body and hers. "What do you want me to do? Pull out?"

Kathrin smiled and pushed her body against his with force. "No, I want you inside of me the whole time."
His breath quickened, and Kathrin felt the heat again, but more intensely through her feet and up her calf muscles. She gripped tighter onto Aaron’s muscles, and concentrated on her breathing. She kept moving with Aaron, and realized that if he lasted, she could get there too. Aaron slowed the pace, and Kathrin moved her body in response to his stalls. She knew that it was taking every effort on his part to restrain himself, so she moved her hand down to help stimulate herself. Aaron almost seemed surprised, but relaxed and kept thrusting against her.

She didn’t know what happened, but somewhere in between wanting to reach orgasm and reaching orgasm, she lost her ability to reach orgasm. Yet, she moaned louder and louder as Aaron reached climax, and when at last he threw himself against her in a final frenzy of jerks, Kathrin cried out along with him, and flexed her muscles spontaneously until he had finished. Then she matched the rhythm of his breathing, until the two of them lay there, panting softly in the light of the flashlight. Aaron rolled onto his back and pulled Kathrin to him. He smiled at her reaction to his love-making, and brought his mouth to her ear. “How was that?”

Kathrin smiled dazedly. “Great.”

“Yeah,” he agreed.

Kathrin lay silently against his body, and tried to beat off the guilt that was radiating from the centre of her core. She couldn’t explain fully why she had done it, but she reproached herself bitterly. *Was that the smartest thing you could have done?* She hadn’t done it to hurt him though. She’d done it to make him feel important. Like he could do that to her. That he mattered. And for a while there she’d been close. Really close. But, as soon as she thought she’d get there, then she consciously tried to get there and couldn’t. It was a cruel game inflicted on women: the ability to reach orgasm, but not the means always. She was sure that with time Aaron would be able to satisfy her completely, and in the mean time, one forged orgasm wouldn’t be the end of the world. She didn’t have to pretend ever again if she didn’t want to. She kept the thought to herself and gradually the heavy burden of guilt lifted from her gut. She’d done it for him.

Aaron smoothed the wet hair on her brow, and traced her face with his fingers. “Kathrin?”

“Mmn.”

“Is everything all right between us?”

She looked up and then rolled towards him. “Yeah, why?”

“I mean with the whole family thing.”

Kathrin lay back down. “I thought about it a lot these past two weeks. Yes, everything’s O.K.”
He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tightly. "I'm glad..." he said, as if a prelude to more.

Kathrin knew what the words were before he spoke them. She turned and put her fingers on his lips. "Aaron..." and then she stopped, because she realized she couldn't say the words.

And she could feel the slight tingle run through his mouth under her finger tips, and she too shivered. She meant what she couldn't say. She honestly, for the first time ever, believed it, but couldn't believe that she felt it. And so she couldn't say what she felt.

Over lunch, Aaron kept stealing glances at Kathrin. She caught a few of them and smiled. After they had returned to the cottage the night before she had quickly fallen asleep in his arms. He had smoothed her wet hair again and again, until it finally dried hours later. He couldn't fall asleep. Two thoughts kept duking it out in his head. The first that he had brought Kathrin to orgasm, and the second that she had almost said what he was still waiting to hear. But she hadn't, and it made him feel uneasy because he couldn't decipher her thoughts. He kept up with Andria's banter, and showed no signs of being upset or confused. Better to deal with the issue later, out of the presence of Andria and Mark. And Danielle, who cheerfully shoveled slimy peas into her mouth with her stubby fingers. He laughed. "I wish I had a camera right now."

Andria turned her attention to Danielle. "Why? So everyone could see that we have a slob for a child?"

Aaron laughed. "No, but next thing you know she'll be driving your car, and promising not to throw a party while you're away."

"Don't scare them Aaron," Kathrin warned.

Andria laughed. "Well, as long as she's not as wild as Kathrin, I don't care."

Kathrin suppressed a grin, while Aaron turned an inquisitive glance at her. "I wasn't so bad," she protested.

"Oh really? What about the time you borrowed mom's car to go for a pack of smokes?"

Aaron frowned. "What's wrong with that?"

"She was fifteen."

Aaron laughed. "What else?"

"No way!" Kathrin said, getting up, "We've reached the end of this discussion."

"Aw, c'mon." Aaron whined.

Andria threw him a wicked wink. "I'll tell you some other time."
Kathrin sat back down, and stretched a long finger at her sister. "Don't even think about it. Aaron does have a point, though. You should be documenting her childhood. When was the last time you had her picture taken?"

"I don't know," she said turning to Mark, "Hon?"

"Her birthday I guess. The pictures I take never turn out," Mark admitted.

Aaron looked up. "Why don't you get her picture taken professionally?"

Andria pondered the idea. "Well, we did last year, but I didn't like the studio."

"So, get someone to take the pictures at your house," Aaron suggested.

"I don't know anyone," she returned, then looked at Kathrin, "Do you Kath? I'm sure you must deal with a lot of them at work."

Kathrin nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, I'm sure I could find out. But the last really good photography I saw was at Aaron's apartment."

Aaron frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The work on your wall. That friend of yours."

Aaron felt the tips of his ears warming up, but Kathrin didn't give him the chance to say anything. "When I sent you that file in New York, I had to save it on disk, and I looked through the scanned photographs of you. They're amazing."

Aaron looked up in shock. He felt a sudden anger welling in his chest, but he did his best to conceal it. "What?" he asked in a tight voice, "You looked through the disks?"

"Just the one. Why don't you get your friend to do Danielle's portrait?"

Aaron cleared his throat, and smiled at Andria. "I'm afraid she stopped working a couple of years ago."

Andria's face sunk. "Why?"

Kathrin echoed her sister's question. "But she was so good."

"Talent isn't always lucrative," Aaron explained.

"Well, surely she would think about it."

Aaron's face set into a rigid grimace. "It's out of the question."

No one else pushed him to continue. They could all tell that he wasn't interested in pursuing the conversation. "Well," Kathrin said finally, "I'll find someone down at the office. I'm sure someone does portraits."
Andria and Mark accepted her promise, and finished packing their belongings. They left shortly after two, and it took only three minutes for Aaron to find Kathrin and corner her in the kitchen. “You had no right!” he exploded, grabbing her arm.

“What are you talking about?” Kathrin asked, astonished at his fury.

“To go through those pictures.”

Kathrin eyes glazed into a defensive paralysis. “Aaron, I just looked at them.”

His fingers clung to her arm, and Kathrin could feel his grip burning her skin. He stared into her eyes. “I don’t go through your things.”

“What did you want me to do? Not send you the file? I’m sorry. I didn’t think it was a big deal!”

He lessened his grip. “I don’t want you going through my stuff again.”

Kathrin felt her own anger festering in her stomach. All she had done was look through a couple of files on his computer. It wasn’t like she had broken into the apartment and fingered all his stuff. “Fine! My suggestion would be to lock everything away, and change all your passwords and your keys. Then you won’t have to worry about me snooping through your crap! In fact, maybe you should get rid of me completely! Now that I’ve broken your trust!” she turned and yanked her arm from his hand.

He looked at her, and slowly his face melted into sadness. “I didn’t mean that I don’t trust you.”

“Yes you did! That’s exactly what you meant.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I’m a little over-protective of my belongings. It goes along with the whole neat-freak thing.”

Kathrin crossed her arms, and looked at him sternly. She was still fuming. “What? Are you afraid I’ll find out something? Like maybe your family’s a little off-centre? Well, too late. I already know that. All you do is keep things from me. Why can’t you just let me in? You say that you love me, but how can you when you don’t even trust me?”

Aaron’s arm fell to his sides. “I’m sorry, O.K.? That’s all I can say.”

Kathrin’s look indicated that she didn’t believe him. “Kathrin, please. I am sorry. But in the future, don’t snoop. Just ask me, and I promise I’ll tell you everything you ask.”

“O.K. Then tell me who the photographer is.”

Aaron looked down. “You don’t want to know.”

“Who?”
“It’s Lily. That’s why I can’t let you ask her.”

Kathrin exhaled slowly. “So that’s why you’re so upset. You don’t want her to be back in your life.”

Aaron nodded. “Someone else will do an equally good job.”

“Yeah, but Aaron, she’d be better than good. I could call, and I wouldn’t even tell her that you gave me the reference.” Kathrin said firmly.

She thought about it. Part of her really wanted to have Lily’s obvious talent for the photographs. The other part wanted to see what Lily was like.

Aaron shook his head slowly. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I just can’t.”

Kathrin nodded and relented. Asking him once more would only make him reject the idea more forcefully. It was better to wait until he let his guard down. And then she’d ask him again.

“O.K. I accept that.”

“Thank you.”

She smiled. “Well, now that it’s all out, what do you want to do tonight?”

Aaron looked up at her, and a slight grin spread across his face. “I think it’s high time that you and I got wasted together.”

By ten o’clock the two of them were pissed. Kathrin shuffled the cards with obvious difficulty, and more often than not, dealt out too many cards. “Having problems?” Aaron laughed, not quite as tipsy as Kathrin was.

She giggled, and wedged a cigarette between her lips. “It’s hard to count to eleven.”

Aaron shook his head and picked up the hand in front of him. He carefully organized the cards, and took another swig from his beer bottle. They were playing for sips. Every point counted as a drink from the bottle, and Kathrin was lucky to be winning. It kept them evenly drunk. Had Aaron been a better card player, Kathrin would have already been face down on the couch, or praying to the porcelain goddess. He was firmly convinced that she was somehow cheating, and kept looking under the table to find cards. No such luck.

Kathrin had pulled two fishermen hats from the closet, and forced him to put one on his head. They reeked like moth balls and dust, but Aaron complied without too much trouble. In fact, it was kind of fun. Kathrin kept referring to him as ‘matey’, and as the night wore on,
procured a yellow slicker from the closet to adorn herself with. “I’ve got a set of hip-waders in there, that would fit you perfectly,” she offered.

Aaron declined diplomatically. “I’ll just get too hot.”

Kathrin smirked. “Well, if we change the rules of the game, we might make it more interesting.”

He got up to get a few cold beers from the fridge. “How?”

“In addition to drinks, every game you lose you have to take off one article of clothing.”

Aaron came very close to dropping the armful of bottles he was carrying back to the table.

“Seriously?”

“Dead serious.”

He sat down at the table, and plunked the bottles down one at a time. “Well then, let the games begin.”

It took her exactly ten hands to get him down to nothing. She lost three hands, and sat only in her bra, underwear and the yellow slicker. “So,” she said victoriously, “I guess you lost.”

Aaron blushed, and felt a shiver of cold run over his spine. “I guess so. What happens now?”

Kathrin stood up, and got her balance, then moved over to Aaron. “Well, I guess now you get your prize.”

“But I lost.”

“O.K. I mean, now I get my prize.”

“And what is that?” Aaron asked.

Kathrin grinned, and took off her slicker. “Now, I’m going to give you the best blow-job you’ve ever received.”

Aaron looked up in surprise. Those were not the words he’d ever expected to hear out of Kathrin’s mouth. But she had said them, and slowly started pulling him out of his seat, and towards the bedroom. When she got him into the room, she quickly pulled off the rest of her clothing, and jumped on top of him. Aaron lay back on the bed, and let Kathrin do her thing. And in the end, she was right.

“How many people have you slept with?” he asked casually the next morning, his head hunched over his bowl of cereal.

She glanced over her book at him, surprised at the question. “Does it matter?”
“No.”

She paused. “Then don’t ask.”

He continued shoveling cereal into his mouth for a few moments. Then he said, “I want to know.”

She ran her fingers through the strands of hair tucked behind her left ear. She wondered where the conversation was coming from. He hadn’t ever asked her anything about her past, and if any time was perfect it had been the night before, when they were both wasted. Kathrin frowned. “Why do you want to know?”

“It’s going to sound weird, but last night there was something different about you. I didn’t realize what it was until after you fell asleep.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the way you moved. You seemed more sure of yourself. It made me wonder what you were like with other men.”

Kathrin tried to hide her smile behind the nightshirt. “You were jealous?”

Aaron looked at her. “I... I don’t know, maybe. But I thought of you in bed with some guy, and I didn’t like picturing it. I just want to know. Is that an insecure guy thing? Me wanting to know about you?”

“No, I think it’s nice. But it still doesn’t make me want to answer the question.”

“Why?”

“It’s the first of too many questions I don’t want to answer.”

“No,” he said quietly, “that’s all I want to know.”

“You say that now, but then you’ll ask me who was the best, who first brought me to orgasm, where’s the weirdest place I’ve ever done it. And no matter what I say, you’ll always harbor a feeling of insecurity. It should be enough for you to know that you’re the only one I’ve ever cared about.”

His eyes gazed into the liquid. “I still want to know.”

“You don’t want to know! When it all comes down to it, you really don’t want to know. And how can you ask me while you’re eating breakfast? This is the most important meal of the day, so concentrate.”

He put his bowl down, but kept hold of the spoon. “Kathrin!”
She slammed her hand down on the table. “Fine. You want to know? O. K., I’ll tell you. In a car wash, I’ve never had one, and no one’s ever been good enough. I’ve slept with too many wrong people and not enough right people.”

The colour of her face had faded somewhat and her hands trembled slightly as she stared into the look of surprise on Aaron’s face. “You’ve never had an orgasm?” he asked gravely.

Kathrin covered her mouth, realizing what had slipped out. “Ah, shit!”

“You lied to me?”

Kathrin placed her head in her hand. “I didn’t lie to you.”

Aaron dropped his spoon into the bowl, and the metal clanked against the lip, splashing droplets of milk onto the table. “Not technically, no. But I thought…”

“You were wrong.”

“But you led me to believe I was right.”

Kathrin sighed. “What difference does it make? I haven’t had one, I probably never will, and sometimes I think I just can’t.”

“Why?”

Kathrin looked down at the table. “I don’t know.”

“There’s got to be a reason.”

“Then you tell me.”

Aaron mopped up the tiny dots of milk with his napkin. He contemplated his answer, then offered: “They say that some women are afraid of giving in, giving their bodies up.”

Kathrin laughed. “I’m not afraid of sex.”

“It doesn’t have to be physical. You’re afraid of relationships.”

She looked up into his eyes. “That’s not true.”

Aaron held the eye contact, and raised his eyebrows. Kathrin waited for a verbal response, then repeated, “I’m not afraid of relationships.”

“Then what are you afraid of?”

Kathrin tapped the edge of her coffee mug, then abruptly got up. “I need a smoke.”

She walked to the bedroom, and Aaron watched her slim legs move through the thin material of her nightshirt. He got up and poured them both more coffee, then returned to his seat. She came back through the doorway carrying her cigarettes and a lighter. She lit a smoke then sat down at the table. As she exhaled, the smoke carried her words to Aaron. “What were you saying?”
"I asked you what you’re afraid of."
Kathrin smiled. "Aaron, I’m not afraid of relationships."
"Then why haven’t you dated anyone in over two years?"
Kathrin pointed her cigarette at him. "You haven’t dated anyone in four!"
"That’s different."
"No it’s not. What are you afraid of?"
Aaron sipped his coffee and calmly replied, "We’re not talking about me right now. I’m not the one who has a problem with commitment. I already told you how I feel about you."
Kathrin grimaced, and knew he was referring to her inability to say anything to him the night in the fort. "O.K. I’ll tell you, but only if you tell me later."
"You go first."
Kathrin reached over and pulled a plate from the counter. She placed her cigarette on the plate and then slipped her hair out of its elastic. When she had retied it she turned to Aaron. "O.K., I’m afraid of losing myself."
Aaron frowned. "Losing yourself in someone else?"
"No. Just losing myself."
"Why?"
Kathrin tugged at her pony tail. "I don’t know."
"You do know."
"I can’t talk about it."
"Kathrin, of course you can. I’m asking you to."
Kathrin shook her head, then asked, "Why all this sudden interest in my past?"
Aaron got up from the table. "I asked you one question. I didn’t say anything about your past. You’re the one bringing it up."
"I’m not bringing it up, I’m trying to avoid it. There are a lot of things I don’t want to tell you, and a lot of things I don’t think I’m ready to tell you."
"Like what?"
Kathrin contemplated her thoughts. "Like things that have made me who I am, things that have shaped my life. Experiences. People."
"Bad things?"
"Some are."
Aaron crossed back to the table, and sat down, pushing the bowl out of the way. "Do you think I'll judge you?"

Kathrin shook her head. "I just don't want to fuck things up. Especially now, when it looks like everything is going well."

"You won't."

"How can you say that? You don't know."

"How can you know until you try?"

Kathrin planted her fingers around her mug and stared into the pool of coffee. She had been waiting for this moment for years, and now it didn't seem right. All of a sudden some guy had shown up, and changed the way she looked at a lot of things. Things weren't supposed to happen so fast. But this... man... was altering everything she had ever believed in. That wasn't natural, was it? Her feelings shouldn't be changing like that - so soon after she met him. At the same time, she felt good. A solid fullness, a feeling of right, had begun invading her body ever since she met him. How could she risk throwing that away? She took a deep sip of coffee, and repelled all the dark thoughts. She needed a clear head. The worst thing that could happen would be for him to get up and leave. But if she didn't tell him, then he'd never be able to be open and honest with her. If she was going to lose him to facts, it was better knowing it sooner than later.

"O.K. I'll tell you, but after this conversation I don't ever want to hear it mentioned, not even alluded to, ever again. Deal?"

Aaron nodded. "Deal."

She took a deep breath. "O.K. Here goes: when I was eleven, I used to play house with my friend Rebecca. We would both be single women because no guys ever wanted to play, but sometimes her brother James would join in. He was thirteen and I had a crush on him. When he played, he would be the father and I would be the mother. We would huddle under a blanket in the basement, and pretend it was night. His breath was warm and sweet. One time he asked me if I wanted to kiss him like grown-ups kissed. I giggled and said no. The rest of the time we just stayed under the covers and breathed. I guess he got off on just being close under the covers. But he must have said more to his friends. It wasn't his fault really, no more than it was my mom's fault."

Aaron frowned. "What happened?"
“One night, my mom was going out for dinner with some friends. So she called James to see if he could sit. His parents said he was too young and wouldn’t allow him, but mentioned that James’ friend Tim would probably be able to. Tim lived down the street, but I didn’t really know him, he was older. Maybe fifteen. I only saw him and James playing hockey in the road after school, when I walked home. I would pass them, and they would whisper behind my back when I went up the driveway. I didn’t like Tim because I was sure that James had told him about playing house. I could tell by the way he looked at me, something that made me cringe, like I knew what he was thinking about. Even at that age.”

Aaron watched as Kathrin’s face tensed into a frown. “Do you want to go on?” he asked softly.

“No, I don’t. But I will. Everything went fine the night he baby-sat, and he sent my sisters and I to bed without any problem. After I had been lying there for a while, the light in the hall started bothering me. I hated to sleep with the light on. I called down to Tim and asked him to turn it off. He came up and walked into my room to see what was the matter. He asked me if I was all right, and I told him that I couldn’t sleep. So he sat down on the edge of my bed and rubbed my back. I must have fallen asleep, because when I woke up I was lying on my side and he had his arm over my chest and was sticking his fingers down my underwear. I couldn’t move... I couldn’t move, and I couldn’t say anything. So I just pretended I was asleep until I had enough nerve to roll over onto my stomach.”

Kathrin looked at Aaron, and he tried to keep eye contact. She moved the coffee cup in a circular motion over the table. “Have you heard enough?”

Aaron swallowed. “Is there more?”

“Yeah, there’s more. When I rolled over, he got up and shut and locked the door. He came back to the bed, and sat at the end of it. I could feel him watching me, and then I felt his hand, rubbing my leg. He did that for so long, just rubbed. And I just pretended to sleep. Then I heard him get up and unzip his pants...”

“Oh God, Kathrin.”

“He... well... this is so hard to talk about.” She said, and could feel tears welling in her eyes.

“Go slow.” Aaron said, his eyes glued to the table.

“He pushed himself inside of me. In the worst place. He pushed my head into the pillow, so I couldn’t breathe or speak or scream. I have never felt pain like that since. I lay there crying,
and he tried to comfort me," Kathrin's lips curled up into a frightening grin, "that fucking asshole tried to comfort me as he wiped blood and sperm from my anus. Then he said 'you're such a good girl. I like you much better than your sisters. You won't tell anyone about this, right? It'll be just between us.' Like I'd wanted him to do that to me. Then he cleaned everything up, opened the door and walked down the stairs like nothing happened."

Aaron reached for Kathrin's hand but she pulled away to keep herself under control.

"What did you do?" he asked, brushing away his own tears with the back of his hand.

"Cried myself to sleep. When I woke up he was gone, and I thought it had been a bad dream. Until I went to the bathroom, and all this blood and white stuff fell into the toilet. I was so scared, I thought I was going to die. But I wouldn't tell me mother. I couldn't. I remembered how she acted when Mrs. Martin was with that man. I thought she'd send me straight to Hell."

"What about the guy?"

"He never baby-sat again for us. I always made up some excuse for why I didn't like him. My mom never suspected."

"You didn't tell her?"

"I couldn't then. I was too embarrassed. And I thought that she would think it was my fault, and blame it on me for being a bad Catholic."

"It wasn't your fault! Kathrin you can't think that."

She smiled weakly. "I know. But back then...I knew that I had sinned because I had thought impure thoughts about James."

"You should have said something!"

"I didn't want to go through it again. Physically or emotionally."

Kathrin sat, ripping shreds from the paper napkin, and laying them in straight lines across the table. Aaron reached out and took her hand across the paper. "Did you ever tell anyone?"

"Yes. I told Carol one night in university, but not the details. I wasn't ready to let it all out. Then, I finally told my mother about six years ago, and she cried. She asked me if I wanted to see someone about it. It wouldn't do much good now, would it? I'd feel like a talk-show victim. But the thing is: every time I drive up that street I pass his house and I feel physically sick. But I can't do anything about it." Kathrin said and pulled her hand from Aaron's and lit another smoke.

He cleared his throat. "Did he ever say anything or do anything after?"
“No. When I was nineteen, I saw him at a bar. He was sitting with a girl and they were holding hands. I thought I was going to pass out, so I left. He didn’t see me, or at least he didn’t let on that he saw me.”

“I hate to ask,” Aaron said uncomfortably, “but did anyone else ever…”

“Ever damage me like that?” she asked, fiercely butting out her cigarette.

“I didn’t mean it in that way.”

“I know,” she paused, “yes, I suppose I did.”

“What? What does that mean?”

“When I was sixteen, I took control. Fixed everything.”

Aaron knitted his brows. “I don’t understand.”

“There was this older guy at my high school I really liked, and I thought liked me too. But then my sister warned me that all he wanted was sex, and that he’d already gotten a girl pregnant at our school. I didn’t care so much about the other girl, but the thought of him using me made me feel dirty, since I’d already convinced myself that I wanted to have sex with him. To get it over and done with. Even back then, I didn’t believe in love.

One day after school, I was sitting in the bathroom and I opened up the cupboard. I looked through all the bottles and found a small canister of mousse. I guess it seemed the right size to me. I pulled it out and sat it on the counter. Then I took the jar of Vaseline from the medicine cabinet and gooped the jelly all over the bottom of the canister. I lifted one leg up onto the counter and started to insert the can of mousse. It was freezing, like it was cold and dead.

That’s how I felt doing it. That’s how I feel talking about it: sterile and clinical. There was discomfort and then pain, but I didn’t notice. I felt lifeless, like it was outside my body. Cold and dead. That’s exactly how I felt when I pulled the canister back and saw that the bottom was covered in greasy blood.

When it was all over, I stood at the sink, and rinsed the mousse in hot water. And then I put it back into the cupboard and walked out of the bathroom.”

Aaron watched her light another cigarette. “Why did you do that?”

“I don’t know. Shortly after, I had sex with the guy. I didn’t bleed, so I guess he thought I wasn’t a virgin. It was better that he didn’t think that. I didn’t want him to know he had something over me.”

Aaron nodded. “Sort of like, you beat him to the punch.”
“Yeah, I guess. You know, when I was little I heard that children who suffered as children, spent the rest of their lives in happiness. When I was eleven I knew that I would be the happiest adult on the planet. I had to be, to make up for everything. But I’m still not happy. How many times can you be taken advantage of before you freeze?”

Aaron shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Once. It only takes one time. I still feel like I can’t function.”

“He took that away from you, and you had to take back the only thing you could.”

Kathrin nodded. “I guess that’s it, isn’t it? I made myself bleed for me. To save myself.

There never was a first. No one knows that but you.”

“Thank you.”

“But I still can’t function, even after telling you. There’s no catharsis here, like maybe I hoped there would be. You know why I say goodbye without speaking? The business cards? Why I don’t date people for longer than a wink? Why I never commit?”

Aaron looked at her across the table. “You’re afraid.”

Kathrin smiled briefly. “Because that monster comes out. The one from the shadows in my bedroom when the hall light is on. And it wants to tear me apart. In the eyes. I can see it everywhere I turn, that desperate face, wanting to rip my skin. You think I never let anything get to me. You’re right. Deep, deep down it’s all frozen. There’s no heart anymore.”

Aaron seemed about to say something, but Kathrin cut him off. “Don’t feel sorry, I have it easy. I don’t have to feel at all.”

“Kathrin, you have to feel something.”

She looked out the window. “No. I don’t. I don’t have to feel anything.”

Aaron clapped his palms down on the table. “No you don’t have to feel! But do you feel?”

Kathrin nodded slowly. “Mostly I feel angry. Not because of what he did to me, but because I can’t ever love anyone. I can’t ever trust anyone. All men do is hurt me.”

“Is that why you don’t talk about your dad?”

Kathrin gnawed on her lower lip, and Aaron could see a tremble moving over her mouth. “I used to think that if he was there, he would have stopped it. Or it wouldn’t have happened. I realize that he wouldn’t have been able to change anything, but that’s not the point. He wasn’t there. I couldn’t even depend on him.”

“You can depend on me.”
“I know.”
“Can you feel anything else for me?”
“I don’t know that.”

Aaron smiled, but his eyes avoided her. “You don’t have to.”
“It’s not that. Sometimes I have very strong feelings for you. It’s just... this is going to sound stupid.”
“Try me.”
“I always promised myself that the first time I told someone I loved them, I would have to feel it in my whole heart. It would have to fill everything up, and cover the pain of those things.”
“And it hasn’t.”
“Not yet.”

Aaron nodded solemnly, and stood up. He pulled Kathrin to his chest and hugged her tightly. All around him there was a buzz in the air, and it vibrated through his skull. He knew what she meant. How after so many terrible things happened to someone, they held it against the entire world. He had felt that for a long time. And it was a surprise that he had let Kathrin get as close as she was to him. Because of that he knew that he truly loved her. As much, if not more, than he had loved Lily. He knew what he had to do, but when he spoke the words were hesitant.

“Do you think you could?”

Kathrin smiled. “I’m about ninety-nine percent.”
“Well,” he coughed briefly, “maybe the solution is for us to get closer.”
“Yeah.”

“Kathrin?” he said, pulling her from his body so he could look into her eyes clearly, “I want you to move in with me.”

Kathrin took a step back. At first she thought he was joking, but then his serious look stopped her speculation. He was dead serious. She exhaled, not taking her eyes off of him for a moment. “Into your apartment?”

“Yes. You can think about it, if you want. I’m not going to rush you.”

“No,” she said, “I will.”
With the help of her family and friends the move only absorbed the last day of July. Aaron had also asked two of his male colleagues to help, so in total there was a group of fourteen people working under Ingrid’s supervision, which consisted of giving instructions at every turn. The younger people heeded her advice when she was in sight, but then returned to wrapping the plates in newspaper and not bubble wrap, and carrying furniture over their heads. By five in the afternoon, all of Kathrin’s belongings were somewhere in Aaron’s living room, with the exception of her bed, which she loaned to Andria and Mark for their guest room, her kitchen set, which would find a temporary home in her mother’s garage, and her painting of the lion head, which she wanted to hang in her office at work. Her living room suite fit nicely into Aaron’s apartment, and her desk and computer had been shifted into their new location in Aaron’s sun room where the fish swam happily.

The group heaved a sigh of relief when the last load was delivered to the new address, and then they all returned to Kathrin’s empty apartment for her first and last summer barbecue. Ingrid and Agnes had removed every speck of evidence that anyone had ever lived in Kathrin’s place. Kathrin toured the rooms as if she’d never seen them before, and listened to the silence around her. She had never realized how basic the place was. Or she had forgotten since she’d moved in. She remembered the first time she had walked through the empty rooms, and known from the beginning that the place was perfect. A feeling of emptiness washed over her for a moment - like she was saying goodbye to a member of the family. But, as she walked through the bathroom a silly smile spread over her face. “Goodbye mildewed bathtub. hello Eden.”

In reality she wasn’t giving that much up. Maybe a little bit of privacy, but from the moment that Aaron decided she should have the sun room for her own personal space, she knew that everything was going to be fine.

After a dinner of burgers, potato salad and coleslaw, numerous long-lasting toasts, and several trips to the cooler for beer, the party broke up. Kathrin distributed her new address and telephone number as everyone left and then started picking up plastic plates and cutlery. Once she finished she stepped over to the withering rails and stood in the twilight, overlooking the parking lot out back and the Cardsells’ beautiful roses. Unexpectedly, she felt old. She viewed the past few years of freedom as if looking back decades. Her liberty was disappearing before her very eyes and it startled her. She was giving so much up and yet gaining so much at the same time. *You still haven’t told him,* she reminded herself. She had decided shortly after agreeing to live with Aaron that she did indeed love him, but still hadn’t found the courage to say it. Not that she didn’t want
to, but the perfect moment hadn’t arrived. And after waiting so long, nothing short of a
spectacular announcement would satisfy the imaginings of the scene as they ran through her head.

Aaron found her staring down over the balcony. “Something interesting down there I
should know about?” he asked quietly.

Kathrin laughed. “No. I’m just zoning out.”

“Are you about ready to go?”

“Yeah,” she answered, stooping to pick up the garbage bag at her feet.

He took it from her. “I’ll take it. You say your good-byes, then I’ll meet you out front.”

She took a last turn around the balcony, bidding a silent farewell to the Cardells, then
went inside, careful to close and lock the door behind her. She moved slowly through the hallway
to the kitchen, trailing her fingers over the cool walls and door frames. She walked to her
bedroom, shut the closet door and walked backwards until she was out of the room. She continued
walking backwards through the rest of the rooms, until she stood in the front hall. Something
about the retrograde motion gave her a sense of closure. Like she was really leaving. She stood in
the hallway for a moment, then reached her fingers up to the light switch. She traced the switch
hesitantly then finally tugged it downward. The apartment went dark and Kathrin pulled the door
open.

“Goodbye,” she whispered to the air, and stepped out into the hall.

She spent all of Monday moving her things from their boxes into suitable places around
Aaron’s apartment. Our apartment, she kept reminding herself. It still didn’t feel like she
belonged there, even though every storage space had been altered to fit Kathrin’s things. It was as
if Aaron had taken a measuring tape and divided everything in perfect halves. Kathrin was given
half his closet space, four drawers, one bedside table, two shelves in the storage closet, space in
half the bathroom fixtures, the bottom shelves in all the kitchen cupboards, and two shelves on the
bookcase. She couldn’t believe the obvious effort and preparation Aaron had put into welcoming
her and her belongings. She unpacked box after box for the entire morning, only stopping once an
hour to receive Aaron’s phone calls. He’d promised to check in with her on the hour in case she
needed help with anything. After the third call, she told him that he didn’t need to call so often, but
actually found it sweet when he refused to stop. Time and time again she assured him that
everything was fine, and that she would be done by the time he got home from work. Even if it
killed her.
By mid-afternoon, the only boxes left un-packed were the ones filled with mementos and ornaments for various holidays. Aaron had told her that he would take them to his storage locker in the basement when he got home from work. She moved the boxes to the kitchen counter so that they would be out of the way. All that was left was her laundry basket, a folding clothes’ horse, and her clothing. She grabbed the basket and horse and headed for the room Aaron had pointed out earlier in the morning.

When she opened the door, the darkness of the room astonished her, and she flicked on the light. Immediately she saw why the room was so dark. At the far end, someone had covered the wall, including the window, with some kind of thick, impenetrable paint. Kathrin frowned. Why on earth would someone do that? Probably some freaky previous tenant’s sex room, she mused. She tucked the clothes’ horse beside the dryer, then placed her laundry basket on the hood of the washer, and pulled her detergent and fine washables’ soap from it. She arranged the bottles neatly next to Aaron’s stuff on a shelf, and then looked for a place to store the basket. The table on the other side of the room had been cleared for her - exactly half of it. Kathrin grinned and stepped towards it. She was about to put the basket down when she noticed a slight discoloration on the surface, in the well-defined shape of a large rectangle. Around the perimeter of the marking the table was noticeably darker. Kathrin smiled. Her old drafting table was the same way around the sketching area. She put the basket down and turned off the light on her way out. She’d ask Aaron if they could take off the black paint, at least on the window, when he got home from work.

He promised to do it on the weekend, explaining that he’d never gotten around to it after he moved in. Kathrin gave him a huge ‘tsk’, and teased him for letting his attention to detail lag, even if it was only in regards to a minor item.

The rest of August flew by. Kathrin’s work schedule had been lighter since June, but everyone at the office was getting edgier the closer the fall television season loomed. Once that happened, they would all feel like accountants at tax season. In the mean time Kathrin would enjoy the relaxation. She loved coming home and making dinner with Aaron, then slipping out for a coffee, or a walk, or even to catch a film with Aaron’s arm circling her shoulder the entire time. The apartment had fallen into feeling like home, and even the fish seemed to circle the bowl with more pomp and circumstance than ever before. And the sex was great. Not the desperate sex they’d had when they knew that it could be days or weeks until they got another chance, but slower and calmer because they knew they had the time. He hadn’t brought her to what they referred to as the “o-word”, but Kathrin still found pleasure in their love-making. It had only been four months
after all. Still, she sometimes felt that there was a back-lash from telling him about her past. Every so often during fore-play, he'd stop and cast a sympathetic, even downright pitying, eye at her. Which made her tense up. But at the same time, a whole world had opened up for her with the recounting of the past. She no longer felt that a huge explosion was welling up inside of her. She felt calm. Happy.

Only one thing kept her from believing life was completely grand. Since she'd moved in with Aaron, the phone calls from her friends and family had dwindled to few conversations and they were far between. She and Aaron chalked it up to the fact that everyone wanted her to get settled in and enjoy the whole 'newlywed' lifestyle before her regular mode of existence resumed. She appreciated the thought, but she would have liked to hear from Carol more than once a week. In fact Carol hadn't called at all in the previous ten days. Kathrin knew that she too was at fault and made a note in her day planner to call Carol as soon as she got to work the next morning. At least before Labour Day. Her sisters too. No doubt Jen was choking back her excitement at the thought of the first day of school, and how it was only a matter of years before the soon-to-be baby went off to kindergarten.

The baby was due at the beginning of February, and Jen hadn't even started showing. When Kathrin and Aaron had slipped over to her mother's place for lunch, Jen had looked great. Kathrin had never seen a pregnant woman so glowing, but then again she'd never noticed anyone who was only four months pregnant. She only hoped that if she ever had a child she'd look as good carrying it.

Carol sounded cranky when Kathrin called her. "About time," was all she muttered.

"Sorry," Kathrin apologized meekly, "I've been busy."

"We all have," Carol's responded tersely.

Kathrin was insulted. The onus wasn't only on her. "So what's new?" she asked, skirting the issue to avoid an argument.

"Not much. Work is as usual. And you? How is the happy lover?"

"I'm great, actually." Kathrin smiled.

They chatted for a while about Kathrin's new surroundings, and the weather, and Alison's adjustments as a wife, then Carol dropped her voice into a low whisper. "So, have you told him?"

Kathrin flinched. "Not yet."

"What are you waiting for, a sign from God?"
“No. I’m just waiting for the right moment.”

Carol groaned. “Geez, Kath. There is no such right moment. All you do is wait until he does something to make you smile. Then you tell him. You make the perfect moment, you don’t wait for it to happen.”

“It’s not that easy.” Kathrin moaned.

“Yes it is. It is that easy. You’re just being difficult. Stop being so stubborn.”

Kathrin smiled. “I am not stubborn.”

“Yes you are.”

“No, I’m really not.”

“Then why are we arguing about it?”

“Because it’s so much fun to upset you.”

Carol paused. “Yeah, so I noticed.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kathrin asked.

“Nothing. Just, I guess I’m wondering why it took you so long to get back to me.”

Kathrin frowned. “What? Did you call?”

“Friday.”

“Where?” She racked her brain, but couldn’t locate any remembrance of a call.

“The apartment. Aaron told me he’d leave a message.”

“Carol, I didn’t get the message. I’m sorry. Aaron must have forgotten. I just thought you were mad at me or something.”

“Well, I was,” she conceded, “when you didn’t call back. But hey, don’t worry about it. Welcome to the world of living with a man. You don’t get phone messages, but you do get bulletins about every sporting event weeks in advance.”

Kathrin laughed. “Well from now on, if you don’t hear back from me, leave a message at work.”

“O.K.”

“So, what’s your plan for Labour Day weekend? Anything?”

“Oh yeah, and I’m really excited about it,” Carol said with evident displeasure, “We’re going to Harold’s farm. Though farm is so far from what it is. More like a palace.”

Kathrin laughed. “Well it actually sounds like fun.”

“Then why don’t you and Aaron come?” Carol responded.

“Are you kidding? Harold’s parents? No way. You couldn’t pay me enough.”
“Please?”

“Sorry. I’ve got to prep for the fall season. The programming list comes out that week, and all of our clients want immediate slots. I’ll be swamped.”

Carol didn’t believe her. “You’re just making that up.”

“No, but even if I wasn’t busy, I’d still make something up.”

“Well, call me if you change your mind.”

“I will,” she promised, “but I know I won’t.”

“Well, at least keep in touch. And tell Aaron to shape up or I’m skipping him out.”

“I’ll let him know you said that. Bye.”

Aaron looked shocked when Kathrin reminded him about the missed phone call.

“I didn’t tell you?” he asked, bewildered, “I know I wrote it down somewhere. I’m sure I did.”

Kathrin smiled. “Likely story.”

“Seriously. I always keep a stack of sticky notes right beside the phone.”

Kathrin looked over to the phone and searched the table. There was nothing on it. “You were saying?”

Aaron followed her gaze, then turned back sheepishly to Kathrin. “Usually.”

He got up and began looking around the room. Kathrin watched him search, and stifled a giggle as consternation spread across his brow. When he slipped into the bedroom, and tossed her the face of a true sleuth, she collapsed against the couch laughing. After a moment Aaron jumped out of the bedroom and landed with a thud in the living room. “Aha!” he said, waving a stack of sticky notes triumphantly, “Like I said!”

He tossed the stack over to Kathrin, but she was laughing too hard to retort.

“And ask me where it was.”

“Where was it?” she managed to ask.

“Peeking out from under what looks to be a tornado-struck desk, underneath a mountain of papers!” he pointed an accusing finger at her, then gave her a dead-pan look. “And by the way, your mother called.”

Kathrin flipped over the stack of notes. Clearly underlined was the word ‘call’, followed by a colon, and underneath, ‘Carol’ and ‘mommy’. Kathrin burst into laughter as Aaron jumped
around the table in an energetic victory dance, landing finally right next to her. "So, what do you say now?"

"You're cute."

"And?"

"And I'm sorry."

"And?"

"And I love you."

Both of their smiles vanished. Kathrin sat silently, suddenly in awe of herself.

"Wow. I don't know where that came from," she admitted.

He smiled and laid his hand across her chest. Slowly he fanned his fingers, so that they spread over her ribs, and up to her collar bones. "I do." He responded quietly and with conviction, and left his hand over her heart for some time.

Kathrin woke up one morning in the middle of September to discover that she was losing her mind. Work had gone from busy to absolutely insane. Jamie's girlfriend had moved out, and after Kathrin tried her best to pacify him to no avail, she put up with his grumbling, and tried her best to avoid his internal ogre every possible chance she could. Even Richardson's calm demeanor was ruffled a bit. Kathrin hated the thought of another day at the office, but still forced herself out of bed. And to top everything off, both Carol and her mother were miffed because she was too caught up in her professional life to pay them the attention they felt they deserved. She didn't have the time to worry about it. If they were going to get upset and not call her out of spite, well then, three could play that game.

The only consistent thing in her life was Aaron. He was always around when she needed him: he brought her dinner to the sun room if she was too busy working to go to the table, served her morning coffee in bed before he left for work, and rubbed her feet without even being asked. She couldn't imagine life without him - even if he had some stupid habits. She knew that she herself had some big ones, and that his were very minor foibles in comparison. But still, they irked her. Like how he refused to change his monotonous answering machine message to something more peppy - something that contained their names and not just the telephone number for callers to identify them by. Aaron felt that a more personal greeting invited intrusion. She relented. It was, after all, his number. And he did get business calls on occasion. And his obsession with neatness, which she didn't even like thinking about.
She wanted to make up for all of his thoughtfulness, and decided that for his birthday she had to do something really special. A surprise party was out of the question. She couldn’t get up enough courage to call his parents, and knew very few of his friends, aside from the guys from his office he went out with sometimes. Going away was a bad idea; they were both too busy. She finally decided on a romantic dinner at his favourite Chinese restaurant, and then rattled her brain to find the perfect present. She didn’t realize how hard Aaron was to shop for until she went looking. Store after store, she left empty-handed. He didn’t need any clothes, didn’t want any gadgets. In the end she bought him a new squash racquet, and sighed dismayingly. It was far from perfect.

He left the apartment earlier than usual on his birthday, and Kathrin didn’t have a chance to call him until after her morning meeting. When he answered the phone he was abrupt, and too busy to hear her sing ‘Happy Birthday’. She frowned, and went back to her work. At lunch she slipped out to find a birthday card in the under-ground shopping mews. She had to stop at the automatic teller machine to grab some money, and passed the small art gallery near the bank. Immediately she saw the perfect present. Behind the glass, a gorgeous Bateman print gleamed under the soft track lighting. She moved closer, and read the title: “Path of the panther”. Something about the dark face, and the bright eyes, immediately made her think of Aaron. And the colours were just bright enough to bring out the green tinge to the living room. It would be perfect right above the mantle. She went inside, purchased the print, and told them she’d be back at five to pick it up.

She managed to get the print up to the apartment without any help. She was hoping to mount it on the mantle before Aaron got home. But when she opened the door, she could hear Aaron talking on the phone in the bedroom. He was speaking in a low voice, but seemed to be angry. She placed the print down by the fireplace, and crept slowly towards the bedroom door, so as not to disturb him. “I don’t care. It’s none of your business anyway. Goodbye.” She heard the phone slam down into the cradle.

She stepped quickly away from the door, just before Aaron opened it. He jumped back with a startled expression on his face. “Oh God, you scared me. When did you get back?”

“I just walked in the door. Who were you talking to?”

“A business associate. Jerk!”

Kathrin had seen him mad, only once before, and she didn’t like it. “Well,” she said, throwing her arms around his neck, “happy birthday.”
"Not now Kathrin," he said, pulling her arms away.

She stepped back. He was in a really bad mood. "O. K. I'll just let you cool down then."

She slipped past him into the bedroom to change out of her work clothes, and could hear him flicking the remote with a vengeance. She hoped he'd see the wrapped print and feel badly about snapping at her. It would serve him right. She decided to take a bath, and relax before their romantic dinner. Hopefully by then he'd be himself. If not it was going to be a long night.

When she got out of the shower, he was still in the living room, but the T. V. was off and he was going over some files. She took her time getting ready - she wanted to look nothing less than spectacular for Aaron. Finally, she slipped into her Chinese dress, and sprayed some vanilla perfume over her body. It was close to seven, and their reservation was for 7:30.

"Aaron," she said, stepping out into the living room, "you better go get ready."

He looked up, and glanced quickly at her, then turned his attention to the files again. "In a minute."

She stepped back into the bedroom. He hadn't noticed the print. It was still lying in front of the fireplace. She couldn't figure out why he was so mad. It wasn't like he was turning thirty. And he hadn't even commented on how she looked. She went to the closet and slipped into her heels, then went out to the sun room for a smoke. After she put out the cigarette she went to get Aaron, who was still sitting on the couch. "C'mon, Aaron, we're going to be late," she said gently.

"I have to finish this!" He snapped.

Kathrin stared at him. "Well, if you're busy, we don't have to go." She tried to say it as passively as possible.

He looked up. "Like I would ever hear the end of it!" he said, standing up.

"What is your problem?" she demanded.

"Nothing. Now that I'm up, I might as well get ready."

She watched him brush past her, and head for the bathroom. Before he stepped inside he added, "It stinks like a pool hall in here!"

Kathrin swallowed. He had never been so rude before. She didn't even want to go out. Still, she sat patiently on the couch and calmed down while he shaved and got dressed. They were going to be late. She decided to call the restaurant to let them know. After she'd postponed their reservation, Aaron stepped out of the bedroom, and snatched up his files. "Where are we going, anyway?"

Kathrin smiled. "Your favourite."
“Chinese?”

“Yeah.”

He looked at her like she was an idiot. “You’re not wearing that.”

Kathrin looked down. “What’s wrong with it?”

“We’re going for Chinese food, and you’re wearing a Saigon prostitute’s outfit. They’ll love that!”

Kathrin clenched her teeth. “Fine. Let’s not go then. I’ll call and cancel.”

Aaron glared at her. “I’m dressed now!”

Kathrin stood up. “If you’re going to be a fucking asshole about it, I’d rather not do anything! I’ve tried to be nice all day and put up with your shit, so don’t start with me. And don’t you ever fucking tell me what I can or cannot wear! Do you understand?” she dropped her voice suddenly, “Do you?”

Aaron stood rigidly, and exhaled. “Fine. Let’s go.”

Dinner went badly. Aaron refused to pretend nothing was wrong, and was terse the entire evening. When they got home, Kathrin pointed out his print and handed him his wrapped racket with force. “You know,” she said, going into the bathroom, “I hope you had a wonderful birthday.”

He put the present down on the coffee table, and then got undressed. When Kathrin finally made her way into the bedroom, Aaron was tucked under the covers and acting like nothing was wrong. Kathrin stormed over to the closet, pulled out the blanket, and marched into the living room. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“What does it look like? I’m sleeping on the couch,” she said returning to the bedroom to pluck her pillow from the bed. “Good night.”

She pulled out the couch, and made an uncomfortable bed for herself. Then she lay in the darkness until long after Aaron had fallen asleep.

When she got home the next day, Aaron was waiting at the dining room table, wearing his best suit, and cradling a bouquet of roses in his arms. “I’m sorry.”

Kathrin didn’t respond.

“I was a jerk. I had a bad day and I took it out on you. I won’t ever do it again. I promise.”
She looked at him passively. "You better not."
"Are you mad at me?" he asked tentatively.
"I wasn't mad. I was hurt. You made me feel stupid, and you made me feel cheap."
He stood up. "Kathrin, you're the most important person in my life. I swear I won't do it again."
She pursed her lips, waited a moment and then kissed him. "All right. You're forgiven."
"Can we do it right tonight?"
"What do you mean?"
"I made reservations."
Kathrin smiled. "What do I have to wear?"
He laughed. "I was kind of hoping you'd wear the dress from Alison's wedding. With your hair up in a bun."
Kathrin shook her head. "All right, but how come you're so bossy?"

He opened his first gift when they got home. And swung the new racket across the living room. "I feel like a gladiator," he proclaimed.
"Well, then maybe you'll play like one," Kathrin said, as she slid the print towards him across the floor.
He ripped open the brown paper and pulled the print from the wrapping. "Wow," he said when he'd finally viewed the print. "This is great. Where are we going to put it?"
"I thought over the mantle. With all the black leather, and the green walls it would go nicely."
He nodded approvingly. "Looks good. But I'm surprised. I wouldn't have thought Robert Bateman was your style."
"Actually," she giggled. "The panther kind of reminds me of you. That's why I got it."
He looked at the panther again. Then he looked at his reflection in the glass. "I don't see it."
Kathrin laughed. "C'mon, let's put it up."

They decided to forget about their fight, and it slipped from Kathrin's memory as Thanksgiving got closer. As time moved forward, she viewed all their conflicts with a strange warmth. Everything that happened made her feel real - made their relationship stronger. She no longer recalled the tragic dinner at his parents' place as a painful event, but merely as a bad
evening. She was ready to try again, and decided to woo Aaron with her cooking. She brought it up over dinner. “You haven’t talked to your parents in a while,” she commented over Thai soup.

“Nope,” he said, slurping noodles into his mouth.

“I was thinking, maybe we should try again.”

Aaron grimaced. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe we should invite them over here for Thanksgiving.”

He stared at her and clutched his spoon tighter. “Are you crazy?”

“I just thought…”

“No way! I hate to admit this, but they won’t have changed Kathrin. Let them have dinner at the country club. Like they do every year.”

“They don’t have it at home?”

“No. Too much work.”

“Well, what about Elaine?”

He looked at her strangely. “She’s a chef. She’ll be working.”

“On Thanksgiving?”

“It’s a nice restaurant. They do a great Thanksgiving dinner.”

Kathrin sighed. “O.K. I give up. I guess we’ll go to my mom’s.”

“Tell you what?” he smiled, “Why don’t we do Thanksgiving here? Just the two of us.”

Kathrin thought about it. “Well, my mom might get upset.”

“She does have two other daughters,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, but I think that Jen and Scott are going to his family’s place.”

“Andria?”

“She’ll be there.”

“So, there you are.”

“I’ll have to see what she says.”

Telling her mother was easier than she thought, considering that Ingrid was a total bitch from the very onset of the conversation. The first thing she said was: “Oh, you’re calling me before I die. How very nice.”

That set the tone for the rest of the conversation, and after a few snippy comments Kathrin couldn’t control herself any longer. “Listen mom, I’m just calling to tell you that Aaron and I are going to have Thanksgiving dinner here.”
Her mother paused for a moment. "Fine!" she snapped finally, and slammed the phone down into the cradle.

Kathrin shook her head dismally. She was tempted to call her mother back, but knew that they'd only get into a bigger fight. She was sure that when her mom relayed the conversation to Jen, Jen would explain the situation very rationally to her mother.

She ordered a ten-pound turkey from the butcher's a few days early, and then polled Aaron to find out what he liked for to eat for Turkey Day. They finally agreed on a traditional fare, with mashed potatoes, candied squash, cranberry sauce instead of gravy, and a mandarin and almond salad. Kathrin was pleased with their choices, and imagined herself as a glorified Betty Crocker. She bought most of the groceries after work on Friday down at the market, and then went out before twilight and collected the first fallen leaves off the ground. For the most part the weather had still been very mild, but some of the trees had begun turning, and Kathrin longed to take a drive east of the city. The way to Kingston always seemed to turn golden before Toronto. Maybe she'd ask Aaron to go with her on Monday.

When she returned to the apartment she spread the leaves over the centre of the table but found that they weren't festive enough. In previous years she'd always picked up a few gourds to decorate with. If she got up early enough on Saturday she'd do the same for Aaron's apartment. She looked around the apartment with distaste. The leaves did nothing to create the right atmosphere for a Thanksgiving Dinner. *If only I had...* she smacked her hand against her head as the sudden realization hit her. Somewhere in the boxes of Christmas decorations and mementos, there were a few cobs of Indian corn, and a fat papier mache turkey she'd crafted two years before. She ridiculed herself for being so forgetful. When Aaron got home she'd ask him for the locker key, and find her plump turkey. She was quite sure she knew exactly where it was.

Aaron walked through the door as she was making the cranberry sauce. He inhaled the tart scent, and smiled. "Smells good. I can hardly wait until Sunday."

"Patience," she said and pushed her cheek out to receive his kiss.

He took off his coat, and hung it up carefully. "How as work?"

"Not great," she muttered, "a four hour long meeting, and no one let me go for a smoke break."

"Then you should quit."

Kathrin laughed. "If I took everything as a sign, I wouldn't be alive."
“Well, it’s food for thought. You really should quit.”
“I know, I know.”
“My day wasn’t much better, so let’s not talk about it.”
“O.K. I need the keys for the locker.”
“Why?”
“Thanksgiving decorations.”
Aaron grimaced. “Do we have to?”
She tried to swat him but he was too far out of her reach. “Of course we do.”
“O.K. Do you know where they are?”
“I think so. In the box marked ‘fragile’.”
He stared at her. “They’re all marked ‘fragile’.”
“The big computer box.”
“I’ll go do it now,” he offered.
“No, it’s O.K. I can do it.”
Aaron shook his head. “That’s silly. I might as well do it before I get comfortable, and you’re busy being the master chef.”
Kathrin smiled. “Thanks Aaron.”
“No problem. What am I getting?”
“Some Indian corn, and a huge paper turkey.”
Aaron hesitated at the door. “On second thought...”
“Come on. It only happens once a year.”
He turned towards her. “Why do I have a feeling I’m going to hate Christmas?” he asked, then stepped out into the hall before she had a chance to retort.

When he returned they ate a quick dinner, and then Kathrin decided she had enough energy to go grab the gourds at the small store around the corner, and then disappear for a quick coffee and a few smokes out of Aaron’s disapproving eyes. She had to admit he was a good influence on her. Her cigarette consumption had declined considerably since she’d moved in. Not that he was ever rude about her smoking in the apartment, but his look was enough to indicate displeasure. She usually slipped out for a walk and smoke before bed. Only when she worked late into the night did she smoke in the apartment, and even then only smoked in the sun room, with the sliding glass door closed completely.
She pulled on her fleece and slipped out into the hallway, calling loudly to Aaron who was in the bedroom doing some work. “Hon?”

“Yeah,” came his muffled reply.

“I’ll be back in about half an hour or so.”

“Have fun,” he called.

He typed for nearly an hour after Kathrin left, and then decided to call it quits for the evening. He had three days to finish the financial report before Tuesday, and wasn’t really worried. After a quick shower, he pulled on fresh boxers and slipped into bed. He turned the light out, and snuggled down into the duvet. By the time Kathrin got home he’d be sound asleep. Her half hour estimations always seemed to fall short by at least an hour.

Kathrin woke up Sunday morning to Aaron touching her shoulders and neck. She rolled over and they started kissing. The phone rang. Aaron groaned. “Don’t answer it. They’ll leave a message.”

After a slow and lazy session of love-making she rolled out of bed, and headed for the shower. Aaron got up, and went to make breakfast. While the eggs were cooking he remembered the phone call, and went to check the messages. He erased the message. Kathrin came out in her towel. “Who was it?”

“A hang-up. Probably a Jehovah’s Witness.”

She kissed him, grabbed a cup of coffee from the pot, and then ran her fingers through her wet hair. “You know, we have to stop having sex.”

Aaron flipped his head around. “What? Why?”

“I can’t get the tangles out of my hair.”

“Well then, maybe you should be on top more.”

Kathrin grinned. “I’m serious. Maybe I’ll see if I can get an appointment for today. Get it all chopped off.”

Aaron shook his head. “Don’t. I love your hair.”

“Just a trim then.”

He stepped towards her. “No. You know the reason I fell for you in the first place was because of your hair... and your eyes. But I noticed your hair first.”

“How could you miss it?”
He laughed. "Good point. But if you cut your hair, you wouldn't be the same," he complained.

"And wouldn't that be exciting? You could have sex with another woman and get away with it."

"Please?" he begged.

"Oh, all right, but don't blame me if you have to brush it out sometime."

"It's a deal."

She got dressed and then pulled out every item she needed to prepare the turkey. Aaron looked on, mystified at the process. "I didn't realize that the stuffing went inside the body."

Kathrin laughed. "I think it's where the term 'head up his ass' came from. The neck goes in there too."

"Gross. I am now leaving the vicinity of the kitchen."

"Oh no you're not. I forgot to pick up some rosemary, so I'm going to the store. You finish putting the stuffing up there."

Aaron groaned. "No. Let me get the rosemary."

Kathrin turned to him. "On one condition: if you can tell me what rosemary looks like you can go."

Aaron stuffed the turkey.

It took three stores before Kathrin found fresh rosemary. She returned to the apartment after almost an hour. "What took you so long?" Aaron asked.

Kathrin grimaced. "Couldn't find any."

"Well, I stuffed her."

"Good. Did my mother call?"

"Nope, was she supposed to?"

"Well, I thought she would, but I guess she's still mad."

They finished the turkey, and then slipped it into the oven. Kathrin spent the rest of the afternoon finishing the side dishes while Aaron watched football, occasionally getting up to help her. By five o'clock she was a little upset that neither her mother nor her sisters had called. She took a shower, and then tried Andria's place. There was no answer. She called her mother's house, and let the phone ring fifteen times before she hung up. Then she tried again, thinking she'd called the wrong number. There was still no answer. She hated the fact that her mother refused to get an answering machine.
Kathrin was still frowning when she stepped into the living room.

“Something wrong?” Aaron asked.

“No one is picking up at my mother’s house.”

“Maybe they went for a walk.”

Kathrin shrugged. “Maybe,” she said, but she didn’t believe it.

They ate dinner shortly after six, and Aaron was full of compliments. Kathrin beamed as she refilled his wine. Her first real turkey had been a success. Of course, Andria’s recipe was to thank, but Kathrin concealed that fact from Aaron. After dinner she started the dishes and asked Aaron to try her mother’s line, but there was still no answer. Aaron kept telling her not to worry, but the uneasiness grew as the evening wore on.

“Aaron, I’m starting to get worried. My mother would have called, no matter how mad she is at me. Do you think I should drive over there?”

Aaron looked at her. “It’s only 8:30. Kathrin, they probably got an invitation to someone else’s place. What about Agnes?”

Kathrin thought about it. “Yeah, they might have gone there.”

“Well, call her.”

“I don’t have her number.”

“Then don’t worry about it. Call your mom first thing in the morning. O.K.?”

Kathrin smiled. “O.K. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to sound like a worry wart.”

“You’re concerned. It’s understandable.”

He patted the leather couch and Kathrin sat down next to him. They turned on the T.V. and by ten, Aaron had fallen asleep on the couch, but Kathrin wasn’t the least bit tired. She kept glancing at the phone, willing it to ring, and nervous energy welled up inside of her. She decided that she’d call one last time at eleven. By that time her mother would be home. She looked back at the T.V. There was nothing on. She didn’t want to wake up Aaron. She needed something to do. She got up suddenly and walked around the living room. The leaves, corn, gourds and turkey were still on the table. She picked up the leaves and threw them into the garbage, then gathered the corn and the turkey. After putting the corn into a plastic bag, she carried the decorations to the door, lifted Aaron’s keys from the counter, and stepped out of the apartment, quietly shutting the door behind her.

The room with the storage lockers was dimly lit, and the smell of cold concrete and mothballs gagged her for a moment. She scanned the numbers on the lockers, and slowly moved
down the narrow passageway. Near the end of the room she found Aaron’s locker, and could see through the wire to a neat stack of boxes. She put down her turkey and the corn and searched the key ring until she found a small gold key, and inserted it into the lock. The lock opened, and Kathrin pulled it from the locker. She opened the door, and looked at the boxes in front of her. They were hers. She pulled the chain for the overhead light bulb, and it gave her a bit more vision in the gloom. Carefully she pulled each one down, until she found the computer box. She opened the lid, and slipped the turkey and the corn inside. Around her were all of Aaron’s things: a set of skis, an old dresser, and an assortment of neatly labeled boxes. Some of the listed contents were in Aaron’s neat handwriting, and some were in someone else’s. She leaned in closer. Probably his mom’s. She moved backwards and was about to re-stack her boxes, when the light flashed on something metallic near the back of the locker. Kathrin peered around Aaron’s skis, and found herself looking at some kind of black metal box. It looked like an overhead for transparencies. Kathrin frowned. Why did Aaron have that? Then she immediately understood. It was a photography enlarger. Lily’s. The thought struck her with force, and for a moment she felt completely winded. She took a deep breath, and tried to reason everything out. It made no sense for Aaron to have an enlarger, unless Lily gave it to him. Maybe it was a present and she gave it back to him when they broke up. But a piece was still missing from the picture, and it took a moment before it fell into place. An enlarger went in a darkroom. And a darkroom had no light and no windows. Kathrin shut her eyes. How could you have been so stupid? Lily had lived with Aaron. Aaron had lived with Lily. And Kathrin had never even thought about it. The laundry room had been Lily’s darkroom, and the enlarger had made the mark on the table.

But still, she thought, why would she leave her enlarger? It looked like it was in good shape, but Kathrin didn’t really know that much about photography. Maybe Lily had bought another one, and couldn’t be bothered to drag both of them out with her. Kathrin felt like she’d been hit by an airplane propeller. She’d never even thought to ask Aaron about Lily - not in depth anyway. When she got upstairs, feathers were going to fly. Then she shook her head. She wasn’t going to confront Aaron about her discovery. He had probably been afraid she’d overreact if he told her, which was what she was doing. It wouldn’t do them any good anyway. They’d only get into another fight about invasion of privacy. He had told her countless times that his relationship with Lily was over - end of story, and she finally believed him. She was mature enough to handle his past like an adult should. She’d just go back upstairs, and if he ever asked where the
decorations had gone, she’d simply say she’d put them away. And her response would lead him to believe that she hadn’t seen anything.

She composed herself, and then finished re-stacking the boxes. And applauded herself for being a grown-up.

When she got back upstairs, and had replaced the keys on the counter, Aaron was still sleeping on the couch and it was nearly eleven. She couldn’t wait any longer. She approached the phone, and picked up the receiver. The sudden beeping in her ear startled her. There were messages on the machine. Kathrin frowned. Surely the phone would have woken up. She dialed in for the messages.

It was Andria. “Kath, it’s seven thirty. We’ve been trying to get you all day. I don’t have a number here, so I’ll keep trying.”

The next message was a hang-up, but sounded like it was from the same place as the first call. Kathrin erased both and slowly hung up the phone. She didn’t like the feeling coursing through her veins, and she felt anxiety welling in her throat. The ringer was on; they’d heard it in the morning. She checked to make sure. The button indicated that it was indeed on, and Kathrin’s frown deepened. Maybe, the ringer had died completely. She picked up the phone again, and was about to call Carol and have her test the ringer, when she realized there was no dial tone. “Hello?”

There was a silence, then Andria’s voice. “Kath? Is that you?”

“Yeah. Andria?”

“Oh thank God. Where the Hell have you been?”

“I’ve been here. Something’s wrong with the phone, I just got your messages. What’s the matter?”

Andria paused. “It’s Jen.”


“She’s in the hospital.”

“What?” Kathrin asked, her voice rising in pitch and intensity.

Aaron stirred on the couch.

“She lost the baby.”

Kathrin shut her eyes. “Oh God! Where are you?”

“Toronto General.”

“I’ll be right down.”
She hung up the phone. Aaron sat up on the couch. “What’s the matter?”

“Jen miscarried.”

“Oh geez. Do you want me to go with you?”

“No. Stay here and fix the phone. It won’t ring. I’ll call later.”

She grabbed her purse and raced for the door.
Andria and her mother were waiting in the hall when Kathrin entered the ward. She approached her sister, whose face was white and drawn. It looked like she hadn’t slept in a week, and her mascara had smudged across her eyes. Kathrin tried to form a smile with her lips, but couldn’t. She kissed Andria then turned to her mother and received a long hug. “How is she?” Kathrin asked.

“Tired. Scott’s in there now, but she’ll want to see you after,” Andria replied, and wiped her nose with a tissue.

Kathrin fumbled to open her purse, and pulled out a package of tissue. She offered a fresh one to Andria, and then wiped her own nose. “I’m so sorry I didn’t know earlier.”

Andria patted her on the back. “Don’t worry. You’re here now. That’s all that matters.”

She indicated to a row of chairs in the hallway, and the three women sat down. Ingrid clutched a styrofoam coffee cup in her thin hands, and kept gnawing at her lower lip with her teeth.

“What happened?” Kathrin asked once they were seated.

Andria blew her nose. “She started spotting last night, and her doctor told her to take it easy - nothing unusual. She called me. It was the same thing with Danielle, remember? But everything turned out fine, so Jen calmed down a bit.”

Ingrid interjected. “When she woke up this morning the blood was bright red. She called her doctor, and he told her to come here.”

“They couldn’t find a heartbeat.” Andria stood up, and began pacing the floor.

“How did she...” Kathrin began, but couldn’t get the words out.

Andria turned around, and Kathrin saw tears forming in the corners of her eyes. “She had to deliver it.”

Kathrin clamped her hand over her mouth. “Oh my God!” she mumbled.

Ingrid burst into fresh tears, and Kathrin realized how traumatic it was for both of them. No doubt they were exhausted. She reached over and took her mother’s hand, squeezing it tightly. Ingrid tried to smile. “She’ll be fine, I know,” Ingrid stammered.

Scott stepped out into the hallway, and Kathrin turned towards him. He looked frailer than she’d ever seen him, and his shoulders sagged under his flannel shirt. She stood up and went to him. As he walked towards her, she felt all the pain he was holding in. Suddenly a warmth spread up her face until her eyes were filled with tears. She blinked frantically, and Scott disappeared under a glaze of water. When she had controlled her emotions, she hugged him powerfully. “I am so sorry,” she whispered hoarsely.
He hugged her, and then pointed to the doorway from which he’d come. “She’s been waiting to see you.”

Kathrin nodded and stepped towards the doorway. She could no longer see her mother, but could hear her sobbing quietly behind her. She opened the door and slipped inside the room. The white curtain was pulled around the bed, and a dim light shone above it. Kathrin moved towards the curtain, and slowly pulled it back. Jen’s eyes opened immediately and she stared dazedly for a moment before she realized it was Kathrin.

Kathrin looked at her sister. Jen’s eyes were red and swollen, but the rest of her face was ashen. Her body was covered tightly with crisp white sheets, and Kathrin could make out the small hump of belly where the baby should have been. Kathrin swallowed and stepped to the bed. “Jen.”

“Hi,” she replied with a raspy voice.

Kathrin sat down on the edge of the bed, and leaned over to give her sister a lingering hug. She could hear Jen’s shallow breaths, and the clearing of her throat. Finally they pulled apart. Jen’s eyes were tearless and Kathrin fought hard to contain hers. Jen tried to smile, but her eyes compressed in obvious pain. “I lost him.”

“I know.” Kathrin said, sniffing up the drip in her nose.

“They let me hold him after. He would have been so beautiful.”

Kathrin took her sister’s hand. “I know he would have.”

Jen gazed at the end of the bed. “I’m so tired.”

“I can let you sleep if you want to.”

Jen shook her head. “No. I waited all day for you. They don’t understand.”

“Who?”

“Scott, mom, Andria. All of them. When they brought him to me, I looked at him, and I couldn’t see his eyes. And I thought of what you said that day. Of how babies trust you. And I knew that I couldn’t even offer him that. He couldn’t see how much I wanted to protect him.”

Kathrin felt a tear roll down her face. “Jen, it’s not your fault.”

“I know. But I still feel like I did something wrong.”

“You didn’t.”

Jen turned her eyes to Kathrin. “I held him in my arms, and even after they had told me there was no heartbeat, even after I knew, I sat there praying. Whispering in my head ‘C’mon. All you have to do is breathe. Just one breath.’ And for a minute I thought I heard him, I thought I
heard his heart beat. And then they took him away. Before I even said ‘hello’. Do you know how much that hurts?"

Kathrin wiped her eyes. “No.”

“My whole body hurts. It shouldn’t. It should feel empty, but it’s full.”

Kathrin wiped her nose on her sleeve, and then the tears came. Jen squeezed her hand tightly, and watched her with compassion. And then she pulled Kathrin down until Kathrin’s head was lying on her chest. Jen stroked her hair while Kathrin cried for her sister. Then Jen began to speak in the soft soothing voice Kathrin remembered from childhood. “I always pretended I was your mother when we were little girls. That you were my baby, even if you were only a little younger than I was. I want that again. I want to feel like someone’s mother.”

“You will,” Kathrin murmured.

“I don’t think so. I don’t think I can go through it again.”

“Yes, you can. When the time is right.”

Jen stopped stroking her hair. Kathrin waited for a moment, then sat up. Jen was looking at her intently. “What’s wrong?” Kathrin asked.

“I want to bury him.”

“Then we’ll bury him.”

Jen smiled weakly. “You’ll help?”

“Of course I will.”

A single tear dropped from Jen’s eye. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

She waited until Jen had finally drifted off to sleep, then turned off the light and crept out of the hospital room. Her mother was curled up on the hallway chairs dozing, but woke up when Kathrin went over to her. “She’s asleep.”

“Thank goodness.”

Kathrin sat down, and Scott and Andria moved over from the nurses’ station. They were all exhausted, and the strain showed on their faces. Scott hugged Kathrin again, then addressed all three women. “You guys should go home. You look awful.”

“Don’t be silly,” Ingrid responded.
“Ingrid, there’s no sense in us all being here and getting no sleep. The nurse is bringing me a cot so I can be with her. Hopefully, they’ll let her leave tomorrow, and then you can stay with us for as long as she needs you.”

Andria nodded. “He’s right mom. She’ll need us more when she wakes up. Not now. Why don’t you stay at my place tonight?”

Ingrid relented. “All right, but you call us if anything happens.”

Scott promised her would, and then Andria led Ingrid to the elevators. Kathrin lingered behind. When her sister and mother had left, she slumped down on the chairs. Scott sat next to her. “Are you sure you’re O.K.? Kathrin asked, “Can I do anything?”


“Yeah, I know, but don’t worry, she’ll be fine. It’ll always hurt, but you guys will make it through. You love each other.”

“It was so important for her to see you. What did she say?”

“She wants a funeral.”

Scott frowned. “For the baby? Can we do that?”

“Yeah. The doctors will tell you how. I’ll help.”

“Why?”

“I think she needs closure. You both do. To keep him alive inside,” she said, placing her hand over her heart.

“You know, she loves you more than anything. All day she kept asking for you.”

Kathrin shook her head. “I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner. I didn’t get Andria’s message until after dinner. The phone’s been messed up since this morning.”

Scott looked up at her. “So you didn’t get my message either then?”

Kathrin frowned, and twirled the used tissue in her hand. “No. You left a message?”

“Yeah, around ten.”

Kathrin’s hand froze above the tissue. “No. I didn’t get it,” she responded vacantly.

“Well, I’m glad you got here anyway.”

It took her a moment to respond. “So am I.”

Scott stood up, and Kathrin followed him to the elevators. “Call me tomorrow?” she asked as he pushed the elevator button for her.

“Sure thing,” he said, kissing her on the cheek, “thanks.”

She stepped into the elevator, and pressed the button for the lobby.
Aaron was sitting in the living room when she entered the apartment. He got up immediately and went to help her take off her coat. After he hung the coat on a hanger, he turned to her. “You O.K.?” he asked.

She didn’t respond. Instead, she moved to the couch and sat down. Aaron got a glass of water from the kitchen, and placed it in front of her. “Is everything all right?”

Kathrin looked up at him, and nodded slowly. “Yes. Did you fix the phone?”

He sat down. “Yeah. For some reason it was set on automatic pick up. I re-set it. Why?”

“Scott called this morning. He said he left a message, but I didn’t hear it.”

Aaron shrugged. “Oh, that’s weird.”

Kathrin’s eyes pierced his. “Yeah. Didn’t you say there was a hang-up this morning?”

“Yes.”

“But no message?” she mused.

“No. Kathrin, why are you looking at me like that?”

“I don’t know. It just seems really strange, that’s all.”

He frowned. “I agree. Are you sure you’re all right?”

Kathrin leaned back against the couch and nodded. “Just tired I guess.”

“Do you want to talk about the hospital?”

She reached for her glass and took a sip of water. “Not now. Maybe tomorrow.”

He looked at her oddly. “Is something else bothering you?”

“How come you never told me you lived with Lily?”

Aaron’s head jolted backwards. “What?”

“How come you never told me you lived with Lily?”

“How did you know?”

She didn’t want to tell him about the storage locker. “I’m not an idiot. I figured out that the laundry room was her dark room from the paint. It was just a hunch. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Aaron sighed. “I don’t know. Because I thought it would upset you.”

“You keep everything from me because it might upset me. First your parents, now this. What else?”

“There’s nothing else.”
"I don't know if I can believe that." Kathrin countered.

"What do you want me to say?"

She looked at him. "I want you to tell me the truth."

"About what?"

"About Lily."

Aaron threw up his hands. "Why?"

"Because I told you about my past, and you said you'd tell me about yours sometime. Now I want to know."

He got up abruptly and walked to the mantle. "At two o'clock in the morning?"

"I won't be able to sleep anyway."

He let out a long sigh. "O.K. You want to know? I'll tell you. One day I was walking down on the boardwalk, and a photographer was doing a shoot. One of the lights got blown over by the wind, and I stopped to help. Lily was the photographer. She asked me if she could buy me a drink. I accepted. We started dating. She moved in. Things went badly. That's it."

Kathrin scowled. "That's not it. Why did it end?"

Aaron turned to the mantle. "Things got really bad."

"How?" she pushed.

He spun around. "Kathrin sometimes things just go badly. There's no reason for it. It just ended."

"Did you love her?"

Aaron seemed stunned at the question. He thought about it for a few moments. "Yes," he said finally, "yes, I did."

"Then why aren't you with her now?"

"Because her kind of love was expensive. It cost me more than anyone would ever want to lose. That's why I didn't date anyone after her."

Kathrin swallowed. "Then why do you still have all her stuff in the locker?"

He stood moving, and slowly turned towards Kathrin. "You went in there?"

Kathrin felt ashamed. "Yes. I went to put the decorations away."

"Without asking me?" he growled.

"I didn't know her stuff was there!" she returned vehemently.

"I told you not to snoop in my things!"
“Aaron, this is our apartment now,” she said, trying to defend herself, “my things were down there too.”

He swept his arm across the mantle, sending the baby pictures and greeting cards flying to the floor. “How dare you?”

She sprang to her feet. “How dare I? Listen to yourself! You’re mad because I found Lily’s enlarger in our storage space. How dare you!”

He took a step closer to her, and Kathrin suddenly feared him. She retreated a few steps, but continued yelling. “Why is her stuff there? Why the hell do you have your ex-girlfriends belongings in your locker, when she moved out?”

Aaron grabbed her arm. “Because she never moved out!”

Kathrin stopped, and her arms fell to her side. “What do you mean, ‘she never moved out?’” she asked quietly.

Aaron’s face turned pale, and he looked towards the ground. “Because she’s dead.”

Kathrin heard the words, but couldn’t respond. She felt behind her for support, and sank gradually onto the couch. Aaron remained silent and motionless. It seemed like years before either of them spoke. Finally Kathrin looked up. “Aaron. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

He shuffled near the mantle. “I know. I should have told you.”

She covered her hand with her mouth and gently rubbed her cheeks with her fingers. “I don’t know what to say.”

He looked up, and Kathrin saw that he was crying. She didn’t think she could handle any more tears, but still needed to know everything he would tell her. “How did it happen?”

“Car accident.”

Kathrin grimaced. “Were you there?”

He shook his head. “No. I didn’t find out for five hours. It was our anniversary.”

She stood up and went to him. Her hands found his cheeks, and she pushed her warm palms against his skin. “Sweetheart, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

He looked at her mournfully, and then took her hand and led her to the couch. They both sat down and he clung to her hand as the tears streamed down his face. “I wanted to tell you, but I was so scared. I thought you’d get freaked out. I thought you’d leave me if I told you that I had a dead ex-girlfriend. Like you wouldn’t be able to handle it. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. It must hurt so much sometimes.”
He pulled away. “It did. For so long. But I was only in love with what she had been when we first started out. At the end, it was over anyway. But no matter how hard I tried to remember that, I only felt guiltier. Like I’d caused it. But the worst part is, since I’ve met you, it doesn’t hurt any more. Is that wrong?”

Kathrin shook her head, and once again her eyes filled with tears. “Of course not. But if it ever does hurt, I will understand. You loved her.”

“No. No, you don’t understand. I feel a thousand times more for you. You’re the most perfect woman I’ve ever met. I knew it from the first moment I saw you. But then I feel guilty for not having loved Lily enough. Like I’m trampling on her spirit. Because I love you more than anyone I’ve ever known.”

She wiped away her tears frantically. “And I love you too.”

“But not like I feel! I would lay down my life for you. Do anything to make you happy. You’re going to go through me like all those others, and then leave me.”

She looked at his raw face, and saw how miserable he was. His eyes were swollen and red, and small drops of spittle were lining his mouth. Her heart went out to him. “No, I won’t.”

“You can’t promise that. You can’t promise me that you’ll never leave me.”

She leaned over and kissed his wet face again and again. “Of course I won’t leave you. I love you.”

He tucked his head into the nape of her neck and gurgled his words through tears.

“Promise me. You have to promise.”

“I swear. I’ll never leave you Aaron. Never.”

He pressed his face against her cheek and gripped her tightly with his arms. “Really?”

She lifted his face to hers. “Really.”

“Then,” he paused to wipe his eyes, “marry me.”

Her heart skipped a beat, and her body suddenly stiffened. She pulled away from him and stared into his bloodshot eyes. “Aaron? Are you serious?”

“More than I’ve ever been.”

She swallowed, and reached for the glass of water. A billion thoughts raced through her mind, and she couldn’t think clearly. She didn’t realize how long she stared into space until Aaron cleared his throat. “Is that a no?”

“But...um...”

He sighed and leaned back against the couch, then shut his eyes. “It’s too soon, isn’t it?”
Her mouth hung open as she shook her head slowly. “It’s not that. It’s just that this night has been so emotional. I’m not thinking rationally. I need time… but that doesn’t mean I don’t love you. I just need to sort everything out in my head first.”

He brought his head down and looked at her. “How long?”

“A day, or two at the most. Please.”

He lowered his head back onto the couch. “I’ll never leave you,” he said to the air.
The hospital released Jen on Monday afternoon. Kathrin packed an overnight bag, then left Aaron a note by the phone. He'd left early Monday morning without waking her, and she hadn't seen him. She had no idea where he had gone, but was glad he wasn't around. It wasn't that she was trying to avoid him, but her thoughts were so completely occupied with Jen's collapse that she didn't want to be torn between two situations. In retrospect she felt that his timing had been unfair. He could have chosen a better time to ask her to marry him. Of course he probably hadn't known what he was saying until the words were out of his mouth, but no matter what, Kathrin couldn't face him until she knew that everything was all right with Jen and Scott.

Jen was still pale when Kathrin went up to take her some soup. Her sister's eyes were glossy, and she didn't want to talk. Kathrin sat by her bed, and waited until the soup turned cold. "You should eat."

"I can't."

Kathrin carried the tray back down to the kitchen, where Andria, Mark and Ingrid and Scott's parents were seated at the kitchen table. They looked at the bowl of cold chicken noodle soup, but no one made a comment. "Where's Scott?" Kathrin asked.

"In the garage. He's been there since we got back." Andria answered her question while writing on a pad of paper.

"What are you doing?"

Her sister looked up. "The funeral preparations. I don't think either one of them are up to it right now."

Kathrin bit her lip. "Don't you think that's a bit soon?"

Andria's face pinched up. "I know, but we have to start now."

"Today?"

Andria pushed away the pad. "I'll do it tomorrow."

Ingrid heaved a sigh of relief, and got up from the table. "This whole thing is so depressing. I wish someone had some good news to share."

Kathrin turned to put the soup bowl on the counter. She refused to share the events of the previous night. It was too inappropriate. The news that Aaron had proposed would have to wait - at least until she had an answer for him.

They spent the rest of the day trying to feed Jen and Scott. Both refused to eat anything. Scott's parents left before dinner, making Ingrid promise to keep in touch. Andria and Mark left shortly after dinner to return to Danielle. They had thought it in bad taste to bring her with them,
and Kathrin was relieved. He mother puttered around the kitchen, putting away dinner plates, and Scott disappeared into the hallway. After a few minutes Kathrin left the kitchen and walked through the rooms on the first floor. She heard a creak above her, and proceeded up the flight of stairs. When she got to the landing she waited to hear the creak again, but the house was silent. She turned around the staircase and walked towards the nursery. The room was dark except for the night light’s glow. Kathrin pushed the door open and stepped inside. Scott’s lone figure stood at the draped window staring at the crib. Kathrin approached him, and he shifted uneasily. “I was thinking,” he said absently, “I should start moving this stuff out.”

She went over to him, and gently placed her arm on his shoulder. He flinched, then relaxed against her touch. In the dim light she could see that he was crying. “You don’t have to.”

“What am I supposed to do?” he begged her to answer.

“Wait until you’re ready.”

He shook his head. “I feel so helpless. But Jen...she’s lost everything that was important to her. And I can’t say I’m sorry enough to make it better for her.”

“Just be there for her.”

He reached out and ran his fingers over the crib Mark had made. “Have you ever loved anything so much that you feel its pain? That’s what it’s like. She won’t get over this. And there’s nothing I can do to help her. I want to pack this room up so she can forget. But she won’t. Ever.”

“I know.”

“Can you do me a favour Kathrin?”

“Of course.”

“Let me sit here for a while. Alone.”

She nodded, and walked out, shutting the door behind her. She felt like she was in a funeral home. Or a library. Where every word was whispered. She wished that she could walk out the front door and forget about everything, but knew it was impossible. Instead she went to the guest bedroom, and lay down on the bed. She was sharing it with her mother for the night. It had been a long time since she’d slept with her mother, and somehow, it made her feel better.

A few hours later, they climbed into bed. Both women read for almost an hour, then Ingrid yawned, and shut her book. Kathrin glanced over. “You done?”

“Hmm.” Ingrid responded.
Kathrin took the book from her mother’s hand, and then placed both books on the bedside table. She leaned over and turned out the light. “Good night mom.”

“Goodnight sweetie.”

She could hear her mother’s slow breathing in the darkness and tried to match it. Her eyes refused to shut no matter what she did, or how she shifted to make herself more comfortable. After half an hour, she gave up and stared at the ceiling. She knew that her mother was doing the same thing. “Mom?”

“Yes?”

“It’s going to be O. K., right?”

Her mother rolled towards her and patted her arm lightly. “Of course it will. We just have to believe, and everything will be fine.”

“How do you know? How do you know it will be fine?”

Her mother trailed her fingers up Kathrin’s arm, and then rested them in the crook of her elbow. “Kathrin, I never told anyone this before,” she said quietly in the darkness, “Your father and I had a miscarriage right before Jen. I was devastated. I thought my life had come to an end. Back then it wasn’t like today. The doctors thought it was something the mother had done. The church believed the death of a baby was because of the parents’ sins. They made me feel like I had murdered my baby. But your father carried me through. About a week after the miscarriage, he and I stayed up all night talking. We cried for hours together, and then just held each other. Months later, one day we realized that we had moved on, and away from it without really noticing. It was as if the pain of it got smaller every day until there was only the tiniest bit left. I still carry that little piece with me, but I can live with it. I had three beautiful daughters, and you were all such perfect babies. And even though I still think about how everything would have been so different, I know that God did it for a reason: so I could have you three. And that’s how I know it will be fine.”

Kathrin leaned over and kissed her mother’s hand. “I’m glad you told me that.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. I never knew. But maybe you should tell Jen.”

“Do you think so? You don’t think it will upset her?”

“No. I think that’s exactly what she needs to hear.”

“I will then.” Ingrid said, squeezing Kathrin’s arm once, then rolling over. “Good night Kit Kat.”
Kathrin smiled. “Goodnight mom.”

Jen looked better when Kathrin checked in on her before she went to work. The doctor had given orders that Jen should remain in bed for at least three days, and then expected her to take it easy for another week. Kathrin was relieved to see some colour in her sister’s face, and kissed her gently on the forehead. “I’ll come by tonight.”

Jen nodded. Kathrin grabbed a cup of coffee on her way out. She thought about going back to the apartment, but decided that she would go straight to work. She wasn’t ready to see him. Even near the end of the day, she dreaded going home.

Jamie stopped by her office on his way out. “Aren’t you going?”

“Eventually.”

“Trouble at the hen house?”

Kathrin smiled and shook her head. “No. I just want some time alone.”

“See you tomorrow then.”

The office staff cleared out shortly after five, and Kathrin counted her options. All day long thoughts had been running through her head. Of course she loved Aaron, and she did want to marry him, but there were things that made her wonder. First, the whole timing thing bothered her. They had known each other for less than nine months, and only lived together for a few of those. And he’d taken her by surprise. Completely. And the thought of his parents’ reaction frightened her. His father would be the last person to walk her down the aisle. But the final issue had to do with something she couldn’t explain. She felt that deep down Aaron simply didn’t trust her.

There were so many fears to address that she couldn’t work out by herself. She needed someone to talk to. She grimaced when she thought of Carol. Carol would accuse her of being a fair weather friend. But it was worth a shot. Kathrin picked up the phone and dialed the gallery. The receptionist told her that Carol was in and put her through. Carol picked up and answered the phone with a professional tone.

“Carol. It’s Kathrin.”

“Hello,” she responded coolly.

Kathrin scratched her head. “Listen, I know you’re mad at me, but I really need to talk to you. Can we meet somewhere?”

“I’m really busy Kathrin. I have a new artist coming in at six. Can we do it later this week?”
“It can’t wait. Please? It’s really important.”

Carol was silent for a moment. “O.K. There’s a restaurant right down the street from the gallery. Why don’t we meet there for dinner at quarter after seven?”

Kathrin heaved a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

Kathrin got to the restaurant early. The name was familiar - no doubt from some write-up in one of the papers, but she’d never been there before. A tall blond hostess ushered her to a small table in the back of the room, and gave her a menu. Kathrin scanned it quickly, but found that she had little appetite. She wondered briefly what Aaron was doing, but decided not to call. She’d see him in a few hours.

Carol slipped into the chair across from Kathrin, and cocked her head oddly. “You look awful,” she noted.

“I had a rough weekend,” Kathrin stated.

“What happened?”

“Do you want it in chronological order?”

The waiter arrived and took their drink orders. Carol ordered a glass of wine, and Kathrin got a gin and tonic. When the waiter left, Carol turned back to her friend. “So?”

“Jen lost the baby.”

Carol inhaled sharply. “Oh no. I’m sorry.”

“So am I.”

“Give me a smoke; I think I need one.”

“I don’t have any; I’m trying to quit.”

Carol narrowed her eyes. Kathrin hadn’t not carried a pack of smokes for almost ten years. She stored the information, then proceeded with the topic at hand. “What happened?”

Kathrin relayed the events of the miscarriage, trying to sound as composed as possible. She spoke evenly, though Carol knew it was taking every ounce of restraint that Kathrin possessed. When Kathrin finished, Carol reached over and patted her hand. “I’m really sorry. I know how much that baby meant to all of you. How is she?”

“Melancholy. I just came from there. She blames herself, even though it’s not her fault. But she looks a bit better. She had dinner at least.”

Carol picked up her newly delivered glass, and took a large sip. “It’ll take a while before she’s herself again. Maybe a year. Harold’s sister was like that too.”
Kathrin sighed. "You know, it's amazing how many people lose babies."

"It's amazing how many women can't even have babies. It must make them feel like they're less of a woman."

"I guess. You assume because you're a woman you can have a child. And then what happens when you can't? You hate yourself."

Carol nodded. "Yeah. So what else happened. Not that that isn't bad enough."

Kathrin picked up her menu. "Let's order first, then I'll tell you."

Carol picked up her menu, and both women silently scanned the offerings. Kathrin was debating between fish and chicken when Carol gasped in surprise. "Isn't Aaron's last name Taun?"

Kathrin looked up. "Yeah."

"You said he had a sister right?"

"Yeah, why?"

Carol pointed to the cover of her menu. "Look at the front."

Kathrin flipped her menu closed and scanned the cover. Then she realized why the name of the restaurant had been so familiar. It was where Elaine worked. She groaned.

"What?" Carol demanded.

"Just my luck."

"What do you mean?"

Kathrin smiled. "She's a freak. Aaron says she plays mind games all the time. Once she called and pretended that she didn't know who I was."

Carol frowned. "Really?"

"Weird isn't it."

"I'll say. Hey," she grinned, "maybe we should get her out here and you could introduce yourself."

"Why? So she can poison my food? No thanks."

"Did he say why she's so strange?"

Kathrin shrugged. "My guess is that she was a problem child. She left home pretty young and doesn't speak to his parents. She barely speaks to Aaron."

"Still, it might be interesting to see her."

Kathrin thought about it. "I couldn't."

"Well, you said she doesn't know who you are."
“Don’t even think about it.”
Carol grinned maniacally. “Whatever you say.”
“Carol!” Kathrin warned. “Have you decided?”
“Yep. So now you can tell me the other thing,” she said, dropping her menu on the table.
“Surprisingly, it has to do with Aaron.”
Carol smiled. “So what else is new?”
“He proposed.”
Carol’s mouth dropped open. “What?”
“You heard me.”
“What did you say?”
“I haven’t yet.”
“Uh oh.”
Kathrin exhaled. “What does that mean?”
Carol didn’t have time to respond because the waiter came to take their order. Kathrin decided on the chicken. When they had placed their orders Carol returned to the conversation. “If you haven’t answered yet, it’s a problem.”
“If you say anything about a commitment problem I’ll slug you!” Kathrin warned.
“Well, it may have something to do with it. I mean, not that I blame you - you’ve had a lot of bad things happen to you in your dealings with men.”
Kathrin shook her head. “No. It’s just that he did it after I got home from the hospital, and I was too wound up to think rationally. I asked for some time.”
Carol’s eyebrows shot up. “And?”
“And I’m confused. There are so many other things that I didn’t know before.”
“Like what?”
“Well,” Kathrin began, “like, remember how I told you he had an ex-girlfriend he didn’t talk to?”
Carol nodded.
“Well, he lived with her.”
“So?”
“So, I went down to the storage locker to put something away, and all her stuff was in it.”
Carol let out a whistle. “You think he still talks to her?”
Kathrin looked down. “No. She’s dead.”
Kathrin watched as Carol swallowed. “Holy shit,” was the only thing her friend could utter.

“See what I mean? He tells me that his girlfriend died, and then in the same minute asks me to marry him.”

“Is he over her?”

Kathrin shrugged. “He says he is, and I believe him, but it still makes me wonder. It was almost five years ago.”

“Well,” Carol reasoned, “five years is long enough to be able to move on. How she’d die?”

“Car accident.”

“Yeow. That must be hard.”

“Yeah,” Kathrin agreed, “but he told me that their relationship was going badly before she died. I think now the only thing he feels about her is guilt. He told me he loves me more than he ever loved her.”

Carol listened patiently, and then digested the information. “That’s good. I mean, at least he doesn’t look on her as sacred.”

The words jolted Kathrin. “Like my dad?”

“Well, if that’s how you see it. Everyone responds to death differently. But at least his response is a bit healthier than your mother’s.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right.”

“So, I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“Hmm.”

They both reflected on the situation for a few moments until their dinners arrived. They ate in silence for a moment, and Kathrin found that she was hungrier than she anticipated.

“This is good,” she said to Carol.

Carol agreed. “Just think, your future sister in law made it.”

Kathrin smiled. “Not yet.”

Carol lowered her fork. “Kathrin, you love him. You moved in with him, and you’re happy. And even though I’m not thrilled at the fact that he stole you away from me, I want you to be happy. I’m not going to predict your future here, but you’re going to marry him. Aren’t you?”

Kathrin swallowed the food in her mouth, then took a sip of her drink. She looked up at Carol, then finally let out a small giggle. “Yes.”
Carol raised her glass. "Then we need a bottle of champagne."

The waiter brought a bottle over, and asked how their dinner was. "Fabulous," Carol bubbled, "the chef is fantastic."

The waiter smiled. "Elaine is one of Toronto's finest."

"You know," Carol cooed, "I would love to compliment her on her skill."

Kathrin shot her a warning glance. Carol ignored it.

"Well," the waiter said, "She's in the kitchen. I could see if she would come out."

Carol was about to respond when Kathrin butt in. "That wouldn't be necessary. I wouldn't want you to go to any trouble."

"No trouble at all. She'd be flattered," he offered, and then headed for the kitchen.

Kathrin smacked Carol's arm. "Way to go."

"Oh come on. You want to meet her, don't you? I know you do."

Kathrin's face flushed. "Yeah, but not now."

Carol laughed. "Don't be such a sore sport. She'll love you."

Kathrin tried to take another bite of her food, but her appetite was gone. Of course she had always wanted to meet Elaine, but it would have been better if Elaine was prepared to meet her. That way she'd have an obligation to be civil.

Carol made a toast, and the two of them tasted the champagne. As Kathrin set her glass down, she could hear the approach of someone behind her. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, and then opened them to see Carol looking at something behind Kathrin's head. It was Elaine, Kathrin could tell from the expression on Carol's face.

"Hi, I'm Elaine Taun," a sweet voice offered.

Kathrin looked up at her slowly. Her hair was tucked up into a chef's hat, but her face stood out clearly. She was a shorter, cuter version of Aaron, with the same intense green eyes.

"Hi," Carol said, "I just wanted to tell you that dinner was great."

"Yes." Kathrin mumbled in agreement.

"Thanks, I'm glad you enjoyed it."

There was a silence for a second, then Elaine glanced from one woman to the next.

"Oh, champagne," she finally observed, "what are you celebrating?"

"An engagement actually," Carol said, with a big smile pasted on her lips.

Elaine smiled warmly. "Congratulations."
Carol shook her head. “Kathrin’s the one getting married,” she said, stressing the name and indicating to Kathrin.

Elaine turned to Kathrin. “Oh. Congratulations; you must be thrilled.”

“Thanks,” Kathrin smiled and she felt a little better.

Carol was unwilling to let it rest at that. “Actually, I have reason to believe that you may know her fiancé.”

Elaine’s eyebrows arched with interest. “Really?” she said, turning back to Kathrin. “Do I know you?”

“Um. No.”

“But you will!” Carol exclaimed.

Kathrin felt like throttling Carol, but refrained herself. “I’m marrying Aaron,” she said as calmly as possible.

Elaine’s face blanched as she received the information and she looked as if she was going to have a heart attack. Kathrin immediately felt awkward. Elaine took a few deep breaths without saying anything and stared oddly at Kathrin. Kathrin flinched under her gaze, and twisted her hands under the table. “Listen,” she started, “I didn’t mean to take you by surprise…”

Elaine shook her head in disbelief. “That’s impossible. You’re going to marry my brother? He never said any…” her words trailed off, and her look of puzzlement increased.

Both women watched as Elaine’s body suddenly drooped, but she caught herself on the edge of the table. Her fingers clamped down onto the table cloth tightly, and seemed to claw at the material. Carol was about to get up to help her, when Elaine regained control and turned a frightened stare to Kathrin. Kathrin watched as her eyes fluttered, then widened. She looked like she had seen a ghost. She opened her mouth, but no words came out.

Kathrin watched Elaine, frightened by her silence. “I’m sorry,” she muttered.

Elaine slowly regained her composure. “No, I’m sorry. It just took me by surprise. I didn’t know he was involved so deeply. Congratulations. Really.”

Kathrin was about to respond, when Elaine leaned over to offer her a hug. The moment their bodies’ touched Kathrin could feel the sudden stiffening of Elaine’s arms and spine. Elaine removed her arms quickly, and Kathrin saw that her face was still as white as the tablecloth. “Are you O. K.?”

Elaine gave her a small smile. “I’ll be fine.”
There was another moment of tense silence, then Elaine cleared her throat. “I should get
back to the kitchen,” she said finally, “Enjoy your meal.”

Kathrin and Carol exchanged questioning glances as Elaine backed away from the table.
“What the hell?” Kathrin finally managed to sputter when Elaine had disappeared, “What just
happened?”

Carol frowned. “I don’t know, but she really freaked. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea.”
Kathrin rolled her eyes in exasperation. “I told you that!” she hissed.

“Don’t blame me. I didn’t know she was going to respond like that.”
Kathrin swallowed. “C’mon. Let’s get out of here. This place is making me nervous.”
Carol agreed. “I have to go back to the office for a while. Why don’t you go on ahead,
and I’ll pay the bill. I owe you.”

Kathrin stood up, and grabbed her coat from the back of the chair. “Do you mind? I don’t
want to leave you here.”

“Don’t be silly. You have to talk to Aaron anyway.”

Kathrin nodded, and then dipped down to hug Carol. Carol could feel the tiny tremors
under Kathrin’s skin, and patted her arm soothingly. Then Kathrin was gone, and Carol flagged
down the waiter with her credit card.

He returned after what seemed like hours with her bill, and Carol signed the slip with
haste. She too was starting to get weirded out by the surroundings. She stood up quickly and put
on her coat, then headed for the door.

She was halfway down the street, when the sound of someone yelling made her turn
around. Elaine came rushing down the street in her kitchen whites. Carol turned back when she
realized that Elaine was calling to her.

Elaine stopped a few feet from Carol, and tried to catch her breath. Carol waited until
Elaine finally spoke. “Your friend. She’s really marrying Aaron?”

“Yes.”

“Does she...does she know about him?”

Carol frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Does she know about Lily?”

“She knows that she died,” Carol responded.

Elaine looked dumbfounded. “He told her?”

“Do you mean about the car accident?”
Elaine frowned. "Car accident?"
Carol’s heart skipped a beat. "Isn’t that how she died?"
Elaine glanced skyward, then met Carol’s incredulous look. "Oh my God," she commented, then shook her head, "no, it’s not. Listen, if you care about her friend, you’ll tell her that she doesn’t want any part in Aaron’s life. Or you’ll regret it."
Carol felt like she’d been threatened. She looked into Elaine’s eyes, but they stared through her. "Why?"
Elaine took a step backwards. "Why?" Carol prodded.
"Just tell her."
Carol advanced towards Elaine, who continued to move away. "How did she die?"
Elaine didn’t answer.
"Please," Carol begged, "tell me. How did she die?"
Elaine’s eyes welled with tears. "She committed suicide."
Carol felt a volt of panic move through her, and she stopped in mid step. Elaine gnawed on her lower lip. "Just tell her."
And then Elaine turned around and ran back to the restaurant. Carol couldn’t move until the door shut behind Elaine. Then, finally she shook her head in disbelief, and moved mechanically towards the gallery. As she followed the sidewalk, her speed increased until she was running frantically down the street. She knew that she had to call Kathrin before Kathrin told Aaron. Everything depended on that one piece of information.

\section{8}

Kathrin walked aimlessly down Queen Street. She had no idea where she was going, but anywhere was better than going home. Eventually she poked her head into one of the small bars near Bathurst and stepped inside. There were plenty of empty tables and Kathrin chose one in the corner. When the bartender finally made his way over to her, she initially contemplated getting a coffee, then decided on a beer. "Guinness," she ordered.
The bartender gave her a curious look. "I like imported," she stated.
He smiled, and left her to the table. She noticed a magazine rack near the bar and went over to pick up one of the weeklies. She couldn’t stand sitting in a bar drinking alone, and anything to take her mind off that would help. The bartender passed her drink over to her.
"Anything else?" he asked.
She looked around, then leaned in closer. "Do you sell smokes here?"
He laughed. “Yeah, I’ll bring them over.”

Kathrin was looking through the “Eye Spies” when her cigarettes arrived. “Thanks,” she said to the bartender.

“New smoker?” he asked.

“Trying to quit,” she responded guiltily.

“Rough day, huh?”

“You’re telling me.”

He placed an ashtray on the table, then went back to the bar. Kathrin read the classifieds as she drank her beer. When she was done, she ordered another. The bartender deposited it in front of her. “This one’s on me.”

Kathrin looked up in shock. “Really? Thanks.”

“Hey,” he said, “I know all about rough days.”

By her third beer, she needed to go to the bathroom. It wasn’t until she got up that she realized that the beers were affecting her. She made her way down the rickety staircase to the bathrooms, and had to wait for a minute before a young woman stepped out of the ladies’ room. “Sorry,” the woman offered.

“No problem,” Kathrin said slipping past her.

Her face was flushed when she looked into the mirror, but she still looked tired. The past few days had been agonizing. Why is it, everything always happens all at once? A week earlier, life was normal. Then everything had been turned upside down. She smoothed her hair, and returned to her table.

The bar was far from busy, and every so often the bartender would drop by to chat with her. The rest of the time Kathrin focused her eyes on the paper, but actually was thinking about Aaron. Really, as far as she could make out, Elaine’s reaction had been in total accordance with what Aaron had said about her. Elaine had once again acted as if she didn’t know anything about Kathrin. Kathrin shook her head dumbly. She knew that if she married Aaron, she’d have to accept the fact that they’d have no relationship with his family. It saddened her briefly, but she could accept it. And her family was enough for any couple.

The clock above the bar indicated that it was ten, and Kathrin ordered one last beer before she left. Halfway through the bartender plunked himself down at her table. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she responded with a smile, “taking a break?”

“Yeah, if you let me bum one of those smokes.”
Kathrin passed him the package. He lit up and reclined against the vinyl seat. “I’ve never seen you in here before. New to the neighbourhood?”

Kathrin laughed. “Actually I used to live a couple of blocks away, but I’ve never been in before. I was just a little homesick.”

“Sometimes I go to the park near where I grew up. It’s calming.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you need another?” he asked, pointing to her nearly empty pint glass.

“Like a hole in the head. Actually, if I could get the bill... I should be getting home.”

He butted out his cigarette, and stood up. “Well, I hope you come back sometime.”

“I will. Here,” she said offering him her cigarette package, “take these.”

When he brought her the bill, he signed his name. Kathrin pulled her money out and made sure to leave a healthy tip. He was a nice guy. She pulled on her coat and the bartender came over. “Have a good night,” he said.

“Thanks Colin.”

“No problem...” he waited for her to fill in the blank.

“Kathrin.”

He smiled. “Just a question: would you like to go out sometime?”

Kathrin looked up in shock. She hadn’t had any idea that he was interested. She just thought he was being polite. “Oh, wow. I’m flattered, really. It’s just that I’m seeing someone.”

He smiled. “Well, no harm in asking. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

It wasn’t until she was halfway back to the apartment that she realized she hadn’t looked at another man since Aaron. Months earlier she would have been able to size the bartender up with one glance. She didn’t want to date anyone else; she wanted to be with Aaron, and that was all there was to it.

When Carol got back to her apartment she called Kathrin for the second time. Aaron informed her that she still hadn’t gotten back. “Well, make sure she calls me. O.K.?”

Carol hung up the phone and wondered what could be taking Kathrin so long to get home. She didn’t like the tone in Aaron’s voice, but knew he must be stressed out—waiting for Kathrin’s answer. But when Kathrin still hadn’t called by ten, Carol started to worry. She dialed the number again, and let it ring until Aaron picked up.
“Is she back yet?”

“No, Carol,” Aaron moaned, “I’ll tell her when she gets in.”

He hung up the phone on her. He was starting to get worried too, but reasoned that she had probably stopped by Jen’s place after work. He finished up his work for the evening, and then turned on the news.

Kathrin stumbled in the door as the weather was airing, and Aaron turned to watch her. She bent over to pull off her shoes, and had to steady herself against the door frame. It took him a moment to realize she was drunk. Then he got up and went to help her take off her coat. She smiled goofily as she pulled her arms out of her coat. “Thanks,” she giggled.

“You’re drunk,” he told her.

“I am not. I just had a few.”

“And you reek like smoke. I thought you were trying to quit.”

“I am...trying.”

Aaron hung up her coat. “Well, it doesn’t seem to be working.”

Kathrin turned around and breathed beer at Aaron. “Why do you always have to worry so much? I was just having a little fun.”

He let her grab on to his shoulder as she lost her balance. “With whom?”

“With myself,” she said straightening up and heading for the couch.

When she reached the couch she plunked her body down, lifted her feet from the floor, and threw them over the end of the arm rest. “Wow. Those beers went right to my head.”

Aaron stood above her. “How many did you have?”

“Oh, three or four or five. I don’t remember. You look really tall like that.”

Aaron huffed once and stared at her. He’d never seen her so wasted. He could usually tell when she was tipsy, but had never witnessed her in a state worse than that. It was a side of her he didn’t like. Not one bit.

“So,” he said irritably, “you got drunk by yourself. That’s pretty impressive.”

She looked up again. “Aaron don’t get mad. I don’t want to fight with you tonight. I came home because I want to talk.”

“Yeah? Well you’ll be quite the conversationalist tonight, won’t you?” he snapped.

She pulled herself up into sitting position. “You don’t have to be so mean,” she started, but the phone rang and she was silenced by Aaron turning around.
He picked up the phone. “Hello?” he answered gruffly, “Yes, she just walked in the door, but she’s busy. She’ll call you back.” He hung up the phone quickly.

“Who was that?”

“Carol.”

“Why didn’t you let me talk to her?”

“Because she’s called two times already tonight, and you and I need to talk.”

Kathrin gave him a hard look. “Aaron, why do you have to be such a dick sometimes?”

She said getting up, and trying to walk towards the bedroom.

“Where are you going?” he demanded.

“To call Carol back.”

“Oh no you’re not!” he said, grabbing her arm and pulling her towards him.

Kathrin tripped over her foot and found her body pressed against Aaron, his grip holding her up. “Aaron, you’re hurting me.”

He let go of her arm and propelled her to the couch. “I’ve waited here all night. You didn’t call, you didn’t tell me where you were. I was worried about you. The least - the very least you can do is talk to me. You owe me that.”

Kathrin rubbed her arm slowly. “Don’t lecture me.”

He threw up his arms. “I’m not lecturing you. I’m just asking you to talk to me.”

Kathrin got up again. “I’ve go to go pee. Then we’ll talk. O.K.?”

He grunted and sat down in the armchair. “Fine.”

Kathrin took a long time, and Aaron was beginning to wonder if she was all right, when he heard the sound of the toilet flushing. He listened to the tap run, and heard Kathrin blow her nose. She was taking her sweet time, and Aaron knew that it was to anger him. When she finally came out, her hair was damp and her make-up had been rinsed off. “Sorry,” she mumbled, “I felt gross.”

He didn’t respond in any way and she sat down beside him. They looked at each other cautiously, and then the phone rang with three quick rings, which meant the call was coming from the front desk. Kathrin rose hastily. She reached for the phone, and picked it up. “Hello?” she waited until the door man finished speaking, “O.K. I’ll be right down.”

She hung up the phone, and turned to find Aaron looking at her with curiosity. “It’s Carol. She’s dropping something off. I’ll be right back.”
After she'd put her shoes on and left the apartment Aaron got up and poured some scotch over ice. He sat down and waited. Carol was turning into a pain in the neck.

Carol was seated in one of the lobby armchairs. She jumped up when Kathrin exited the elevators, and rushed over to her. "We need to talk," she explained.

"About what?"
"About Aaron."
Kathrin looked at Carol, then at the doorman. "Here?"
Carol ducked in closer. "No. God, you reek like alcohol. Are you drunk?"
"I had a few," Kathrin acknowledged.
"Can we go somewhere?"
Kathrin looked around. "Like where?"
"I don’t know. For coffee or something."
Kathrin shook her head. "I can’t. Aaron’s waiting for me upstairs."
"Did you accept yet?"
"No."
"Good. Come on. We’ll sit in my car."
They stepped out the front door, and Kathrin shivered against the cold. Her sweater was useless against the wind. Carol opened the car door, and Kathrin slipped in. The car was still warm. Carol got inside, and turned on the engine. Heat blasted out from the vents. "So?" Kathrin demanded.

Carol turned to her. "I have something to tell you."
Kathrin nodded. "What?"
"How much to you really know about Aaron?"
"What do you mean?" Kathrin asked dumbfounded.
"I mean, ever since you’ve met him, he’s constantly kept things from you. Like his parents and his sister, and Lily. How do you know..."
Kathrin scowled and butted in. "God Carol. He’s my boyfriend. I think I should know if he’s lying or not. He was afraid to tell me initially, that’s all."
Carol didn’t look convinced. "Are you sure? Do you honestly believe that?"
"Yes. Why? What are you getting at?"
Carol glanced out the window for a moment. "I know how important it was for you to find someone. Especially after your dad, and what happened when you were younger. I understand that feeling, but I just want to make sure that you know what you’re doing. I don’t want you to get hurt."

Kathrin leaned over. "What are you saying? That you think I’m only with Aaron to be with someone? Or to get over my dad? Or to get over being molested?"

Carol shook her head. "Of course not. I just think…"

"That’s what you think isn’t it? So the truth finally comes out."

"No Kathrin, that’s not what I’m saying, but tonight I heard something."

"What? What did you hear?"

Carol took a large breath and then faced her friend. "After you left the restaurant, Elaine came out after me. She wanted to know if you were really marrying Aaron. I told her yes, and then she told me the truth."

"What truth?" Kathrin demanded.

"Lily committed suicide."

Kathrin stared at Carol. "What?"

"She killed herself."

Kathrin shook her head. "That’s a lie. That isn’t true. Aaron told me."

Carol reached out to touch Kathrin, but her friend recoiled from her hand. "It’s a lie Carol. It’s just like Aaron said: his sister is a fuck-up. She just said that to get a reaction from you."

"Listen," Carol spoke softly. "I know it may seem hard to believe, but I think she was telling the truth."

"That’s bullshit!" Kathrin snapped.

"Well, what about him never telling you about Lily?" Carol demanded.

"He did."

"Seven months later!"

"Carol," Kathrin warned, "watch it!"

"You only know what Aaron’s told you!" Carol raised her voice.

"What are you saying?"

"I don’t know."

"No you don’t!"
Carol paused to control her temper. “It’s just that there are all these things. Changes. differences in you.”

“I haven’t changed.”

“O.K., then why haven’t you called me for the past month?”

“And you have?”

Carol continued over Kathrin’s question. “And why don’t you come out with the girls anymore? And what made you decide to quit smoking?”

Kathrin stared at her. “What are you talking about? You guys have ignored me ever since I moved in with Aaron.”

“Oh really? Why don’t you ask your mother? A couple of weeks ago she called me to see if anything was wrong with you. She was upset that you hadn’t called her back in ages. The old Kathrin didn’t go around holding grudges.”

Kathrin frowned.

“You’ve changed, Kathrin. Every time I talk to you, I see less of the friend I once knew.”

“Well then, maybe you’re the one who’s changed.”

“No. It has nothing to do with me.”

Kathrin cocked her eyebrow. “Really? It wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact that you’re jealous?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Carol demanded.

“Oh, give it up, Carol! You’ve been jealous since day one. I have a man who loves me - always does nice things for me, and asked me to marry him. You have Harold, who will never propose because he’s scared shitless of his family. Of course you’re jealous.”

Carol face clenched into a tight ball of muscles. “What the fuck is your problem? Why does everything always revolve around you? You’re not a fucking goddess, Kathrin. Why can’t you ever face the truth? Nothing’s ever your fault, is it? You just blame everyone else. Your dad left you, so you blame him. He didn’t choose to die! You sleep around and it’s some guy’s fault that you got the clap! And you’re mad at the world because one asshole did a horrible thing to you? Take a look around! Shitty things happen to everyone.”

Kathrin gripped the door handle. “How dare you? How can you speak to me like that? You waltz into my apartment building, tear my boyfriend apart, and hand me this self-righteous bullshit! What the hell do you want me to do?”
“Take responsibility for once! Admit that maybe Aaron isn’t perfect like you want him so desperately to be,” Carol urged with venom, “before it’s too late.”

Kathrin flipped her face towards Carol. “Fuck you! Didn’t you see how she acted when she found out who I was? Aaron’s not the one lying here. If you’re going to believe what his psychopath sister says, then I don’t need you around. Have a nice fucking life!”

She groped for the handle, and pushed open the door. “Kathrin,” Carol pleaded as Kathrin stepped out of the car, “please…”

Kathrin ducked her head back down. “Go to Hell!”

The door slammed shut, and Carol watched her run to the door of the apartment. Then she burst into tears.
Kathrin tried to look as calm as possible as she passed the doorman, but inside she was seething. She got into the elevator, and pressed the button with trembling fingers. She and Carol had never had such a horrible fight before. They’d had fights, some doozies - but never anything of the same magnitude. Well screw her! She doesn’t know what she’s talking about, Kathrin fumed as the elevator rose through the shaft. She tried to calm herself down, but even after she’d gotten off the elevator, her heart was still racing. All the alcohol in her bloodstream had been replaced by pure adrenaline. It coursed through her veins and she leaned against the hallway wall to allay it. She didn’t want Aaron to see that anything was wrong with her. It would only make him suspicious.

Kathrin looked down the hall and inspected each individual doorway. In the months since she’d moved in she’d met two of the other tenants, and only in passing. They were very polite and she appreciated the fact that everyone seemed to respect each other’s privacy. No one had ever come asking for even an egg. But she suddenly wished that she could enter into any one of the other apartments, instead of her own. That she had an ally in her neck of the woods.

It wasn’t that she didn’t believe Aaron. Elaine was lying: that much was true. It fit perfectly into what Aaron had said, and what his parents had confirmed by omission. There were so many things that indicated she was no longer part of the family: she hadn’t been at the house that night for dinner, there were no pictures of her anywhere, though there were a whole bunch of Aaron, and even though Aaron’s room was a shrine to his childhood, she didn’t recall seeing any room made up of Elaine’s mementos and belongings. These pieces of evidence confirmed what Aaron had said. The only thing that bothered Kathrin was that Aaron refused to address why Elaine would lie. Surely she and he had reached the point where they could share everything. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to concentrate. She knew that there had to be some way of getting the information out of him without making him feel threatened. She wasn’t going to give up on him, no matter what. Not like Carol had so pulled out on her. She decided not to tell Aaron about the fight - not until he and she had worked out their own differences.

She took one last breath and stepped into the apartment. Only the end-table light in the living room burned, and she could make out Aaron’s rigid profile. He sat in the arm chair staring at the fireplace. “What was that all about?” he asked without turning to her.

Kathrin reacted quickly. “Carol brought over a print that I’m taking to Andria.”

He turned and examined her face in the dimness. “Where is it?”

“Down in the car. That’s what took so long; we had to fit it in the trunk.”
He nodded and Kathrin dropped her keys on the counter. Aaron stirred his drink with his fingers and Kathrin approached him. “Can we talk now?” she asked tentatively.

He gestured to the couch and Kathrin sat down. “Listen Aaron, before we get into this I just want to tell you that I’m glad you gave me the time to think this through. My mind’s been a mess since Jen went into the hospital, but I’ve had the chance to work through a lot of things, and...”

He looked at her. “What are you saying?”

She stopped. “I’m still really confused. I mean, I’ve thought a lot about your family, and how hard it will be if we get married. Hard on me, and hard on them.”

“Hard on them? How?” he questioned.

“Aaron, you don’t have to pretend. I know they don’t like me. It’s O.K. because I think now that I know why.”

His brow crumpled. “What do you mean?”

“Listen,” she said calmly, “you can tell me... I won’t get mad. They really liked Lily, didn’t they?”

He stared at her in shock, and thought about denying the truth. Then he sighed and the crease smoothed across his forehead. He responded quietly. “Yes, they did. My father especially. He thought she could do no wrong.”

Kathrin immediately tried to imagine what kind of woman would be seen as perfect by Aaron’s father. Then she remembered how Aaron had made her dress conservatively before the dinner. Either Lily was like that, or she too had faked it for Aaron’s family. *For four years?* Kathrin asked herself. It seemed unlikely that anyone could pretend for that long. “I guess it was hard for them when she died.”

Aaron nodded. “It was hard for us all. She had a falling-out with her own family, so we became her adoptive family. At first it was great. She was the sister Elaine never had. They went shopping together, and out to the theatre.”

“How’d Elaine take it?”

Aaron grimaced at the memory. “Kathrin,” he said staring into his glass, “Elaine was never very stable to begin with, but Lily was a good influence on her. That was one reason that Lily and I stayed together, even when things got rough. When she died such a violent death Elaine lost control. She took it worse than any of us. Depression, nightmares, the works. My mother
told me I should see someone about it for my sake as well as Elaine’s - so that Elaine would be more open to it.”

“It was that bad?”

“Worse. One night Elaine even went so far as to accuse me of causing Lily’s death. My father defended me and a horrible argument followed. It was awful. My mother and I knew how dad was, so we just let him go on. We should have stopped it.”

“Why?” Kathrin asked quietly, dreading the answer.

Aaron snapped out of his reverie and brought his eyes to hers. “He struck her. Across the face. He’d never done anything like that before. He’d always believed that the best discipline was the silent treatment. He could go a week without acknowledging me. I don’t know what is worse: being hit or being ignored. When he hit her, we all froze, and then he told Elaine that Lily was more of a daughter to him than Elaine would ever be. My mother started crying, and I silently begged him to take it back, but the words were out. Elaine went upstairs, packed her things and that was the last time she spoke to or saw either of them.”

Kathrin inhaled sharply, and could feel her heart throbbing in her temples. She stared into Aaron’s eyes, and waited for him to finish. After a painful moment, he looked away and then back down at the table. “Then, my father did something I’ll never forgive him for. He ordered my mother and I to clean out Elaine’s room, and get rid of everything in it. For the first time my mother spoke up and begged him to change his mind, but he refused. He told her never to mention Elaine’s name in the house again. And she never did. And Elaine refused to talk about either of them.”

“How is she now?”

“She blocks it out entirely.”

Kathrin frowned. “You mean she has no remembrance of it?”

“Worse. The last time I tried to get her to talk about it she looked me squarely in the eye and told me that Lily wasn’t killed - that she chose to leave so she could escape us.”

Kathrin sucked her cheeks in. The bomb had been dropped. Even though she felt sick at the whole conversation, without knowing Aaron had told her everything she wanted to hear. She let out a long sigh, and Aaron took it as a bad sign. “Kathrin, I can’t offer you a perfect family. We have skeletons so deep in the closet that as far as anyone’s concerned some of them don’t exist. My family life was rough. But you should be able to understand that. The one thing I can promise you is that I will give you my entire heart and do anything to make you happy.”
Kathrin looked at him. “That’s all I want.”

“Then say you’ll marry me.”

“Aaron, I’ll marry you - for better or for worse.”

They decided to wait a few weeks before telling their families. Kathrin felt it would be better to wait until Jen was feeling a little better, and Aaron needed to find a way to tell his parents so they’d receive the news with a positive outlook. Kathrin knew that they had no fear of Elaine telling the Tauns, and she kept her secret close to her heart. The only people who knew about the engagement were she, Aaron, and the man who’d taken her ring measurements at the jewelry store. She and Aaron had decided on a simple ring, with only a small diamond. She didn’t want anything too flashy - she hated women who flaunted their rings as if they showed their own worth.

In the end they decided to wait until the first of December and tell her family on her birthday. It would be a small celebration, as Carol and she were still off speaking terms, and she didn’t want to call up Steph or Alison and somehow force them to choose sides. In the mean time they volleyed wedding dates back and forth, and eventually decided on late August. Both of them would be at leisure to enjoy a two-week honeymoon before the fall crunch hit them at work. Aaron brought home stacks of holiday tours and honeymoon packages. For some reason he wanted desperately to go on a cruise, and though Kathrin wasn’t thrilled at the idea, she reasoned if he really wanted to go, maybe they could compromise. One week at sea, and another on a lush Caribbean island. She didn’t realize how many compromises were involved in getting married, but for the most part they agreed on everything.

The only problem that had arisen was the ceremony. Aaron wanted a long Catholic service. Kathrin rejected the idea time and time again. Finally, one night at dinner the conversation turned nasty.

“Aaron, I am not Catholic. I refuse to get married in a church.”

He glared at her over the centre-piece. “Kathrin, you were born and raised Catholic. You’re mother will throw a fit... and I know this isn’t the best reason, but my parents will like you even less if you refuse to get married in a church.”

Kathrin dropped her fork on the plate, and it clanged loudly against the china. “Oh yeah? Well that’s just too bad for your parents! I can’t. I’m sorry, but that’s all there is to it. Why does it matter to you? You never go to church either.”
He sighed. “I know, but this is different. After the ceremony you never have to go back. Please Kath, it’s important to me.”

“And it’s important to me that you don’t make me do something against my will!” she retorted, “I’m not backing down on this. Anything else I’ll reconsider, but I won’t get married in a church.”

“Just think about it!” he snapped.

She looked at him, and dared him with her eyes to push it. He relented and they refused to talk about it for the time being. Other things were more important.

Aaron’s lease was up at the end of December. After a brief conversation it was decided that they would find a new place. Kathrin didn’t want to be reminded of Lily any longer. She wanted a home that was equally theirs. In between office meetings about the Christmas campaigns, she checked into condominiums and rentals. The thought of owning a house and paying a mortgage scared her. Aaron felt the same and they agreed that they’d rent for a year before looking into buying anything.

The hardest part about the whole thing was keeping it under wraps. Kathrin longed to tell someone - anyone, about the news. She went with Jen to the Mount Sinai bereavement program a few times after the baby’s funeral, and it took all she had in her not to tell Jen. Every time they left the hospital Jen looked more upset. Kathrin had hoped that Jen would feel better after the funeral, but it hadn’t worked out that way. She had cried openly when Kathrin said the short eulogy, and sobbed as they spread the ashes around the backyard of the house. Kathrin knew Jen would pretend to be happy about the wedding, but deep down it would only reinforce how miserable she was.

Still, as Kathrin’s twenty-ninth birthday loomed closer her excitement increased. Aaron refused to tell her exactly what they were doing, but she knew that he and her mother had talked on the phone a few times, and the whole family would be there. He wouldn’t say anything more.

Her birthday dawned bright and sunny, and she was in a good mood when she went to the office. Jamie and a few other assistants sang a sober rendition of “Happy Birthday” to her, and she glimpsed a few of them expel morning yawns. By ten her entire family had called to wish her a happy birthday, and then quickly expressed their regrets that they wouldn’t see her until the weekend. Kathrin had to fight her giggles. What a bunch of fakers. Alison and Steph had both
called too. The only person who hadn’t made an effort was Carol, but Kathrin didn’t expect her to. Still, it hit her hard.

Flowers arrived from Aaron before lunch. Kathrin smiled when Jamie brought them in. “I don’t know why,” he muttered, “everyone around here thinks I’m a lowly errand boy. You ready for lunch?”

Kathrin grabbed her purse, and followed him out the door. On their way down the hall, she heard Richardson’s voice. She turned the corner to find him walking towards her. “Hey, I’m just going out for lunch. We still on for the two o’clock meeting?” she asked cheerfully.

He shook his head. “I was just coming to find you. I have to cancel. How about tomorrow at ten?”

“Sounds good,” she answered and headed for the front door.

“Connelly!” he barked.

She turned around and waited for him to say something. “Happy Birthday.”

“Thanks.”

When they got to the lobby, Jamie headed for the main doors. “I though we were going downstairs.” she exclaimed.

He grinned. “Change of plans.”

They walked out into the sunlight, and Jamie led her towards the intersection. Suddenly he stopped and Kathrin turned to see him admiring a brand new yellow VW Beetle. “Wow. Cool, huh?”

“Yeah,” she agreed, and then continued walking to the pedestrian crossing. Jamie dawdled, still admiring the car.

“C’mon, I’m starving.”

He held up his hand, as if to indicate he didn’t want to be disturbed while fantasizing about the car. Kathrin rolled her eyes. *What is it with men and cars?* Slowly Jamie’s hand slid into his breast pocket, and then he extracted something. Kathrin peered closer, then flinched as Jamie tossed her whatever he was holding in his hand. She barely managed to catch it, and then looked at the object. Her face blanched and her mouth unhinged very slowly. “Holy shit!”

Jamie’s face broke into a wide grin. He bowed dramatically. “Your chariot my lady.”

Kathrin felt like she was going to faint, and she moved towards Jamie in a haze. It’s for me? Who...did Aaron do this?”

Jamie grinned and nodded. “Yep. It’s your birthday present.”
Kathrin fanned herself and then lost control. She started jumping up and down, and crying, and carrying on. Jamie let himself be hugged countless times, and finally grabbed her arms to keep her from swinging them around at innocent bystanders. “Calm down!” he ordered, “or I won’t let you drive it.”

Kathrin took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. When she was calmer Jamie gave her a once over. “Better?”

“Fine,” she said huskily.

“O. K. Here’s the deal: you get in the car. You follow these directions,” he said, handing her a sheet of paper, “and you have a good afternoon.”

Kathrin frowned. “What about work?”

“Richardson gave you the afternoon off. On account of your birthday and all,” he said with the tone of someone who knew more than she did, “Can you handle that?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Good, cause I don’t want to see you crashing this beautiful car.”

Kathrin laughed. “I promise. Thank you. Thank you so much,” she said, throwing her arms around him again.

“Go!” he ordered.

Kathrin walked slowly around the car, and got to the driver’s side. She slid her hand over the new paint, and grinned. At the last minute, before she opened the door, she turned back to Jamie. “Hey,” she said slyly, “don’t think this means that you’re getting off easy. You still owe me a birthday lunch.”

Jamie grinned.

Kathrin pulled out very carefully, and followed the directions. She pressed every button she could lay her fingers on and inhaled the interior smells of the car. Someone had told her once that car companies manufactured a spray that smelled like a new car. If that was so then her car had been amply sprayed. She wanted to drive around all day, and ‘cruise’ like she and the girls had done in high-school. But she was on a route to somewhere - even though the directions left only a street address.

She drove uptown, and followed the directions until she was on Avenue. A turn into the parking lot told her where she was. Mira Linder’s Spa in the City. Kathrin groaned. Possibly the last thing she wanted to do was spend the afternoon getting her nails done. She parked the car, and
made her way up the stairs. Once inside she was greeted by a perfectly groomed receptionist.

“Hello, welcome to the Spa in the City,” she greeted Kathrin warmly.

“Um, hi. I don’t really know what I’m doing here,” Kathrin responded.

The woman smiled. “Your name?”

“Kathrin…”

“Oh, Ms. Connelly. We’re so glad you’re here. Come right this way.”

Kathrin followed, and listened to the woman babble on about what treats were in store for her. She barely heard the woman ask if she’d like a mineral water. “No thanks,” she muttered, and swore to herself that she’d throttle Aaron when she saw him later.

Her tune changed after the first five minutes. Then for the rest of the afternoon she relaxed as aestheticians, beauticians, and interns buzzed around her, primping, styling, and feeding her lunch. Finally, she was given the most relaxing massage she’d ever gotten, and nearly fell asleep. Aaron obviously didn’t know what one afternoon of pampering her was going to cost him. It would be his fault if she couldn’t give it up.

At five-thirty, a slim European woman finally led her back to the change room. “And here is the best part,” she said, throwing open the door with relish.

Kathrin glanced inside and was dumbfounded by what she saw. On a hanger was a vibrant mauve silk a-line dress, with a matching jacket. A pair of chunky black heels with purple sequins sparkled below, and the matching purse was draped over the chair by a pair of pantyhose, and her toiletry bag. Kathrin gasped in surprise and the woman smiled. “It must be your lucky day.”

Kathrin ran her fingers over the silk, and then drew back, afraid to get any of the lotion from her hands on the dress. She gave the woman a look of surprise, and was handed a small box in return. The woman left her in the change room and Kathrin opened the box. Inside was a pair of mauve underwear, and a bra to match. Kathrin extracted the undergarments and was shocked to find that the underwear was a g-string. She pulled the underwear up over her hips, and then put the bra on, and hooked it behind her. It was a perfect fit. Then she slipped into the pantyhose.

Next she pulled the dress over her head, and stepped into the shoes. They were a little tight across her foot, but not enough to hurt. Soon enough they would wear in. Kathrin glanced into the full-length mirror, and smiled. Her hair was a mess, and her face bare no make-up, but she looked nice anyway. Once she got home and fixed herself up, she’d be a knockout.
There was a knock on the door, and Kathrin opened it tentatively. The same small woman grinned. “You look fabulous.”

“Thanks.” Kathrin said reaching for the silk jacket.

“No, no.” the woman plucked the hanger away from her. “you’ll wrinkle it. Come with me.”

They went down the hall and Kathrin was led into a large solarium, where a row of mirrors lined the wall. She was pushed into a chair, and wrapped from head to foot in a plastic cloak. And then the make-up artist worked on her face and the hairstylist teased her hair. Half an hour later they pulled away, and Kathrin was left staring at a reflection she barely recognized. Her hair had been pulled up into an elegant chignon, and only a few stray tendrils formed a halo around her face. Her make-up was elegantly done to make her look like she was wearing very little, and her eyes shone vibrantly. She stared in surprise at how mature and stylish she looked. She’d never been so done up. The artists stood back and admired their creation. Finally, the small woman pulled Kathrin out of the chair, and helped her to her feet. “Turn around,” she ordered.

Kathrin did so, and felt the woman’s hands encircle her neck. She looked into the mirror and saw that the woman was fastening a rhinestone choker around her neck. The rhinestones gleamed pink and purple and blue above the golden collar of the choker. Then the woman handed Kathrin two clip-on earrings, and waited until Kathrin had applied them to her ears. When Kathrin was finished she took one final look in the mirror. She was awed at how glamorous she looked. The woman handed Kathrin a small card. “This is where you go from here.”

Kathrin looked down to see her uncle’s business card. So, we’re having dinner at the hotel. She smiled and thanked the woman, as an attendant handed her belongings over. Then they walked her to the door, and let her out into the darkening night. She found the car without any problem, and tried not to laugh. Her outfit definitely didn’t go with the car... but than again, it was so far off that the two seemed to compliment each other.

She slipped in behind the wheel, and turned the key in the ignition. It was almost sixty-three. She’d be at the hotel in twenty minutes. Then she’d find out what all the brouhaha was about.

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Kathrin went up the stairs slowly and glanced around. The doorman had told her to go to the small reception room, but the upstairs hallway was vacant. No doubt they were all inside waiting for her. She approached the door slowly, and tried to hear what was going on behind it.
There was absolute silence. She smiled. Aaron had probably brought her there for a quiet dinner before they met up with her family.

She pulled the door open, and was initially alarmed at the darkness. Then suddenly the lights were thrown on, and Kathrin jumped back in surprise as the voices of over fifty people filled the room. “SURPRISE!”

She clamped her hand over her heart and looked around. Her eyes took in all the people at once, then digested the faces. Her family, Steph, Alison, Jason, Adam, Jamie and the rest of the work crew, some old friends, and Aaron all stood smiling at her, waiting for a reaction. Kathrin couldn’t find any words. She looked around dazedly, and scanned the room. Don’t cry, she warned herself, you’ll ruin your make-up.

“Holy shit!” she finally sputtered, and laughter filled the room.

The evening flew by, and by nine everyone was dancing, drinking and carrying on. Even Richardson was having a good time. A huge buffet table had been set up by the door and Kathrin ate voraciously while chit-chatting with her friends and family, telling them about her wonderful day and rambling on about the new car. Everything was perfect except for the fact that Carol wasn’t there. Kathrin forced herself not to think about it. Steph had claimed that Carol had come down with a bug, and Kathrin tried to determine from her friend’s face whether that was what Carol had told her to say. Steph seemed sincere.

Finally Scott got up to the podium to make a short speech. Kathrin groaned and prepared to be roasted. He didn’t lambaste her too badly, but she was happy when Ingrid took over and recited one of her rhyming soliloquies extolling both Kathrin’s triumphs and worst moments. Everyone applauded vigorously when she was done, and Ingrid turned the microphone to Aaron. He stared out at the audience for a moment and composed himself. “Well,” he began, “I don’t know if I can make my speech rhyme, or compete with people who’ve know Kathrin a lot longer than I have...but I want to thank you all for coming tonight. And I want to wish Kathrin the best birthday she’s ever had. But more importantly,” he paused and searched Kathrin out with his eyes, “Kathrin, will you come up here?”

Kathrin blushed, and made her way to the front. As she stepped forward people moved out of her way, and she felt like a movie star at the Academy awards. Finally she approached the podium, and Aaron grabbed her arm to help her onto the make-shift stage. The ‘audience’ waited until Aaron began again. “As most of you know Kathrin and I have been living together for a few months now. Well, the lease on our apartment is up, so we’ll be looking for a new place.”
He turned to Ingrid. "How about it Ingrid?" he asked.

The crowd laughed and Aaron looked up, while Ingrid smiled at being included in the joke. "Maybe what I should say is a permanent place," he said taking Kathrin's hand, "because Kathrin and I have decided to get married."

There was a split second of silence, then the room erupted into a volley of applause, and hoots. Kathrin looked up at Aaron and he leaned over to kiss her on the lips. After the kiss, Kathrin found herself staring at her mother's glowing face, and smiled back warmly. Aaron held up his arm and waved for everyone to be silent. "Wait..." he said over the din.

The crowd hushed. Aaron reached into his breast pocket, and pulled out a small box. Kathrin shook her head with a surprised smile on her face. He hadn't told her he was going to pick up the ring. He handed her the box. Kathrin turned it upright and slowly opened the velvet case. Her heart stopped. Instead of the simple ring they had chosen, a large platinum band cradled the hugest diamond Kathrin had ever seen. It was even larger than Mrs. Taun's. She looked up at Aaron with a startled expression on her face, and then showed him the ring. Aaron laughed and addressed the audience. "If you're wondering why Kathrin is so surprised...this isn't the ring we picked out."

Kathrin waited for him to explain the mix-up. "Kathrin," he said quietly, but with force, "I want you to know how much I care about you. When I saw this ring, it seemed to say it better."

He took the box and removed the ring from the velvet slot. Slowly he took Kathrin's quaking hand, and pushed the ring over her finger. Kathrin felt a tear slip out of the corner of her eye and wiped it away before it could do any damage to her make-up. She sniffed quickly as everyone applauded again, then felt herself being led off the stage and into her mother's waiting arms.

"Kathrin," her mother wept openly, "I know you'll be so happy. Just like your father and I were."

Kathrin hugged her mother tightly, and then was whisked into her sisters' arms. For the rest of the evening she was passed around like a rag doll from one friend or family member to another. The ring itself seemed to weigh her down, and she kept looking at it in astonishment. Her ring put all those flaunting fiancées to shame.

And then finally Aaron got her alone in a corner, and kissed her face over and over again. "Are you happy?" he asked.
Kathrin nodded. She was too happy to say anything. Everything she had ever wanted was finally right before her face. “But Aaron,” she managed to sputter at last, “this must have cost you so much money. Everything.”

He looked into her eyes. “And I don’t regret any of it. I don’t want you to either…understood?”

She smiled. “All right.”

“So, how was your day?” he asked, making fun of her sudden sobriety.

“Today,” she gushed, “was perfect.”

“And it will only get better!” he assured her.

When they finally got home, Kathrin refused to take off her dress. She didn’t want the day to end. Aaron watched her waltz across the living room, twirling her new purse and car keys in her hands. “You know,” he said, “you should look like this every day.”

She laughed. “Then I wouldn’t be able to work. I’d have to spend every waking hour at the spa.”

He smiled. “Well, why not?”

She came up close to him and kissed his lips. “It would drive me crazy.”

He went into the bedroom for a moment and then returned with his automatic camera. “I want a couple of pictures of you. While you look so nice.”

She sat on the edge of the couch and posed for him. She was drunk on happiness, and even went along with him as he asked her to pout for the camera. Then he approached her, and carefully removed her jacket. Kathrin giggled as he took a few more snapshots, then carefully stepped behind her and unzipped her dress. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Just a few more.”

“Promise you won’t put them on your desk at work,” she teased.

“I promise.”

She shed her dress and carefully folded it over the chair. Aaron whistled appreciatively, and ran his hand up her thigh. He kissed her fiercely on the lips and then moved back to take a picture. Kathrin stood against the wall in her undergarments and heels trying to look natural. Suddenly Aaron stopped and held the camera in one hand.

“What?” she asked.

He approached her. “Bedroom. Come on.”
He led Kathrin into the bed room and told her to lie on the bed. Kathrin did, but propped herself up on her elbows so she could see him.

"Take your bra off," he ordered, and Kathrin felt a surge of electricity go through her. She'd never done the nude photo thing with any boyfriend, but Carol had acknowledged doing it with Harold. "You know," Carol had admitted, "I felt pretty sexy doing it."

Kathrin forced herself not to think about Carol, and concentrated on the situation at hand. She unhooked her bra, and tossed it on the floor. Aaron stepped closer to the bed and took another picture. Kathrin blinked after the flash went off in her eyes. Then Aaron was next to her, and he bent down and took her nipple firmly between his teeth. She could feel the tension and then a surge of pain and Aaron's teeth clamped tighter.

"Aaron," she moaned, and he looked at her.

His face was flushed, and Kathrin realized how excited he was. "Does this turn you on?" she asked seductively.

He gripped her breast strongly with his empty hand, and kissed her with such force that it amazed her. Then she could feel the choking weight of his tongue in her mouth as his body pressed against her on the bed. She had never witnessed such animal yearnings from Aaron before and she found herself excited by them.

"Take of your panties," he said as he dropped the camera on the bed, and then pulled off his own shirt.

Kathrin lifted her hips and pulled the mauve underwear from her thighs. Immediately Aaron grabbed her buttocks with both hands and pulled her to him with such force that Kathrin let out a gasp. He leaned over her chest, kissing her and rubbing his hands over her body. The friction burned up and down her arms, and she squirmed to get closer to him. She could hear the heavy thud of his belt buckle fall on the bed, and then his hands were off her for a moment but the pressure of his lips refused to ebb. Soon he was touching her again with renewed passion, and Kathrin listened to her own moan rise through her throat.

Suddenly his fingers plunged into her vagina, and moved with powerful strokes up and over her pubic bone. She writhed under his touch and pushed her hips higher and off the bed. He continued rubbing her as they kissed, and pressed his body against hers again. Then without warning he withdrew his fingers and wiped the fluid on his hand across her thighs and stomach. "On your knees," he snarled.
Kathrin sat up groggily and then kneeled facing him. He pushed her shoulder roughly, and she lost her balance until she fell onto her hands and knees facing the headboard of the sleigh-bed. Aaron clamped his hands down on her hips and moved in closer until his penis penetrated her vagina from behind. She gasped at the intense pressure and shut her eyes. She had had rear-entry sex with other men, but Aaron and she had always assumed missionary or woman-on-top positions. But she didn’t have the chance to think about it, because the pleasure of his forceful entry consumed her. His hands refused to stop moving over her body, and when he gripped her flesh it was with strength and hunger. Kathrin moved with him as he pulled her head back by her hair, and then kissed her neck fiercely. His teeth bit into the lobe of her ear, and his breath was hot and desperate against her face.

And then Kathrin was lost in the swirling of their flesh and the pounding of their bodies and her heart. Aaron’s growls behind her body increased the sexual intoxication, and she felt as if she was being pulled under the ocean, and drowning in the throb of her blood. Soon Aaron was gripping her stomach and pulling her towards him until his chest clung to her back, and his right hand moved down to touch her in the exact way she had touched herself at the cottage.

The wave started in her toes, then lapped up her legs and over her thighs. She wasn’t sure what she was experiencing. Like her nerve endings in her feet were exposed at first to extreme cold then immediately to intense heat. It continued to expand, until her whole body was consumed, and she was gasping for air and pushing her body against Aaron in desperation. He gripped her even more tightly as she thrashed about, and squeezed her buttocks until Kathrin lost feeling in them.

In the last instance, as Aaron bucked the last few times before ejaculation, Kathrin felt a huge ‘pop’ inside her body. It was as if her body had exploded and microscopic pieces of herself were bouncing through every atom of her being. A wave of intense pain pricked her for one brief moment, and then without warning her body dissolved into a series of spasms. She jerked ceaselessly under Aaron’s grip, and cried out. Her noise mingled with Aaron’s own guttural throat heaves until the two of them had released every ounce of energy left in their bodies.

When it was over Kathrin’s body crumpled on the bed, and she lay heaving while Aaron found a space to wrap his arms around her shaking figure. He rubbed her arms slowly with his hands, and kissed her sweat stained forehead. Then he pulled her face towards him and kissed her lips. “That’s how much I love you.”

Kathrin reached her hand out to him, and he took it without saying another word. After a few moments, she reached her hand up to her head, and pulled the few tangled bobby pins out from
her disheveled hair. Aaron tried to smooth the curls, then looked at her flushed face. He smiled and pulled himself up to sitting position, then groped around the bed, looking for something.

"What are you doing?" Kathrin asked hoarsely.

Aaron found what he was looking for. "You look so beautiful. I want to take a picture of you just like that."

Kathrin groaned. "C'mon Aaron. I must look awful."

"No. You look perfect."

Kathrin reached up to smooth her hair, as Aaron aimed the camera towards her. "No. Don't do anything. Just lay back. Yeah, like that. Perfect."

The flash of the camera blinded Kathrin, and she brought her hands up to her face as soon as the picture was taken. Then she lay back, exhausted at the events of the night, and listened to the roll of film rewind.

Kathrin jolted awake in the middle of the night, and quickly jumped out of bed. She ran to the bathroom, and searched the top drawer for her pills, then popped one into her mouth. When she shut the drawer, it slammed against the back of the cabinet.

Aaron rolled over as she climbed back into bed. "What was that all about?"

"I forgot to take my pill tonight."

"Is that a problem?" he asked.

"Probably not. I've only got one left to take."

Aaron rubbed his eyes in the darkness then tucked his arms around Kathrin. "You know," he said calmly, "it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if you didn't take them."

Kathrin detached his arms from around her waist. The she turned and faced him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you got pregnant that would be fine with me."

Kathrin smiled. "I'd look really great walking down the aisle with a huge belly."

He kissed her nose. "Well maybe not right now, but after we get married."

She nodded. "Well, a year or so isn't that far off from what I'd planned, but with my career and everything, I didn't really think about."

"So what will you do when we have a kid?"

She thought about it. "I don't know. Work until I give birth I guess. Then take some time off. Why, what do you want?"
He didn’t take long to answer. “Well, I was thinking - you’re good enough to be your own boss. Have you considered going out on your own? Then you could work from home.”

Kathrin placed her arm over his shoulder. “Actually I have thought about being on my own. I just couldn’t find a good enough reason…”

He interrupted. “Well, maybe that’s the best reason. We’ll get you knocked up so you have an excuse for your boss!”

She laughed. “Don’t rush it. That’s still over a year away.”

Aaron kissed her face, and then leaned down to kiss her flat belly. “I know, but I can’t wait.”

“And why is that?” she asked softly.

“Because if it’s a girl, she’ll be gorgeous like her mom.”

“And if it’s a boy?”

“He’ll be exactly like his old man.”
A few days after the party Aaron found out that he had to attend another convention in Vancouver for five days, starting on the thirteenth. It was bad timing, but he had no choice - he was the biggest representative. Kathrin groaned when he told her, but took it well after he promised to do some of the packing before he left. They were planning on spending the holidays at Jen and Scott's place, and moving into their new condo on the first, so both of them felt it would be better to have things packed and ready to go before the Christmas festivities really hit. He'd still have a week after he got back from Vancouver, but the week would be consumed with finishing up business from the convention. So he guaranteed Kathrin that at the very least he'd pack up the living room before he left.

On the sixth a large cardboard box arrived at the apartment building, and Kathrin came home to find a note on the apartment door, asking her to claim the box from the front desk where it was taking up a lot of space. She took the elevator down to the first floor and approached the desk. The doorman seemed relieved to see her and volunteered to help lug the box up to the apartment. Kathrin accepted the offer, and the two of them managed to get the box into the apartment with little trouble.

Once the doorman left Kathrin ripped off the small card taped to it, and tore through the envelope. She extracted a dainty card, and flipped it open.

"Aaron and Kathrin, Congratulations. The Tauns."

Kathrin nearly collapsed. The tone of the card seemed typical for his parents, but she was impressed that at least they'd tried to accept the news with some felicity. She thought about waiting for Aaron to get home, but her curiosity couldn't be curbed. After procuring a pair of scissors from the kitchen drawer, she cut through the thick plastic ties keeping the box together. Then she tugged one side of the cardboard, until it pulled away from the large metal staples. She lifted a clump of paper shreds and peered into the box. Inside was a beautiful antique desk, with a roll-back lid. Kathrin ran her fingers over the desk and smiled. It was gorgeous. *Well there's one thing to be said for them; at least they have great taste.*

She showed Aaron the desk as soon as he got home. Of course he couldn't miss it - it was standing in the middle of the living room. He smiled. "Well, that's a good sign, right?"

Kathrin nodded. "Should we call and thank them?"

Aaron tried to conceal his laughter. "Kathrin, that would be pushing things. My parents don't respond well to the direct approach. Write them a thank you letter, and we'll send it."

"Are you sure that's enough?"
"They'll appreciate it more. believe me."

She kissed him. "O. K. It is beautiful, though."

He agreed. "But don't unpack it - we'll just have to pack it back up."

She spent the rest of the night drafting the perfect thank-you letter, and Aaron watched her with a bemused expression on his face. Finally, after she had gone through nearly a full package of stationery, she handed Aaron the final copy. "Will you mail it tomorrow?"

He kissed the top of her head, and tossed the envelope onto his briefcase. "Sure thing."

"O. K. So, what's the plan for this week?" she asked, getting up and crossing to the couch.

"I'm going to take Thursday off to pack up the living room and some other little stuff - just in case something comes up on Friday."

"And what time is your flight on Sunday?"

"Eight-fifty."

She lifted her feet onto the armrest and lay back. "Ooh," she said, as she relaxed against the couch.

"Tired?" Aaron asked.

"No. Just sore."

"Your period?"

"Yeah, that too."

He smiled at her mischievously. "When are you done?"

She shook her head at him. "Forget it. At least another day or two."

Aaron snapped his finger in mock frustration. "Rats."

Aaron stepped out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. He crossed the living room, and put a CD on the player. careful to step around the stack of CD's he was packing into one of the moving crates. He had promised Kathrin that he would finish the living room by the time she got home from work. When the song started playing he went into the bedroom, opened the closet and reached his warm hand into the clothes, pulling his battered robe from its hanger. He dropped the towel on the floor and drew his arms through the holes and stood with the robe untied, draping loosely off his body. Why had he put it on? The apartment was warm and dry. But underneath his denial he knew exactly what he was doing. He knew what was coming.
That slow uneasy stirring in his gut, moving through his body like a hunger. All morning since he’d gotten up it had been with him.

Reaching into the closet again, he pushed the hangers away from the wall, and slowly cleared a space so his arm could reach the wall safe. In smooth clicks he manipulated the circle of numbers past the twelve o’clock arrow. Stop. Then back again the other way. Stop. Again turning the numbers around. The door swung open. Aaron rifled through the contents, probing to the back wall of the safe. His fingers fumbled over his coin collection: a tangible remnant of his childhood memories. Over the antique pocket-watch his grandfather had given him at graduation. Through the stacks of vaccination papers, warranties and an odd assortment of pictures and newspaper clippings. His hand met something soft. His whole body drew back, then relaxed. He pulled a scarf from the back corner and held it in one hand, while the other shut the safe door and twirled the combination lock.

It was a pale, dusty rose, covered in tiny gold and blue flowers. Sheer. Delicate and pretty. Rectangular in shape, about six inches wide and two feet long, but not rigid in geometric form. Instead the silk flowed over itself, in waves of reflected light. Aaron pulled the scarf up to his face and moved it over his nostrils. It smelled new, but left an after-scent of moth balls. Cool across his face, he drifted the silk over his unshaven skin. The scarf fluttered slightly, as it passed over his mouth. Dipped over his closed eyes, until they opened and gazed through the misty lens offered by the scarf. Through those eyes he saw the bed, and moved towards it. He lay down on his back, passing the scarf over his face, then gradually trailing it down his chest and across the flat stomach his bathrobe had fallen open to expose. His breathing slowed and kept the tempo of the song still playing in the living room, echoing off the walls and drifting into his bedroom.

*I’ve been standing here for weeks by the door*
*I’ve been waiting for you to come back to me once more*
*Even when you fall*

He gently draped the scarf over his thighs and groin. It fluttered as he grew erect. He wrapped the scarf around his penis and gripped himself over the thin layer of soft silk. His eyes focused on the ceiling, then slowly closed as he drifted off into the melody.

*Ninth of December*
*Even when you fall*

Lost in the music, his mind floated back through time, out the window, and down onto the street.
Walking home under a heavy blanket of falling snow, he couldn't see the stars, couldn't even barely see the sky, except in the pinkish glow of the streetlights. He was carrying the scarf, tucked neatly beneath layers of tissue paper, almost as delicate as the silk itself. His other hand carried a bouquet or roses, nestled inside the folds of pink wrapping paper. He walked softly on the snow, and there was no sound around him. Cocooned in utter silence. No passing cars gliding gently to a stop at the corner. No small children laughing quietly under the white duvet of winter. Only Aaron, walking home to her. He pictured her, humming softly as she lit the candles on the dining room table. The night would smoothly sail into quiet passion, then dissolve as morning, and his arms slipped over her sleeping chest.

*Sky filled with blue*

*Even when you fall*

The whole world was lost in snow and silence. No wind, no cold, only a warm feeling of presence. God's presence, perhaps. A feeling that crept into his sleep some nights, and woke him up like a nurse/angel/mother during a child's fever. He reached the building and smiled. Mounting the stairs, he looked back into the night sky and felt the presence ease over his entire body. He entered the building and floated down the marble floor. He couldn't hear the echo of his shoes.

*I don't remember*

*Even when you fall*

The elevator door glided back and he entered. The dim gold lights reflected off the back mirror and cast a hazy glow about the elevator. He looked at himself in the mirror. His cheeks were a soft rose colour, and drops of melted snow hung in his hair. He ran his fingers through the long mane of curls then straightened the jagged line of hairs forming his eyebrows with his pinkies. The elevator eased into an upward motion and climbed the floors in slow, laborious rumbles. The seventh floor brought the elevator to a sleepy stop. The doors heaved open with a sigh, and he got off. He made his way down the hall in a drunken-like daze. The floor was silent. No TV, no conversation. Peaceful.

*The last thing I said to you*

*Even when you fall*

He pulled the keys out of his pocket, and turned them in the lock. The door opened swiftly and he peered into the semi-darkness. Only the light on the end table was burning. He flicked the hall switch and the overhead lights buzzed and came to life. He bent over, placing his packages on
the floor and removed his shoes, slightly damp from the walk home. He placed the pair on the rubber mat, neatly wedged between red heels and his running shoes. Then he took off his coat and hung it in the hall closet. He picked the packages off the floor and walked into the living room. The apartment was comfortably warm. He placed the flowers and the box on the dining room table, then stumbled in the semi-darkness to turn on the other light. The CD player was glowing, still running, skipping over the same section of disk. He pressed pause. The player stammered briefly, then lurched into sound when he pressed play. Soft easy listening music flowed through the room. Her CD.

“Lil? Lily?” he called.

He rolled his eyes and pulled another CD off the shelf. Something with a bit more bite. How she could bear that music he couldn’t understand. He glanced around.

“Lily, are you here?” he called loudly, but received no answer.

He went to the kitchen and opened the fridge. It was empty. Maybe she was grocery shopping for dinner. Shiitake mushrooms, or a bottle of wine. That would be nice. He loosened his tie and decided to take the flowers out so they wouldn’t go limp before she got back. From the cupboard he pulled a tall crystal vase and rinsed it out. He filled the vase with lukewarm water and poured the powder into it. Snipped away the bottoms of the stems. He placed the roses, one by one, into the vase. He twined the baby’s breath and fern through them and fluffed out the leaves. A hint of tea rose hit his nose, and he inhaled. She hated roses because she thought they were too romantic. But he had bought them specifically for that purpose. He placed the vase on the counter, then fixed himself a drink. Carefully, he carried his drink to the sofa and sat down, propping his legs up on the table. The clock read 6:48. It was still early. She would come home soon. He just had to wait. He clicked on the news.

*But remember, I’ll always love you*

Aaron’s breath grew shallow, and he tightened his grip on the scarf.

He got up and went to the window. The snow was still falling over the city, thickly falling over everything. He looked down on the street and tried to see if she was coming. He couldn’t see anything.

*I’ve been standing here for years by the door
I’ve been waiting for you to come back to me*
Aaron moaned quietly.

He paced the living room. She had never been this late before. Especially on this night. He picked up the florist card and read his note. “Happy Anniversary. I love you. Aaron.” Simple. He tucked the card into the flowers. He went to the answering machine. Nothing there.

*Even when you fall*

He took the vase to the table by the sofa. He pulled out one of the roses and twirled it in his palm. A thorn snagged his skin, leaving a white line across his flesh. Slowly the white line reddened and small drops of blood gathered along the cut. “Dammit,” he grumbled, and wiped the blood onto his pant leg. In retribution he plucked a red petal from the flower.

*Even when you fall*

Aaron caught the shiver running through his body, and moaned.

He went to the storage room to get a Band-Aid from the first aid kit. The red light by Lily’s studio door glowed in the shadow. He smiled. Of course, she was in the dark room. Why hadn’t he thought of that before? He was about to knock, but knew how she hated being disturbed. Instead, he leaned in against the door. There was music coming from inside, which he could barely make out. They had insulated the dark room themselves, and there was no way she could hear him, even if he knocked.

He decided to take a shower. If she was in the middle of some developing she might be in there for another hour. He walked into the bathroom and left his work clothes crumpled by the door. The water was excessively hot, and it burned his skin as he climbed into the stall. So dinner would be a little late, but things could be worse. No doubt she was almost done. He shut his eyes and let the spray wash over his face. He thought of her and how she would come out the room with her hair matted to her face, smelling of sweat and developer. Sometimes her breasts would be wet with sweat, and stuck to the thin t-shirts she wore. She was sexy after working in the dark room, if things went well. If not, she stomped around the apartment, and he kept his distance. *Let tonight, he prayed, be a good night.*

Briefly he wondered why she was working so late, but dismissed the thought. She couldn’t have forgotten it was their anniversary. Maybe she was working on a photo for him. She had taken a few rolls of them the previous week at the cottage. He would just have to wait.
**Even when you fall**

Aaron’s hand moved faster over the silk, pulling stronger and faster with each stroke.

He dried his body, then walked naked towards the bedroom, passing the table and sending the single petal fluttering to the floor. He pushed the bedroom door open and lost his vision in the darkness of the room. It smelled sweet; a combination of her perfume, and their sweat. He flicked on the light and let the towel drop onto the bed. He dressed quickly, pulling a tan sweater over his wet hair. He grabbed his cologne from the dresser and sprayed himself. She was a sucker for him in cologne.

**Even when you fall**

Aaron went back into the living room, sat back down on the sofa and surfed the channels. The news was over, and nothing else caught his fancy. He sipped his drink slowly and watched some commercials, then he pulled a cushion out from under him and propped his head up on the arm rest. Maybe he’d take a quick nap. Then, if it was a good night, she would wake him up the way she knew he liked best.

**Even when you fall**

He woke up with a start. The CD had ended. He pulled his watch to his face. 8:15. He scrambled up from the couch and went over to the dark room door.

“Lil? C’mon honey. It’s after eight.” He pounded on the door.

The music was still playing, so his only hope was that she would feel the pounding. He paused, knowing that she hated to be disturbed when she was working. He was going to get it. He waited for a few more minutes, then banged again. “Honey?”

No answer. “Shit.” he said simply.

He tried the door and it opened, but the inside door was locked. He slammed his fists into the door. “Lil?”

He was sure that she must have heard the latest round of banging, but he couldn’t detect any movement within. The music lulled for a moment and he brought his hands to the door again. There was no sound inside now. The music had stopped.

“Lil? C’mon. We have to go out.” He waited for a moment then hit the door once again.

It hit him suddenly that he wasn’t hearing the usual groans of the fan. He swallowed hard and mumbled “Jesus” under his breath. She had always warned him how dangerous the fumes could be. He threw his whole body into banging on the door.
“Lil? Can you hear me? Please answer the door! Please!”

He stepped back from the door and frantically kicked at the wood. The door groaned under his weight, but remained solid. Again and again he raised his foot, until finally, the door gave under the pressure. He heard wood splinter as the door flung open and propelled him into the room. The sudden shift of light, from bright to a yellowish gleam caught him off guard and he stumbled around near-blind. The dark-room reeked of chemicals and burned his eyes and nose. His eyes suddenly adjusted to the room and he saw Lily lying face down on the floor, photography pans flung down desperately, having spilt their liquid contents over her naked body. The fluid pooled around her.

Aaron groaned, remembering the dimpled softness of her flesh.

Even when you fall

He moved closer and leaned down over her back. A danker smell hit him full force. He touched her shoulder. Stiff. Her arm. Rigid. Grabbed her hand. Frozen. Turned her over. No sound. No movement. Light. Light. Light! LIGHT! His hand groped for the switch. The light flashed on, spilling over her body, over the wet floor, the pans, the room, the blood. The red petal on the table.

Even when you fall.

His hands were covered in her blood, as he grasped her body in his arms. Blood everywhere. Her face, her hands, staining her hair. He pulled her hair back.

Aaron moved his hand frantically over the silk. He felt the strain coming, getting closer.

Even when you fall.

If was stiff from blood. He ran his hand over her chest, searching for a heartbeat. He couldn’t find one.

“Come on. Come on. Don’t do this to me.”

Her wrists were slit open like puckers in pleats; small gaping wounds. He looked on in horror, fascinated with the brightness. She had slit herself open. Aaron got up and ran for a towel to clean her up. He wasn’t thinking logically. Flash. The knife. Flash. The floor. Flash. Flash. Her naked body. Even when you fall.
His gasps heaved from his throat, and he felt the tension mounting in his body. He held his breath, knowing he was going to come.

Her head, falling back onto the floor, as he moved her into a more natural position. Her breasts poked up into the air, the nipples hard. He watched her rigid body move with his hands, as he posed her like a doll against a stool. Her head thumped against the metal leg hollowly. He reached his hand out to push back her hair. Her eyes wide open, staring back at him. He turned away from them. Tried to reach out and shut them in his mind. Her beautiful eyes. He would never be able to shut them. *Even when you fall.* Flash. Her hands. Flash. Her breasts. Neck. Throat. Eyes. Roses. Red. Table. Petal. Blood. Everywhere blood. Petal falling. *I will always love you.* One lone petal continuously falling. Her eyes. And dragged through the puddle of stopper and blood, the picture of them standing in the shade of the porch.

Aaron felt the surge, and his eyes jolted open as he let out a howl.
The warm water rose and crested over her shoulders, and Kathrin relaxed. She had been waiting all day to take a bath, but first there had been Aaron’s departure, then lunch at her mother’s, and then she’d stopped by the office to pick up some files. To make matters worse, her car was on the fritz again. Initially, after Aaron bought her the Beetle she was tempted to toss the rusty mass she referred to as her car into some wreckage lot. Aaron had convinced her to use the old car as a winter beater, then he’d spent almost a full day wrapping up the bug in canvas and plastic. Kathrin didn’t understand why all the excess protection was necessary - it was in a rented parking space in the underground parking lot, not out in the wide open.

Near the end of the day, she had finally drawn a bath and found the water and the silence relaxing. She hadn’t had any chance to be alone since she’d moved in, and the solitude was exactly what she needed. One week of peace, quiet, and not having to inform Aaron of her every action. She could dance naked in front of the living room window, or stay out all night, or even go through Lily’s boxes in the basement. The last thought startled her, and she brushed it aside. She was curious - that was true, but going through a dead woman’s belongings was morbid. She refused to do it; based on the chill factor alone. She wondered what Aaron was planning to do with the stuff when they moved - there was no way she’d let the boxes go with them. She dreaded having to address it again when Aaron got back from the convention. He refused to talk about it, and she knew how hard it was for him, but surely he had to understand her aversion to having Lily’s ghost move in with them.

When Kathrin got out of the bathroom, her body was puckered and she was exhausted. She looked around for her comfy flannels but realized they were in the hamper. She had noticed Aaron’s new p.j.’s just before he left on his trip and she rummaged through the pile of stuff on his closet shelf until she found the plaid top and put it on. Then she crossed to the bed, slipped under the covers and rolled over until she was lying on Aaron’s side of the bed. She buried her head into the pillow and inhaled his warm, musky scent.

At work on Monday, the office was chaos. Garlands of plastic pine needles and huge red velvet bows hung down over the entire reception area, and the only consolation Kathrin found in the decorations was that Jane had waited longer than usual to hang them. Also, there was no mistletoe to be seen. Everyone was bustling around the office, and Kathrin had to dodge a few over-zealous staff to get to her office un-scathed. Not that she couldn’t understand the rush; the office always closed on the twenty-third, and everyone needed to get finished long before that to
submit their proposals, presentations - and whatever else was owing. She was lucky, she was only working on two accounts: one, for an Irish beer that wasn’t set to launch until St. Patrick’s Day; and the second, for a stupid Boxing Week advertising campaign. When Richardson had handed her the file she’d laughed in his face. One of the interns could have handled it. Still, it was a short term project, so he probably had something really big lined up for her in the new year. She couldn’t complain - the freedom would give her time to be with her family and Aaron.

She didn’t see Jamie all morning - Richardson had handed him over to another campaign, until after Christmas. She reworked some of the fonts they were using for the Boxing Week Sale during the morning and then slipped out to grab a bite to eat.

She found a vegetarian stall in the underground and ordered a sandwich, which she took back to the office with her. Jane flagged her down from the front desk and Kathrin waited patiently until she had finished on the phone line.

“You got a message from an Elizabeth,” Jane said, pulling a pink note from Kathrin’s phone slot.

“From who?”

“She said you’d know her as Mama.”

Kathrin smiled as she grabbed the note. “Great!”

“She’s on a business trip, but said she’ll be back in the office next week.”

“Did she say what it’s about?”

“Nope.”

Kathrin took the note and went to her office. There were two possibilities: either Mama wanted to know something about Andria for the outfit she’d promised; or it was about the Japanese designer. Kathrin pulled up the graphic program on her computer and opened the demo. Wouldn’t that be something - if he was interested. Halfway through her sandwich, a knock at the door brought her out of her visions of wealth and fame. Jamie poked his head in. “Hey!”

“Hi,” Kathrin responded.

He entered the office bearing gifts. In one arm he carried a huge poinsettia plant, and in the other a metal tin. The plant was a gift from the office; they gave them out every year. She couldn’t tell what the tin was. Jamie placed the plant on her desk, and held out the tin.

Immediately Kathrin realized what the tin was - a fruitcake.

“God,” she moaned, “get that thing out of here.”

Jamie laughed. “Compliments of Mr. Richardson.”
Kathrin took the fruitcake with a huge grimace. “I hate fruitcake.” Kathrin paused, and then a wicked smile spread across her face.

“What?” Jamie demanded.

“Nothing.”

Jamie watched her face, but she gave him no further sign as to what she was thinking. He nodded vaguely and then slipped out of her office. Kathrin leaned back in her chair, shut her day-planner, and pushed the fruitcake to the far end of the desk. She returned to the demo, and decided to leave work early and stop by the house. Nothing was keeping her at the office.

At two-thirty, there was another knock at her door, but it was desperate, and Jamie flung the door open without waiting for her to respond. “I need your help!”

Kathrin jerked up in her seat. “For what?”

“Come down to the studio with me. A couple of us need a good idea.”

Kathrin stood up and followed Jamie to the studio. When she got inside several of the designers were peering at a computer screen. She said hi to the group and then asked for the details. “We need a complementing character,” Jamie answered, and the mob moved back from the screen so Kathrin could get a better look.

She leaned in and glanced at the screen. Immediately she let out a gasp. Lizard Man was dancing across the screen, gyrating with another undefined form. Kathrin looked up at Jamie.

“What is this for?” she demanded.

“MuchMusic. For the countdown.”

Kathrin couldn’t breathe. She felt as if the air in her lungs had been sponged out of her.

“For New Year’s?”

“Yeah.”

She sucked in her cheek, and tried to keep the venom in her throat from rising to her mouth. “Well,” she said rigidly, “my idea would be to create his exact duplicate, but make her female.”

The group let out a collective sigh of relief. They tossed the idea around and then agreed.

“If you’ll excuse me,” she said, “I have work to do.”

She moved out of the studio and walked down the hallway, passing her office. She didn’t know where she was going until she arrived outside of Richardson’s office. His personal secretary was nowhere to be seen and she knocked once on Richardson’s door, then stepped inside. He was
talking on the telephone, but ended the call as soon as he saw Kathrin. "Hello," he said, pushing some papers out of the way.

"Hello? That's all you can say to me?" Kathrin stormed.

"Whoa! What's the matter?"

Kathrin stared at him in frustration. "What's going on?"

"With what?" Richardson asked, his voice taking on a terse undercurrent.

"The MuchMusic account was my account!"

Richardson stood up. "Kathrin you're over-reacting. Sit down," he said stiffly, gesturing to the chair, "please."

"No! I will not. You tell me why!"

He shrugged feebly. "You've been very busy this year..."

"What - with Irish beer and a bullshit Boxing Sale? Are you kidding me?"

"Sit down. Let me explain."

Kathrin slumped into a chair and waited for Richardson to begin. "You've had a very stressful year. With your engagement, and the death of your sister's child. I just didn't want you to get..."

Kathrin snapped to attention. "How did you know about Jen?"

"I was told."

"By who?"

"Well, by Aaron. At the engagement party."

"What?"

"He said you were under a lot of strain, and that it would be a good idea to let you have a lighter work load. At least until you get settled."

Kathrin could feel her ears burning, and the blood in her veins rushed to her head. "Aaron said that?" she whispered.

"Yes. And I agree with him."

Kathrin stared at him. "I don't understand. Jim, I am one of the best designers you have here, and my work is consistent. I can't believe this."

"Kathrin, you are over-reacting..." he repeated nervously while tugging at his tie, "I just don't want to see you burn out."

"I am not over-reacting," she responded, "this job is my life. You know that. Please don't do this to me."
He looked at her and sighed. "Fine. After New Year's I'll give you the new account. O.K.?"

"O.K. Now, I'm leaving the office for the rest of the day, because I can't guarantee you I can keep a smiley face - because I am still really pissed off."

He nodded. "I'm sorry, Kathrin."

She headed for the door, and slammed it behind her.

Mr. Richardson's personal secretary looked at Kathrin in amazement.

"What?" Kathrin demanded.

The woman shrank back behind the desk, and Kathrin stormed to her office to get her belongings.

She was on a mission. The entire drive over she kept looking in the rear-view mirror, almost expecting that some unmarked car was following her. At first, she'd felt nervous about going to the Taun's home unexpected, but then she realized that the chances of Mrs. Taun being home were slim - almost nonexistent.

There were no cars in the driveway when Kathrin pulled up to the house. She checked her make-up in the mirror, then got out of the car. Her heels clicked on the driveway in a steady pattern, and she mounted the front porch steps with determination. She couldn't see very well through the front windows, but there didn't seem to be any lights on in the hallway. Kathrin pushed her hair off her face, adjusted the tin in her arm, and then reached over to press the doorbell. After the ring, everything around her seemed to fall silent, and she waited to hear footsteps inside the house. She paused and then rang the bell again. No answer. Well, I could leave it on the porch.

She was heading back to her car to get a pen and some paper, when she heard the door open behind her. She quickly spun around to find Mrs. Taun peering at her with curiosity. Kathrin waved, and Mrs. Taun suddenly recognized her. "Kathrin," she said calmly.

"Hi, Mrs. Taun. How are you?" Kathrin asked as she moved back to the porch.

"Fine."

Kathrin stepped towards the door, but Mrs. Taun gave no indication of inviting her in.

"Here, this is for you," Kathrin said, handing over the tin.

"Oh, Mr. Taun loves fruitcake. Thank you. Would you like to come in?"

Kathrin thought about declining, then nodded. "Sure."
Mrs. Taun stepped back slowly. "I was just making some tea. Would you like some?"

Kathrin could tell by the invitation that Mrs. Taun had had no previous intention of making tea. "Oh no, I wouldn't want to impose. I'm sure you have things to do."

"Well," she began, then shook her head. "Don't be silly. I would love to sit down for a few minutes and chat."

Kathrin smiled and handed Mrs. Taun her coat. "O.K. But let me help."

Kathrin followed Mrs. Taun into the kitchen, and was overwhelmed by the sparseness of it. The walls were a clean white, and only a few cupboards dotted the walls. Given the immense size of the kitchen, it looked empty. Then Kathrin frowned. There was no microwave or dishwasher, but a huge modern steel fridge sat in one corner. It struck her as odd that only the fridge was up to modern standards. But then she remembered how traditional Aaron's parents were.

Mrs. Taun refused to let Kathrin help, but told her that she could do her part by telling her about Aaron. Kathrin told her about the convention, and how well he was doing at work. Mrs. Taun smiled. "We were so happy when he took that job. His father had to pull quite a few strings to get him in."

Kathrin frowned again. "Mr. Taun got him that job?"

"Why, of course. Didn't Aaron mention that?" she asked and then her smile vanished, "Well, I suppose he wouldn't. He never liked the thought of depending on his father for anything. Still, I'm glad he's finally happy."

Mrs. Taun picked up the tray and placed it on the huge coffee service. "My back," she explained to Kathrin, "it's not what it used to be. Why don't we go into the living room?"

Kathrin followed her out, and then waited for Mrs. Taun to sit down. "Let me pour. You just relax."

Mrs. Taun shook her head. "No, I can do it. You sit down," she said while pouring the tea, "So...how is your work going?"

Kathrin took the teacup from Mrs. Taun. "Well, it will pick up in January. Right now, things are pretty slow for me."

"Oh, well that will be nice for your family."

"Yes."

There was a lapse, and Kathrin eased herself into a seat on the couch.

"Our Christmases are pretty quiet around here," Mrs. Taun stated.
Kathrin smiled warmly, and tried in some way to relay that she knew all about it without speaking. The older woman looked at her and sighed. "I don’t suppose we’ll see Aaron this Christmas."

Kathrin looked at her. "Well, of course. Whenever you want. We always have a big Christmas dinner at my mom’s, but we could get together whenever you wanted."

Mrs. Taun smiled awkwardly. "The both of you? Oh. That sounds very nice."

Kathrin was relieved. For the first time since she’d met Aaron, the family situation didn’t seem so bad. Mrs. Taun even seemed to actually like her. She smiled. "Listen, Mrs. Taun, I just wanted to say thank you in person."

"For what?"

"Well, for everything. Your support for Aaron, your understanding, but also for the beautiful desk. I love it."

Mrs. Taun looked up and smiled vacantly at Kathrin. "The desk?"

"Yes. The one you sent to Aaron and I. For our engagement."

Mrs. Taun’s teacup tumbled to the floor, and Kathrin jumped to her feet. "Oh, I’ll get a cloth,” she offered.

Mrs. Taun’s arm shot out. "No, leave it!” she ordered, and Kathrin was taken aback by the force of her words.

She stopped and turned to Mrs. Taun. The older woman’s face had lost its colour. "You and Aaron are engaged?” Mrs. Taun asked, her voice shaky.

"Yes, for a few weeks now. You must have known…” Kathrin words trailed off as the older woman shook her head vigorously, "but what about the desk?"

"I don’t know what you’re talking about."

"But Aaron said he told you!” The words burst out of her mouth.

Mrs. Taun’s hands were shaking. "Neither Mr. Taun nor myself have spoken to Aaron since the last time you were here."

"But that’s impossible. I know he said…”

"How well do you know? How well do you know Aaron, Ms. Connelly?"

Kathrin stared at her. All of a sudden Mrs. Taun was looking at her with distrust.

"What? We’ve been living together since August. That’s how well!”

Mrs. Taun’s hand flew to her heart, and she looked as if she would faint. "Oh,” she managed to sputter.
Kathrin reached over to steady her, but Mrs. Taun pushed her arm away. "Don't... don't touch me. Just leave."

"I'm trying to help."

"Then go. Now. Please."

"Why? What's wrong?"

Mrs. Taun turned wild eyes towards her, and Kathrin backed up. "Please, tell me what's wrong. I need to know!" she begged.

"Go! JUST GO!"

Kathrin looked at the older woman, so unlike the reserved woman who had greeted her at the door minutes earlier. She backed into the hallway, grabbed her coat from the closet and raced out the front door. She turned on the car and screeched out of the driveway. She sped towards the downtown core, but couldn't think clearly, or decipher Mrs. Taun's words. It felt like everything was falling down around her, and no matter what she did it made things worse. And in the end, it always came back to Aaron.

She raced into the apartment, and went directly to the bedroom. The filing cabinet was under the desk and she struggled to pull it out. Once it was in the middle of the floor, she pulled at the handles. Locked. She searched the room to find the keys, but knew Aaron carried them everywhere he went. She slammed her fist down on the metal in anger, and felt a sharp searing pain move up her arm. She rattled the handles again, and then ran to the storage room to get the tool box. She didn't know what she was looking for in the filing cabinet, but there had to be something. Some sign. Something more than a few lousy pictures on a disk.

She pulled the hammer out of the toolbox, and tried to pry the back end into the cabinet. It didn't fit. She yanked the hammer handle backwards, and gouged through the metal, leaving a deep scratch on the surface. She beat the hammer into one side of the drawer, hoping to force the other side out. It didn't work. Sweat poured off Kathrin's face, and she pounded the cabinet harder and harder, her eyes filled with tears of frustration.

She took out the long flat-head screwdriver and forced it into the cabinet with the hammer's driving force. With all her might she tried to pry the drawer open until there was almost an inch of space at both corners. She dropped the tools and inserted her hands into the small space. With ferocity she clawed at the metal, but it wouldn't bend. She drew back her hands. Bright red depressions marked her palms. She used the hammer again and pried back the drawer face, until
she could see clearly inside the top drawer. She shoved back the files and began hitting the metal lock-bar with all her might. The bar held, but gradually bent under the weight of the hammer. She reached in to pull it down, and snagged her skin in the process. “Shit!” she hissed, as she sucked on the drops of blood on her skin.

Once she removed the bar, she pulled the top drawer out and dropped it heavily on the floor. Each folder was neatly labeled with client file names. Kathrin threw them on the floor in disgust. Then she pulled out the bottom drawer. There was a warranty file, a credit card receipt file, a file for the personal safe, other unimportant files, and a file that contained all of Aaron’s old income tax forms. Kathrin was on the verge of crying. Nothing. She’d destroyed the filing cabinet for nothing.

Then she stopped moving. Slowly her fingers traced back over the files. She found the one she was looking for and pulled it out. Inside was a small handbook. She picked it up, and then rose to her feet. Carefully she scanned the room, and then walked through the entire apartment. She made her way back to the bedroom, and went to the closet. Aaron’s things hung on the left side, and she carefully pushed them away from the wall. There it is.

She lifted up the handbook, and flipped it open to the first page. A small sheet of paper was neatly wedged into the book, and Kathrin lifted it out. In small type the safe combination was printed on the sheet. Kathrin moved in closer to the wall, and held up the sheet with shaky fingers. She repeated the numbers to herself and reached her right hand towards the dial. In smooth clicks she turned the dial to the northern point. Stop. Then back again the other way. Stop. Again turning the numbers around. She took a deep breath and turned the handle. The door swung open, and she let out a long sigh. She dropped the sheet of paper and slipped both hands into the stomach of the safe, rifling through the contents, until her touch probed to the back wall of the safe. Her fingers fumbled over things she couldn’t see, but she felt the contour of a pocket-watch and stacks of papers. Her hand met something soft, and she drew back. After her heart slowed a little she reached back into the safe and began pulling everything from it. There were more warranties, and newspaper clippings, and a large manila envelope. Kathrin moved back and forth from the safe to the bed, until everything was placed on the duvet. There was a coin collection, and knick-knacks, and even a scarf. It was rose-coloured, with the exception of one area that appeared to have been bleached or lightened. Like a stain. Covered in tiny gold and blue flowers. Sheer.

Kathrin sat down on the bed and began going through the objects. None of them caught her interest. Finally she picked up the newspaper clippings and began going through them. She
frowned. Each of them traced Aaron’s father’s career in the business world. Kathrin was perplexed. For a man who seemed to resent his father so much, he took a lot of interest in what his father did.

She pushed them away, and lifted up the manila envelope. She slipped her hand into the fold of paper, and felt smooth, glossy sheets in her hand. Then she withdrew her hand, and found herself looking at a stack of photographs. The first ones she saw were the pictures Aaron had taken of her the night of the party. He hadn’t mentioned getting them developed. She perused the pictures slowly and felt strange seeing her body so exposed. It was as if she was looking at someone else and not herself. She flipped over picture after picture, until the snapshots of her were replaced by pictures of Aaron’s family. In the photographs they were all smiling, and appeared happy. Nothing like Aaron had mentioned - they must have been taken before Lily.

She leafed through the family portraits until she was down to the last few photographs in the stack. The final photos had been flipped over, and as turned over the first one a frown spread over her face. The photograph was black and white. The picture was slightly out of focus, but Kathrin could make out the contours and spine of someone’s bare back. It appeared to be a woman’s back covered with drops of water, but because it was such a close-up Kathrin couldn’t be sure.

She flipped the next photograph over, and felt her whole body tense. *What?* It was a joke, it had to be - some sick, twisted joke. A full black and white view of a body - spread-eagle, facedown on the floor and covered with water, but the arms hung haphazardly over two shallow pans. Underneath, the floor was covered in a dark liquid. Kathrin felt queasy. The body lay at a strange, contorted angle and Kathrin forced herself to take a closer look. The woman’s long light-coloured hair was stiff and covered in the dark stain. Kathrin moved an unsteady hand over her stomach to relieve the disturbance in her gut. Her mind raced, and she offered herself a thousand options, but she knew that it wasn’t a joke. It was real.

*Lily committed suicide.*

The thought hit her like a bullet and her grip tightened around the picture. She vaguely realized that her entire body was shaking. She didn’t understand what she was seeing. If Lily had committed suicide, then why - *Why the Hell would Aaron want the police photographs? To be reminded of it?*

She steeled her courage and flipped over the next photograph. She stared in horror as the front of the body was exposed to her. Dried blood caked the face and torso, and the wrists were
covered in pulpy blood that hadn’t yet congealed. Kathrin felt violently ill. Two long slits
pucker ed over the wrists. Deep, precise wounds. Kathrin frowned. She looked deeper at the
photograph. Hadn’t she heard that suicide victims always had hesitation marks? There were no
other marks on Lily’s wrists and Kathrin felt shiver go through her. She’d bled to death willingly.

Only the last photograph remained un-viewed. She turned it over slowly, dreading it, but
at the same time wanting, almost needing to see it. As her eyes took in the contents, her frown
deepened. Everything she’d already seen couldn’t have prepared her for the last photograph. Her
body went into immediate shock, and she couldn’t tear her eyes from the grotesque view. She felt
like she was going to throw up, but couldn’t move from the bed. In the picture a frozen face
looked past her, the eyes stuck in a permanent stare. Even through the coating of black blood. The
lips puckered slightly, and the cheekbones jutted out. Kathrin gasped for air, as she realized
suddenly that the photographs weren’t forensic evidence - someone else had taken them. Her hands
shook uncontrollably, and she tried to let go of the photograph. Finally the photograph fell from
her hands. It floated down to the bed, and the eyes stared up at her in oblivion. The black and
white film didn’t let on what colour the eyes were, but she knew instinctively that they were blue.
The exact same blue as her own eyes.

It seemed like hours passed before she scrambled to her feet and stumbled to the bathroom.
The sudden mobility sent the blood rushing to her head and she groped for something stable as
darkness clouded her vision. She gripped the towel rack tightly until her sight returned, then raced
to the toilet and vomited into the bowl. She retched until there were only dry-heaves left and then
dry-heaved until her stomach ached.

After she stopped throwing-up she pressed her head against the cool porcelain to relieve
the heat on her forehead. Slowly she got up and went to the sink to rinse her face and mouth. She
swished and spat out the remaining bile in her mouth and dry-heaved again. She felt beyond awful,
but couldn’t look at herself in the mirror. She knew she was about three seconds away from
breaking down. She gripped the counter top firmly and shut her eyes. Get out! she begged
herself.

She took a deep breath and then began pulling her belongings from the drawers. She
grabbed her weekend bag from the closet without looking at the bed and stuffed some clothing into
it. She couldn’t pack up all her things. She’d only take what she needed to survive, until she could
logically plan the next step.
In twenty minutes she had packed the important items and carried them to the door. She left the mess in the bedroom - she couldn’t bear to touch any of it. She stepped out into the hallway, then shut and locked the door. The tears began in the elevator and she shut her eyes tightly to keep them inside. *How did it get fucked up?* How had she not realized sooner. All those clues - all the hard cold facts she’d blindly ignored. He’d taken over her life and she had never noticed. As the elevator approached the first floor she brushed the tears fiercely off her face and finally looked into the mirror to wipe away the mascara crusting around her eyes. As soon as she saw her face it was replaced by Lily’s eerie, vacant eyes. She felt like she was cracking up as she kept trying to see herself in the reflection. She couldn’t get it to work. And she didn’t know which way it worked - if she had become Lily, or Lily had become her.
When the phone rang at seven thirty, she jumped out of bed. At first she didn’t know where she was, but gradually the walls came into focus and she relaxed. It was only her wake-up call. She slipped from the crisp sheets that she’d barely slept in and went to the bathroom. She’d been up half the night, thinking. She’d worked out every detail, categorized every lie, and penetrated every angle about her relationship with Aaron. But mostly she planned out what she had to do next.

The first thing she did when she got to work was call some movers to get her stuff out of the apartment. Every company she called was booked solid, but she finally found one place that had a cancellation for the following day. She booked the available time. Then she put her head down on her desk and thought about where she was going. She couldn’t stand the thought of being alone in an apartment, but her sisters’ places were too busy. And Aaron would automatically assume she’d be at Jen’s. She needed a place she felt safe.

She picked up the phone, and dialed. “Hello?”
“Mom? It’s Kathrin.”
“Hi dear. How are you?”
“Fine. Listen, I was wondering...can I stay at your place for a few nights?”
“Sure. Why?”
“Well...”
Her mother laughed. “Are you lonely without Aaron?”
Kathrin didn’t respond.
“Tonight?” her mother asked.
“No, I’ll come by tomorrow.”
“All right. See you then.”

She hung up, then she called the bank and her doctor’s office, and changed her address. She canceled the newspaper subscription. She thought about giving Jane her new address, but wasn’t ready to explain why. She didn’t even know what she was going to say to her mother. All she knew was she dreaded having to go to the apartment, but she had no choice. She had to do it before Aaron returned. The sooner she was out of there the better she would feel.

She entered the apartment silently, not bothering to turn on the light. She felt strange, walking into the apartment without Aaron there. Like something or someone was moving her from above. She had no control over her own body, was only following order from a higher, invisible
being. She put down the wine cases she was carrying, then removed her shoes, and placed them by the door. She moved to the bedroom and turned on the light switch. The lights buzzed alive.

In the light, the room appeared to her like a white tomb. Like death after life. What was it her mother used to say? That she imagined death was a white paradise, without sound and extreme temperatures. Like being inside a cotton ball or a cocoon. Unreal. She stepped around the filing cabinet and took a deep breath. She tried not to look at the photographs as she rearranged them into a pile and quickly shoved them back into the manila envelope. She carried the contents of the wall safe to the closet, feeling like they were stinging her hands, and pushed them into the safe. When everything was inside, she removed her engagement ring and placed it in too. She swung the door shut and spun the dial with force. Then she carefully picked up the sheet with the combination on it, pushed it back into the hand book, and dropped it into the folder. She looked at the filing cabinet. It was destroyed. There was nothing she could do about it. She left everything as it was.

She cleaned out the closet first, then the bathroom. When she pulled out her toiletries she realized that she’d forgotten to take her pill the previous night. She quickly rummaged through the drawer, but her open package wasn’t there. She found a new one and extracted two pills, then popped them into her mouth. After swallowing them, she dumped the toiletries into a box and carried them to the living room. She returned to the bedroom and went in to clear out the sun room. She turned off the light and pulled the doors shut behind her. And then box by box, she packed everything away from the kitchen, the hall closet and the storage room.

By the time she finished packing it was after twelve. The only things left to get were in the storage locker, but she didn’t have a key. She’d have to snip the lock in the morning. She looked out into the night and felt the silence around her. It was eerie in the apartment and she needed to leave as soon as possible. She took a quick look around and remembered her laundry basket and clothes horse. She stepped into the laundry room. She didn’t care about the detergent, so she immediately reached over to grab the laundry basket. It was under the table, and she stooped to pick it up. As she pulled the basket out from under the table, her hands began trembling and the plastic basket clattered to the floor. She clamped her hand over her mouth to keep herself silent. “Oh dear God,” she uttered through her hand.

She dropped her hand and slowly moved it towards the floor. Her fingers trailed over the linoleum tiles on the ground. They were the same tiles from the pictures. She got up quickly and ran for the door. She couldn’t stay around to find out what she’d never known.
Kathrin stepped up to the door carrying the goldfish in a Zip-lock bag, and knocked tentatively. She could hear her mother shuffling down the hall and braced herself. Slowly the door opened and Ingrid appeared wearing her apron and a broad smile. Her smile disappeared when she saw Kathrin. “What’s wrong? You look terrible.”

Kathrin was about to respond when the moving trunk stopped in front of the house. The mover in the passenger seat waved to Kathrin and she waved back. “We’ll put the stuff in the garage.” Kathrin stated to her mother, handing her the fish.

“What’s going on?”
Kathrin looked at Ingrid. “I left Aaron.”
“What?”
“Mom, I don’t want to talk about it now. I’ll tell you everything after we unpack. Put the bag in the kitchen sink. O.K.?”

Her mother took a step back. “O.K.”

Kathrin shut the door and went down to meet the movers. A light sprinkling of snow was falling over the street. She told them to reverse the truck into the driveway and move the furniture and boxes into the garage. She helped them with the little things, and covered the furniture with some sheets from her old apartment. It took less than an hour.

When they were done she paid the movers, and watched until they had driven out of sight. Then she stepped up to the porch where her personal belongings were, and started lugging the suitcases into the front hall. Her mother came out of the kitchen. “Tea?” she asked tentatively.

Kathrin nodded. “Just let me carry some of this stuff up to my room.”

It took her three trips to get all of her stuff secured in her old bedroom, then she made her way down to the kitchen. Her mother was sitting at the table, pretending to do the crossword. She looked up at Kathrin with dark eyes, and tried to look uninterested. Kathrin could feel her curiosity and she sat down, knowing she wasn’t ready to go into the details.

“What happened?” her mother finally asked.

“I left. that’s all.”

“People don’t just leave. There’s a reason. You look like you haven’t slept in days.”

“I haven’t.”

“Well, tell me. I’m worried about you. Did you have a fight?”

Kathrin shook her head. “I haven’t talked to him.”
“Well, I’m sure it’s something that can be worked out…”

“No. It can’t.”

“Of course it can. You’re just getting cold feet. All women do. It’s nothing to worry about.”

“Mom,” Kathrin snapped, “can we please leave it for now?”

Her mother looked at her. “All right if that’s what you want, but you’ll feel better if you tell me.”

“No. I won’t, now stop prying!”

Ingrid got up from the table, and walked over to the kitchen sink. She stared out at the falling snow. “Your father and I had a fight before we got married…”

“Mom, stop it! I don’t want to hear it!”

Ingrid spun around. “Well, maybe you should! All I’ve ever gotten from you is suffering, and blame. You run around and talk like you’re better than everyone in this family. It took you a day to get to the hospital. And don’t think I believe you for one minute about the phone breaking! And then you find someone who is perfect and you can’t handle it! I wish every day of my life that I had your father back here. Every day. Don’t come in here and tell me not to talk about your father, do you hear me? You still haven’t grown up enough to do that! You’re still the little girl you always were!”

Kathrin stood up. “Why can’t you mind your own business?”

“YOU CAME HERE!” her mother hollered.

Kathrin headed for the stairs. “Just leave me alone.”

“GO! Go run away like you always did! Hide up in your room, like a six year old! You want me to feel sorry for you? Well, I don’t! I feel sorry for Aaron!”

Kathrin turned back like she’d been slapped. “Fuck off!” she said desperately, and stormed up the stairs.

Ingrid’s eyes opened wide, and she shrank back against the sink. Kathrin had never, not once cursed at her before. She wiped the stinging tears from her eyes, and prayed silently under her breath.

Kathrin only left her room to go to work. As soon as she got home each night she took the plate of dinner her mother had made and ate it at her desk. She didn’t want to go out; she didn’t
want to see anyone she knew. The only thing she did was feel sorry for herself and cry in her room. Each night her mother would tap on the door and Kathrin would tell her to go away.

Work was no better. All day long her stomach was a ball of nerves. She popped antacid tablets on the hour, but felt no relief. By Friday she was a complete head-case. She flinched every time a phone rang somewhere down the hall, or every time someone tapped on her door. She kept thinking that Aaron would return, find her stuff gone and try to find her.

The drive home on Friday night was the longest of her life. Everywhere she looked she thought she saw Aaron. When she got home, she immediately pulled down all the blinds in the living room, and unplugged the phone. Then she pulled the blinds in the dining room. Her mother had gone to Agnes’ for the night because she couldn’t handle Kathrin’s mood. But she had left dinner.

Kathrin picked up the plate and dumped the dinner off it and into the garbage. She put the plate into the dishwasher and sat down at the table. In the hallway the Grandfather clock ticked loudly and Kathrin tried to shut out the noise. She couldn’t think. She was going crazy, and there was no one there to stop her. Every time she heard a noise she jumped up, and by seven o’clock she was seeing things move in the darkness behind the window.

“That’s it!” she said to herself.

She had to get out of the house before she went completely mad. She grabbed her coat, and turned off the lights. Quietly she snuck to the front window, and lifted the blind to peer out into the night. Everything looked normal outside. She opened the door and stepped onto the porch. Then she ran down the stairs and trotted to her car, keys in hand. Once she was in the car she felt better. She turned the car on, and then drove down the street. She didn’t know where she was going but it didn’t matter.

She went back to the bar on Queen. It was slightly busier, and a new bartender was serving drinks. She slipped into a two-seater and ordered a beer. She didn’t need to buy smokes; she’d been chain-smoking all week. She read all the weeklies, the movie revue guide, and then took a used Globe and Mail off the bar. The few beers she drank didn’t affect her, they only made her tired. By midnight she was exhausted. She paid her tab, and then walked back to the car.

She parked around the corner from her house, after driving by twice. Still, she constantly looked behind her all the way to the door. It wasn’t until she was safely behind the bolt-lock that she felt better. She took off her coat, threw it on the couch and walked to her room. Then she got undressed and went to wash her face. The second she stepped into the bathroom the phone in her
mother’s room started ringing. She waited for it to stop, but it rang again and again. *Ten, eleven,* she counted the rings silently. After the fourteenth time the phone was silent. She shut her eyes and held her breath, but the ringing didn’t start up again.

She had told her mother to tell no one, including Jen and Andria that she was staying there. Her mother had promised after asking countless times why she wanted to be so secretive. “Just until Christmas,” Kathrin had sworn.

So she knew that it wasn’t her sisters. They would never have called so late. It had to be Aaron. She washed her face. He’d think that they’d gone away. Even if he drove by - all the lights were off. *But what if he tries to get in?* She dried her face and went into her mother’s room. Then she unplugged the phone and took it into her own bedroom. She plugged in the cord, and placed the phone right beside the bed. Just in case she needed it. Then she slipped into bed, turned out the light, and tried to fall asleep.

She was more exhausted when she woke up in the morning. She heard a sound downstairs, and tensed.

“Hello?”

She breathed a sigh of relief. It was her mother.

“Kathrin? Are you here?”

Kathrin slipped out of bed, and pulled on her bathrobe. Then she went to the top of the stairs. “I’m here.”

Her mother’s head peaked around the corner. “Oh, there you are. I didn’t see your car. I thought you had gone somewhere.”

“No.”

Her mother looked at her strangely. “Kathrin, are you feeling all right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“You look awful.”

Kathrin rubbed her eyes. “I’m just tired.”

“Well, come down and I’ll make you some breakfast.”

Kathrin moved down the staircase. She was hungry. She hadn’t eaten in almost a day, and her only meal had been small. She went into the kitchen and sat down at the table. Her mother made coffee and passed her a mug. “Did you sleep?”

“ Barely,” Kathrin mumbled while she sipped the coffee.
“Should you see someone? Dr. Cavanaugh might give you some pills,” Ingrid offered.
“T’m fine.”
“You’re not fine.”
“Mom, don’t start. I had a rough night.”
“I noticed. You pulled down all the blinds.”
Kathrin stared at the liquid in her mug. “How’s Agnes?”
“Worried about you. I know you said not to say anything, but who’s Agnes going to tell?
I wish you’d tell me what’s wrong. I know we both said some things the other day…”
“Don’t worry about it. When I’m ready I’ll tell you.”
Ingrid looked at her curiously. “You’re not pregnant are you?”
“What?”
“I just thought.”
“No,” Kathrin said calmly, “I’m not pregnant.”
Ingrid poured some beaten eggs into a frying pan. The phone rang upstairs in Kathrin’s room. Ingrid looked up. “Is that the phone?”
Kathrin clutched her coffee mug. “I unplugged the one downstairs.”
Ingrid pulled the frying pan off the burner and headed for the living room. Kathrin trailed behind her. After her mother had plugged the cord back into the wall she lifted the receiver.

“Hello?”

There was a brief pause, and Ingrid looked at Kathrin. “Oh, hello Aaron.”
Kathrin shook her head vigorously, and silently pleaded with her mother.
“No, I’m sorry. She’s not here…I don’t know. O.K., if I hear anything I’ll call you.”
She hung up the phone and turned to Kathrin. “Tell me what’s going on?”
“I can’t.”
“Kathrin. This had already gone on long enough.”
Kathrin shook her head, and turned her ashen face away from her mother. “I can’t.”

She spent the twenty first and twenty second on site at the production studio to prepare the Boxing Ad work. She told Jane to take messages, but not to put anyone through to her voice-mail. Jane said she would. By the time she got off work on the twenty third she was a mess. Her every move had been made to avoid Aaron. She finished up her shopping after work, and then headed to her mom’s house. The Christmas lights on the porch raised her spirits a little.
Ingrid was baking the Christmas pudding, and the house smelled great. For a flash of an instant Kathrin relaxed. “Hi,” she said cheerily.

“Hi, dear,” her mother responded while stirring sauce over the element.

“How was your day?”

“Fine,” she stopped stirring for a moment. “Aaron called.”

Kathrin didn’t respond.

“He’s worried about you. He said you didn’t tell him you were moving out. And he called Jen and Andria too.”

“What did you say to him?” Kathrin demanded.

“Nothing. Kathrin, I’m really worried too. I had to tell your sisters. They were ready to call the police. But I told them not to tell Aaron.”

“Good.”

“You’re going to have to face him sooner or later.”

Kathrin nodded. “I know, but not now. Please mom, you have to understand… I can’t now. I’m not ready.”

“Fine. But you can’t hide from your fears forever.”

“After Christmas.”

Kathrin drove over to Jen’s while Ingrid gave her the directions. “Mom,” Kathrin finally said in exasperation, “I know where I’m going.”

“Oh, I know…” her voice trailed off and Kathrin could see that her mother was fidgeting with her scarf ends.

“Is there something wrong?” Kathrin asked.

“I guess I’m just worried about Jen.”

“Me too. But acting nervous around her isn’t going to help.”

“I know.”

Kathrin smiled. “So let’s just make the best of it. Who knows - they may surprise us.”

Ingrid looked up and gave her daughter a tiny smile. “Who knows?”

When they arrived at the house Kathrin popped the trunk and went around to get the presents. Her mother pulled herself out of the car, and then got the Christmas pudding from the back seat. Carefully the two women crossed the street, trying not to slip on any ice. Kathrin reached the porch first and knocked on the door with her elbow.
Jen appeared at the door and let them both inside. “Hey.”

“Hi. It’s cold out there. Here, take some of these.” Kathrin said, offering her the stack of presents.

Kathrin could hear Danielle in the kitchen, babbling. The two women took of their coats, and then went to the kitchen. Danielle looked at Kathrin oddly for a moment, then held out her arms. “Kaka,” she gurgled.

Kathrin swooped the baby out of her high chair, and gave her a big kiss. “You know,” she said, turning to Andria, “I don’t think I like your daughter referring to me as shit.”

Andria laughed. “Watch it, or she’ll pick up that word too!”

They had some hors d’oeuvres before dinner, and Kathrin was surprised that no one asked her anything about Aaron. No doubt Ingrid had told them not to. Slowly she felt herself unwinding as she played with Danielle on the centre of the living room floor. Maybe Aaron had given up. Maybe he’d opened the safe and realized there was no hope for him. She’d slid her key under the door when she’d left the last time, with the keys to the new storage locker lock. If he opened the safe he’d know for sure that she had seen the pictures.

Kathrin stuffed her mouth full of dip while she waited for dinner. Everything was ready. She had seen it all in the oven. The only problem was that Agnes hadn’t shown up. They couldn’t eat until she got there.

Shortly after four Agnes arrived at the front door with a large bag. She was ushered in by Mark, and he took her coat. Kathrin said hello and then went into the kitchen to help her mom with the plates. She carried out the first casserole dish and took it to the hot plate by the dining room table, carefully bending down to place it on the heat ring. The room went silent, and she looked up to see what the cause was.

Aaron was standing in the hallway. She jumped up. “What’s he doing here?” she demanded.

Her mother came over to her. “I know you’re upset, but I thought that it was about time you talked to him.”

“WHAT?”

“Kathrin, just relax. I’m sure the two of you can work it out.”

She turned on her mother. “How could you do this to me?”

“I just thought...”

“Get him away from me! Get him out of here!”
Aaron approached her. “Kathrin.”

“GET OUT!” she screamed.

“Relax. What’s wrong?” he said in his calmest voice.

Kathrin glanced around. Her whole family stared at her, trying to figure out why she was reacting so strongly to Aaron’s presence.

“What’s wrong?” she exploded, “You tell me Aaron! YOU TELL ME!”

He tried to reach out to her, but she jumped away from his arm. “Don’t touch me!”

He blushed and lowered his voice. “Kathrin I’m sure you don’t need to carry on like this in front of your family. Can’t we talk?”

“There is nothing to talk about. GET OUT!”

Danielle started bawling, and Andria rushed over to comfort her daughter.

“Please,” Aaron begged.

“No! I went to the house.”

“I know. I talked to my mother.”

“You lied to me.”

“Kathrin, please,” he said, lowering his voice so her family couldn’t hear him.

“What? Are you afraid my family will find out the truth?”

“Don’t,” he warned.

Jen stepped up to Kathrin. “Kathrin, slow down. It’s O.K.”

Kathrin pushed her sister away. “That I’d tell them that you never told your family about me? Or about your ex?”

Aaron frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I figured it out Aaron. Carol tried to tell me, and I didn’t believe her.”

No one in her family moved, except for Andria, who tried to soothe the screaming baby in her arms.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“BULLSHIT! Don’t lie any more! JUST STOP IT!”

Aaron’s body sagged. “You trashed my files.”

“And I had every right to! You asshole!”

Her mother gasped. “Kathrin, I don’t want to hear…”

Kathrin spun around. “SHUT UP! You want me to go back to him? You think we can work this out? Ask him about Lily!”
All eyes turned to Aaron. He remained silent.

"Tell them, Aaron. TELL THEM! About the horrible car crash. Can you?"

He stared at her and clenched his jaw.

"You can't because that isn't how she died! HOW DID SHE DIE?" Kathrin screamed out the last words.

"In a car crash - you bitch!"

Kathrin's face turned a bright shade of red, and anger flooded her face. "THAT'S A LIE!"

He stared at her, and his muscles tightened across his face. Kathrin was suddenly frightened, but the anger inside her was stronger. She took a step forward. "TELL ME, AARON - WHAT HAPPENED? What happened to your poor little Lily, who was so perfect that your family loved her like a daughter? TELL ME! TELL ME NOW!" she yelled, moving in towards him.

Her mother pulled her back by the sleeve. "Kathrin, stop it. You're scaring me."

Kathrin wrenched her arm free. "TELL ME AARON!"

"SHE COMMITED SUICIDE!"

There was immediate silence, then Aaron looked at her with the eyes of a wounded animal. "She killed herself. You think I don't know that? I was the one who found her! I came home and found her lying there, in a pool of her own blood, and I had to call the cops and stand there as they took her body out."

Ingrid went over to Aaron, and put her hand on his back.

"DON'T TOUCH HIM!" Kathrin ordered.

Ingrid looked at her daughter menacingly. "STOP IT! Just stop it, Kathrin. Look what you've done. Leave him alone."

Kathrin crossed over to her mother, and pulled her away from Aaron. "Not on your life. This is what you wanted to know all week," she said to her mother, then turned to Aaron. "What about the pictures?"

He looked up vacantly. "What?"

"I SAW THEM!"

He didn't answer her.

"What pictures?" Jen asked, with panic rising in her voice, "Somebody tell me what's going on here."
Kathrin clenched her jaw. and her words issued forth in a low growl. “You didn’t think I saw them, did you? Well, I did. I saw them all - and I was so sick that I threw up. Your Lily, all sliced up on the laundry room floor. Who took the pictures?”


And then she pounced on him and began shaking his shoulders violently. “TELL ME! DID YOU TAKE THE PICTURES?”

“YES!” he screamed, pushing her back with one heavy shove.

She flew back and hit the wall as he stood up and stared at her. She couldn’t see into his eyes, they were looking through her. Then he moved mechanically towards her, without any emotion. “It was what she would have wanted. The photographer’s impression of the moment,” he said calmly.

Kathrin’s eyes burned with tears, and she felt them drop hotly to her face. “You’re sick. You need help.”

“I need you.”

“No! You need a doctor!” she said through her tears, “Go! Get out of this house and don’t ever come near me again. It’s over. Go!”

“Kathrin, please...you’re the only person I ever...” he said, stepping closer to her.

“GET OUT! NOW! Before I call the cops.”

Scott moved quickly and stepped in between them. He grabbed Aaron by the shoulders. Initially Aaron tensed, and fought the force, but as he looked around he saw the frightened faces staring at him, and he let Scott lead him from the living room to the door, and then down to his car.

Kathrin slumped against the wall, and began weeping. Her mother rushed over to her, and helped her up from the floor. “I’m so sorry, I’m sorry,” she kept repeating while she and Jen lifted Kathrin into a chair.

Kathrin couldn’t respond. All she wanted to do was cry so hard that it wore her out. Then she’d finally be able to sleep.
Ingrid gave her a sedative on Christmas Eve, and she slept for seventeen hours straight. No one tried to wake her up, and when she finally awoke it was after two on Christmas Day. She was still exhausted, but felt better. The tight feeling around her stomach and chest had dissipated somewhat, and she was slightly hungry. Her mother and sisters had been checking in on her, and it was Jen who found her awake.

"Hey," her sister said with a slight smile, "you’re up."

"Yeah."

"You feel any better?"

"Physically or mentally?"

Jen sat on the edge of the bed. "You gave us all a scare yesterday. I know you aren’t ready to talk about it, but when you are, we’re all here for you."

"Thanks," Kathrin replied. "I’m sorry I ruined Christmas again. What did I miss?"

"We only let Danielle open her presents. We’ll save the rest for when you’re feeling better."

"Oh Jen," Kathrin moaned, "you shouldn’t have. I wouldn’t have minded."

"Well, to tell you the honest truth, none of us were up for it. We’re too worried about you."

Kathrin pulled herself up to a sitting position. "I’ll be fine. I’m just a little shaken up. I never thought this would happen."

Jen stood up. "I’m just sorry I couldn’t do anything about it. Are you hungry?"

"A little."

"I’ll get you something."

"Thanks."

Jen smiled. "Hey, you did it for me when I needed it. We stick together."

Kathrin sunk into the pillow after her sister left. She knew her sister meant well, but the words struck her heart. She hadn’t been there nearly enough for Jen after the miscarriage. All she’d cared about was Jen getting on with everything so her own life could go back to normal - so she wouldn’t feel guilty about telling her family about the engagement. What kind of person was she? She felt full of remorse about everything - she’d even swore at her mother. Carol would never speak to her again, and all because she wouldn’t believe that Aaron could do wrong. Even after he’d consistently betrayed her.

She stayed in bed for two entire days. Her mother called the office and told them
that Kathrin was suffering from a flu bug. Then Scott drove them back to Ingrid’s place, and ordered Kathrin to stay in bed at least another day. Kathrin nodded. She felt physically well enough to get up, but the thought of facing the world scared the shit out of her. She wanted to stay in her childhood bed until she died. She understood what Jen had felt after the baby died, how nothing seemed to matter except wallowing in self-hatred. She dreaded going back to the office, or walking down the street: anything that would remind her of Aaron. She didn’t know what she was going to say, or how she was going to react when people asked her how the wedding plans were turning out.

On Wednesday morning she felt well enough to get up and call the office. Jane was genuinely concerned. “Are you in bed?”

Kathrin picked at the seat cover on the living room couch and assured her that she was. “I just wanted to make sure everything is going all right.”

“Everything here is fine, but we’re all hoping you get back soon. Richardson’s been dealing with your client personally, so that’s taken care of. You always seem to pick the best times to get sick.”

Kathrin laughed lightly. “I’ll definitely be back after New Year’s.”

“Good. Oh, by the way, that Elizabeth woman called again. She says it very important that you call her. Do you want the number?”

Kathrin reached for a pen and pad of paper. “Hit me.”

Jane gave her the number, and Kathrin wished her a happy new year. Then she hung up and stared at the phone number. She wanted to call, but at the same time didn’t want to. Finally she picked up the phone and dialed. After a lengthy phone interview, the receptionist put her through.

“Kathrin darling,” Mama cooed over the line, “how are you?”

“I’m fine."

“They told me you were sick. I hope it’s not too bad.”

“I’m feeling much better today.”

There was a long throaty laugh, then Mama spoke again. “Well I hope I can cheer you up. Two things: I’m sending the outfit to your sister as soon as you give me her address. Just in time for New Year’s Eve. I’m sorry it took so long, but I’ve been swamped ever since the documentary aired. Everyone here thinks you’re a terrible witch!”

“What?” Kathrin stuttered.
“For making them so busy! Don’t worry about it. And now the news you’ve been dying to hear: Yoshi is determined to use you. He loved the idea!”

Kathrin’s heart skipped a beat. “Are you serious?”

“Yes! Isn’t that fabulous?”

Kathrin’s mouth went dry. She took a sip of her ginger ale, and cleared her throat.

“That’s great! I mean, that’s really great.”

“He wants you right away, and he’s ready to pay big bucks. Put you up in a condo, a car, the works.”

Kathrin frowned. She obviously hadn’t heard correctly. “In a condo?”

“Well of course. He wants you to go to England. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Kathrin couldn’t speak. She hadn’t actually thought of going anywhere to do the work.

“I... um, well...”

Mama paused. “You sound upset. Is there something wrong?”

“No, it’s not that.”

“You don’t want to go anymore?”

Kathrin sighed. “There are just so many things going on here right now, that’s all. I haven’t really thought about it in a while.”

“Well, what could possibly keep you from going? You’re not getting married or anything, are you?”

Kathrin’s face blanched. “No. Listen Mama - I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, but I can’t make the decision right now. It’s not that I don’t want to, but I have to clear up a few things before I decide.”

“Well,” Mama paused and thought about Kathrin’s words, “he’s not going to wait forever. Tell you what? I’ll put him off for a few weeks, and then you let me know what you’ve decided.”

Kathrin exhaled. “Thanks. I’ll be in touch.”

“All right. Now give me your sister’s address.”

“Why does everything have to happen at once?” Kathrin asked Jen, when her sister stopped in the next day.

“You’re crazy if you don’t go,” Jen replied as she brushed Kathrin’s hair out. “what on earth is keeping you here?”

Kathrin pointed to the television. “The soaps.”
“Kathrin,” Jen moaned laughing, “don’t be ridiculous.”
“I don’t know.”
“You can’t hide out in mom’s living room for the rest of your life.”
Kathrin flipped her hair away from Jen. “Yes I can.”
Her sister put down the brush. “No you can’t. And I know that just as much as you do.
You think I wanted to get up in the morning, still fat and have people ask me when the baby was
due? You know how hard it was?”
“Yeah, I know.”
Jen patted her head, then moved over to the armchair. “Can I ask you a question?”
Kathrin glanced up. “Yeah, what?”
“What are you most afraid of?”
Kathrin pondered the question. “I don’t know. There seem to be a lot of things. Like you
said, I don’t want people to ask me how he is, or when the wedding is. But, I’m also afraid that
one day I’ll turn the corner and he’ll be standing there in front of me. Like a horror movie. And
mostly I’m afraid that this is the end. That I’ll never trust another word that comes out of anyone’s
mouth. It was hard enough before.”
Jen looked at her. “Do you ever think about dad?”
Kathrin frowned. “Actually, I’ve been thinking about him a lot lately. Why?”
“After the miscarriage I kept thinking that he’ll never see a child of mine. He never even
saw one of his own children. At first I felt like I’d let him down, but the more I thought of it the
more I felt robbed by him. And then the night that... Christmas Eve, I realized that this was the
first Christmas that you and mom didn’t argue about him. I’ve been waiting for years for that to
happen. But when it didn’t I felt worse than ever before. And I think about how different it would
be if he were here. How different we would all be.”
Kathrin nodded. “I know what you mean.”
Jen smiled. “I wonder sometimes if we wouldn’t be as strong. Maybe I wouldn’t be able
to go through losing my baby. And maybe you wouldn’t be able to get through this.”
Kathrin felt the guilt wash over her. “Get through this? Look at me Jen - I’ve hurt every
person I care about. Carol hasn’t spoken to me in months, and all I can do is hide out here and
watch T. V. It’s just like mom says - I’ve always run away from everything that scares me. And
now you tell me to pick up and escape to England.”
“Going to England isn’t running away.”
“Maybe not to you, but that’s what it feels like to me.”
Jen reached out and took her sister’s hand. “Not if you do it on your own terms.”
Kathrin stood up, and went over to shut the T. V. off. “I’ll think about it.”

“Get your ass out of bed!”

Kathrin turned, and her face crumpled. She tried to control her tears. “Carol!”
Carol stepped over to the bed, and clasped her in a tight bear hug. “No crying,” she ordered as she patted Kathrin’s back.

“I’m so sorry,” Kathrin said in a thick voice, “I never should have…”

“Shh. It’s O. K. Your sister told me everything. Why didn’t you tell me before?”
Kathrin straightened up. “I couldn’t.”

“I would have understood.”

“I was so embarrassed. Everything you said was the truth, and I couldn’t face you, knowing that I had pushed you away because of him. I was so stupid. All I saw was someone that seemed to care about me, and someone I thought I cared about. Nothing else mattered. Do you know how that makes me feel now?” she babbled through her tears.

“You can’t blame yourself. You’ve always expected the best from everyone. I let you down just as much. I should have stuck by you.”

Kathrin pulled back and wiped her face on her sweatshirt sleeve. “I have been so lonely without you. And everyone.”

“I know. We felt the same way. That’s why I came, so we can start making things better.”

Kathrin tried to smile, but she couldn’t. “I’m trying. But I get more depressed every day. It’s like I know it’s supposed to get easier, and every day I wake up trying to measure it. But it doesn’t shrink. And then, for no reason I’ll hear a noise, or smell something, and I can still see him, and hear his voice. Sometimes I think I’m going crazy.”

“Tell me why.”

Kathrin frowned. “Because I don’t know why he did all those things. Why he was so perfect on the surface and so disturbed underneath.”

“Then,” Carol said, sitting on the bed, “you have to find out why.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“How do you think?” Carol responded pointedly.
Kathrin held her hand up. "I can’t go see her."
"You have to. So you can end it and get on with your life."
Her head dropped and she nodded. "I know," she said then looked hesitantly at Carol, "are we friends again?"
Carol wrapped her arms around her. "Best. Happy New Year babe!"
"Happy New Year."

"Hi, I’m looking for Elaine," she said to the hostess.
The hostess smiled. "She always takes the first week off after New Year’s. She’ll be back next week."
Kathrin’s face fell. "Listen, it’s really important, do you know where I can reach her?"
The hostess shook her head. "She went out of town, that’s all I know. Sorry."
"That’s all right." Kathrin turned to leave.
"Hey," the hostess called out, "I can leave a message here for her if you want."
Kathrin turned back. She rummaged through her purse and pulled out a business card.
"She can call me at this number. It’s regarding her brother."
"I’ll let her know."
"Thanks."

The call came the next Monday. She wasn’t expecting it, and when Jane buzzed her to let her know that an Elaine was on the phone, Kathrin’s hands began to perspire. She picked up the phone. "Kathrin Connelly."
"This is Elaine Taun."
"Thank you for returning my call."
"I didn’t want to call you back, but I felt I should. What do you want?"
Kathrin waited for a moment before speaking. "Can we meet somewhere?"
"What for?"
"Please. I need to talk to someone about this. I’m begging you."
There was a pause. "O.K. I’m off Wednesday. Where?"
"Can I come to your place?"
"What? No way."
"Please, I need someplace private and I don’t have anywhere I can go."
There was a long sigh. "O. K. I'm down in the Beaches. 123 Cherry Street. Eleven o'clock."

"Thank you."

She approached the door cautiously, and rang the buzzer.

Elaine answered the door. She was smaller than Kathrin remembered, and casually dressed. Kathrin felt awkward in her work clothes, and pulled at her hair. Elaine led her up the stairs to the second floor apartment. It was cozy, and unlike Aaron's place, junk littered every nook and cranny. There was a large Christmas cactus on the table, and a fat cat lay in front to the window. "That's Charles," Elaine offered.

Kathrin looked around and finally sat down on the couch. "It's nice in here. Comfortable."

"I made coffee. You want some?"

Kathrin nodded. "Please."

Elaine puttered around the coffee maker, rinsing a mug and then drying it on her sweat pants. She poured some coffee into another mug from the cupboard and handed it to Kathrin. "Sugar? Cream?"

"Both please."

Elaine passed her the carton and a bowl of sugar. Then she sat down in the Papa San chair and pulled her legs up. She grabbed a smoke from her pack on the living room table, the offered one to Kathrin. Kathrin grabbed it quickly. "You smoke?" Elaine asked in surprise.

"Yeah."

"No shit? Listen, if you're here to invite me to the wedding, I'm not interested."

Kathrin looked up in shock. "You mean you haven't talked to Aaron?"

Elaine exhaled. "I talk to Aaron like twice a year, and only when he calls first. How is he?"

Kathrin looked at her intently. "You really haven't talked to him?"

"I said that, didn't I?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I don't know how he is."

"You're his fiancée. You should."

"Elaine," Kathrin took a nervous sip of her coffee, then cleared her throat, "this is very hard for me. I had no one else to turn to. I need to ask you some questions."
“What are you talking about? I don’t have to tell you anything. I’m not involved.”

Kathrin slammed her fist down on the table. Charles jumped up and ran for the doorway.

Elaine looked at her nervously. “Yes you are involved! And I need your help.”

“How?”

“What did you say to my friend?” Kathrin asked quietly, leaning over the table.

Elaine swallowed. “You mean she actually told you?”

Kathrin nodded. “I didn’t believe her, because Aaron told me that you were nuts - that you wanted to keep me away from him. And I believed him, but then I saw the pictures.”

“What pictures?”

“The pictures of her body.”

Elaine’s hand covered her mouth. “Oh my God!”

Kathrin took a deep breath. “I need you to tell me everything.”

Elaine puffed neurotically on her cigarette. Finally she nodded. “O. K. From when?”

“From the very beginning,” Kathrin replied.

“He came for dinner one night, and he went for a walk. He met her on the beach, and they started seeing each other. Soon after, he moved out and in with her. She was beautiful and smart and independent... she was perfect.”

“Then why did she kill herself?”

“You don’t think perfect people kill themselves? Let me ask you a question: have you ever thought about suicide?”

“Theoretically?”

“No. Killing yourself.”

“No.”

“But if it got so bad, would you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Scared people choose violent ends.”

“What?”

“They blow holes in their heads, or they jump in front of subway trains. Violent ends,” she said emphatically, “It’s all violent, it’s all messy, and it’s all ugly. Most people who shoot themselves are afraid. It’s a stat. Afraid they’ll change their minds, so they do it fast. Afraid it might not work, or afraid it will. Nobody wants the last thing they do to be beautiful. That might make them want to stay.”
"What does that have to do with it?"

"And then there are people who get beyond scared. Then all that matters is just getting out. If I ever got to that point - decided to off myself, I'd be happy. I'd know the pain was going to end, so I wouldn't be scared. I'd jump off the tallest building I could find. Swan dive to my death. You dive forty fucking floors, it's going to work."

"Are you saying she really wanted to die?"

Elaine ignored the question. "The cops were surprised at how she did it. Bleeding to death takes the longest. And unless you have fluid to keep the blood from clotting, chances are you'll survive. That's why everyone does it in the bathtub in films. Slitting your wrists is a movie reality. In real life it rarely works."

Kathrin stared at her. "Do you think that Aaron..."

Elaine shook her head. "She did it - the pathologist examined the wounds. They were self-inflicted. She wanted to get out so badly, she didn't mind the time it took or the pain. She had it all planned, even down to the developer so that the bleeding wouldn't stop. She was probably happy it was going to end."

"Why?" Kathrin asked, afraid of the answer, "What could have been so bad?"

Elaine laughed hollowly. "Everything. You're probably waiting for me to tell you some dark family secret, but you must already know."

"What?"

"Have you met my father?"

"Yes."

"And what did Aaron tell you about him?"

"That he loved Lily. Aaron said after she died you and your dad got into a horrible fight, and he told you Lily was a better daughter."

"Well, I suppose that's true," she sighed and lit up another smoke, "He also said a lot of other things about her. That she was a woman and needed to be put in her place. That she was too independent, and needed to be domesticated - like she was some kind of wild animal. He told Aaron to take charge."

"Did Aaron believe that?"

"What do you think? It's weird - the control we let our parents have over us, just because they're our parents. Aaron never didn't believe. It was always 'do your best', 'you didn't try hard enough for that' or 'when will you be a man?' Did you see all those tennis trophies? He had to be
better than everyone, and when he lost the finals, my father ended his tennis career. Just like baseball, and accounting. If Aaron wasn’t the best, then he had to move on.”

“Is that why you left?”

“My leaving started a long time before Lily arrived on the scene. It just took her death for me to realize it.”

“What did Aaron do to Lily?”

Elaine coughed. “I don’t know all of it, I just know what she told me.”

“You talked to her?”

“Yeah. Right before her death. She came to me and I hadn’t seen her so happy in a long time. Afterwards I knew that she had come to tell me her suicide note. You know how they say that there’s a sense of elation after the choice has been made? She was manic.

It started off with little things. He’d get mad when she went out with friends. He’d buy her appropriate clothing for functions they attended at the C. A. firm. Then he started demanding she see less of her family. They joined a gym because he thought she needed to lose weight, and built her a darkroom so she could work from home and not have to go to the studio. He systematically destroyed every relationship she had outside of them, until she was completely alone. And he did it so well, that she never noticed.”

“How could he do that? He could he plan something like that?” Kathrin asked, wondering silently how he could have done that to her too.

“Because he’d watched it for over twenty years with my parents. We never had visitors when I was young. The few people that came over were business associates of my father. My mother doesn’t have any friends. Her luncheons and gatherings are nameless faces chatting with her. You don’t realize all the things going on when you’re young - what you see and what you miss. You think it’s normal. A child can adapt to anything.”

“Why didn’t you do anything? How could you just stand there and watch it happen?” Kathrin demanded with sudden force.

“You don’t think I tried?” she screeched at Kathrin, “You don’t think I regret it every single day of my life since then? If I had known…but I didn’t. And the only time I took a stand was when it was too late.”

“What about me?” Kathrin demanded.

Elaine burst into tears. “I warned your friend! I told her!”
Kathrin put her head down into her hands. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked, then looked up at Elaine accusingly. “Were you waiting for it to happen again?”

“I didn’t know it would! I…” she faltered and sniffed her nose. “I thought he was better.”

“Better?”

“I thought that once he was out on his own, and he saw what he had done he’d change. You have to believe me.” she pleaded. “But then, when I finally saw you. I knew that it was going to happen again. Because you’re her. You’re what she was.”

“I saw a picture of her dead body and it looked exactly like me! Do you know how fucking scary that is?” Kathrin said, her voice trembling.

“I’m sorry. You did the right thing to get out.”

“That is no consolation to me now! What am I supposed to do?”

“Stay away from him. Get as far away from him as you can. Because I believe that he will find you.” she paused and wiped her eyes. “I love my brother. I can’t help that - no matter what he’s done. But he’s a very sick man. In the worst way, because he doesn’t believe that he’s sick. He won’t get help, and no one can make him. And the only thing that you can do is keep him out of your life.”

Kathrin looked out the window, and stared at the bright sunlight. Then slowly she turned back and started sobbing. “That’s easier said than done.” she said haltingly through her sobs.

“Why?”

“Because. I’m pregnant.”
Are you ready? She asked herself for the tenth time as she opened the door and stepped inside the building. The interior hallway was dark in contrast to the bright sunshine outside and it took her a few seconds to get accustomed to it while she moved down the hall. She found the door and pushed it open, stepping quickly over to the reception booth.

"Kathrin Connelly," she whispered quietly.

The receptionist nodded. "Have a seat please."

Kathrin hung up her coat on the coat rack, then moved to a seat in the corner. She glanced around the room and met the eyes of the only other patient in the room: a young, pretty woman. Both of them smiled nervously and looked away. Kathrin picked up a magazine from the table beside her. She leafed through it absentmindedly. Reading a magazine was the last thing she wanted to do. The first thing was to get up, go home, and rewind her clock and calendar back to November.

She looked at the young woman out of the corner of her eye. *She can't be more than twenty-four. Nervous. God she wants to be here as little as I do.* Her eyes darted instinctively to the woman's stomach. It was flat. *Pregnant?* She looked for signs - a wedding ring, some strange glow, the word 'preggers' stamped across her forehead. She couldn't read anything on the woman's face. But then again, Kathrin was sure she didn't show any signs either. She glanced back down at the magazine, but her attention was immediately called to the door. It opened and another woman entered pulling a carriage after her. Kathrin flinched, then checked the young woman reaction. *Nothing,* she noted, then reprimanded herself. *Stop it Kathrin - you're playing with your mind.*

She refused to look at the carriage, and tried to concentrate on the magazine in front of her. After a few minutes she noticed she was nervously drumming her fingers on her knee. She jerked her hand away and forced it to hold on to the magazine. She was concentrating so hard on not moving her hands, she didn't notice her leg was bouncing frantically off the chair leg. She pressed the magazine down on her lap until the shaking stopped. The other two women were too calm and it unnerved her. If there was something more than the passive silence in the room - like a television, or something. Or anything. All there was was her mind, and it was taking up too much space.

She didn't know how she was going to ask the doctor. Tell her. *Tell and then ask.* She tried to locate the hub of her nervousness. She wasn't horrified at the thought of telling Dr. Cavanaugh. Maybe the fear came from the certainty of it all. When she told the doctor she'd get
more than advice: she’d be given a solution. The resolution. That was something no one else had offered her. Her two confidantes had simply asked what she was going to do, not how. Aside from Elaine the only other person she’d told had been Carol. And that had been by accident.

A few days after her visit to Elaine’s apartment, she and Carol had gone to a nearby bar after work. When the waitress arrived to take their drink orders Carol ordered a glass of white wine - Kathrin a ginger ale. Carol gave her a hard stare, but said nothing. When the drinks arrived Carol asked Kathrin for a cigarette.

“Don’t have any.” Kathrin replied.

“What? Two weeks ago you were smoking like a chimney.”

Kathrin blushed. “I know, but I decided to quit once and for all.”

Carol looked at her again, and could tell she wasn’t telling the complete truth. She knew instantly what the truth was when Kathrin looked away. Carol moved in closer and lowered her voice. “How long have you known?”

Kathrin swallowed. “A week.”

She’d known for certain three days before she went to Elaine. Three long days. But even before that she’d known. When her period didn’t hit after New Year’s the first thoughts were sown, but she just assumed it was from all the stress. Her body had played tricks on her countless times before. And the whole fiasco with her pills - she’d missed five in the cycle. At first she rejected the idea. She and Aaron had only had sex twice. And those were in the first few days after her period. But then, she’d taken two home pregnancy tests, and known for sure.

“Jesus Christ.” Carol finally managed to respond. “What are you going to do?”

“Do you have to ask?”

Carol sighed. “Don’t take this the wrong way. but geez, this is like right out of a made for T. V. movie.”

“Thanks Carol. You’re not helping.”

Carol covered her mouth. “I’m sorry, that didn’t come out how I meant it to.”

“It’s O. K. You’re right. It keeps getting worse and worse.”

“Does he know?”

Kathrin looked at her in panic. “Are you kidding?”

“So, who knows?”

“Just you…and Elaine.”

Carol’s eyebrows shot up. “What?”
“It just slipped out,” Kathrin tried to defend herself, but Carol cut her off.

“Stuff like that doesn’t just slip out. Why on earth would you tell her, of all people?”

“I don’t know. I got there and I was confused and angry. I started bawling and the next thing I knew I had told her.”

Carol looked at her and nodded. “Because you had to admit to yourself that it was really happening. To hear how the words sounded out loud and not just in your head.”

“How did you know that?”

“I do it all the time. Analyze over and over until it makes no sense. Finally, I have to talk to someone before I burst. I have to force myself to see it like they see it…”

“To react to it.”

Carol nodded. “It’s a sick game of self-psychoanalysis. Because no matter what anyone ever says, you’re going to do exactly what you want anyway. Aren’t you worried he’s going to find out?”

She’d thought about it at least a million times. How Aaron would inevitably find out — somehow. She knew Elaine wouldn’t say anything. After she had told her, Elaine had violently ordered her to get rid of ‘it’ - as soon as possible. But if Aaron did somehow find out, he would come for her. She had no doubt of that. And he would be able to get to her, she knew it.

“That’s why I have to do something about it soon.”

Carol agreed. “You talked to your doctor yet?”

Kathrin shook her head. “I was thinking about going to a private clinic.”

“What? Are you nuts? And get a bomb dropped on your head?”

“Carol, they haven’t done that in years.”

“They? Who’s they?” Carol asked.

“I don’t know. Whoever they are.”

Carol put her hand down on the table. “Forget it! You don’t have to take my advice, but I’m giving it to you anyway: go to your doctor.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Carol, she’s my family doctor. I’ve seen her since I was twelve.”

“And,” Carol raised her voice slightly, “that’s exactly why you should go to her. She knows your history - and she knows you. My guess is she’s probably given the same advice to at least a hundred women in your shoes.”
Kathrin scowled. "Yeah, but it's different when I'm in my shoes. I couldn't look her in the eye ever again."

"Why?" Carol scoffed, "Because good Catholic girls don't get pregnant? And they don't get abortions?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course not."

"Are you afraid of telling her about Aaron and what happened?"

Kathrin winced. "I don't know," she responded without looking at Carol.

"Kath," Carol prodded.

"O.K. Yes I am. I admit it. You think this is some 'truth is stranger than fiction' melodrama, but it's real. It's happening to me. And I still wake up in the middle of the night and see her face, and think he's in the room with me."

Carol put her drink down. "It's still that bad?"

Kathrin looked up. "Yeah, it's still that bad. Carol, how would you feel waking up knowing that almost a year of your life was a total lie?"

Carol contemplated the thought. "I don't think I'd ever get over it."

"Yeah."

"Just promise me you'll go see your doctor. For your own sake."

Kathrin nodded dumbly.

She'd scheduled her quarterly internal a week early, explaining to the receptionist that she was going on vacation. The receptionist took the explanation as irrelevant, but Kathrin needed some way to justify the change of scheduling. So, there she was, sitting in the waiting room, eyeing two women suspiciously, and waiting for the final word.

Dr. Wong came out and called the younger woman into a room. Kathrin watched them go down the hallway, as another woman waddled out, looking at least eight months pregnant. She got her coat from the rack, struggled into it, and then stopped to admire the baby in the carriage. "It'll be so nice when he's out of here," she said, patting her swollen belly, "and in one of those."

The other woman smiled. "You're telling me. When are you due?"

"Three weeks."

"First one?"

"Yes. I'm so nervous."

"Don't be. I'm on my third," she said indicating to her own flat stomach, "with six months to go. When it's all over, it's worth every minute."
The other woman smiled, then hesitated before she spoke. "Did you have any problems with the deliveries?"

She laughed. "Nope. Easy as pie. Actually," she said, jumping to her feet, "I'll show you."

She crossed over to Kathrin and reached to pick up an album from the table. "Dr. Cavanaugh delivered the first two. She keeps an album of all her deliveries."

She flipped open the album, and began flipping through the pages.

"Oh, how sweet!" the other woman exclaimed as she viewed the pictures.

Kathrin looked up at the two women awkwardly. They didn't even notice that she was there. It was like they'd disappeared into a land of diapers and night-feedings. Kathrin grimaced. Two women who had never met each other were talking like they had known each other for years, all because they were both pregnant. And so obviously happy about the fact. She felt more miserable than before. Must be nice to be so happy about it.

"Kathrin."

She looked up and Dr. Cavanaugh smiled at her from behind a clipboard. "I'm ready to see you now."

Kathrin got to her feet, and stepped by the two women. She walked slowly down the hall, passing large posters of babies, and colourful prints of children playing on the beach, in sandboxes, in school yards, by mounds of flower blossoms. Keep it together, she ordered herself. The doctor showed her into an examination room and promised to return in a few minutes. Kathrin slipped off her top, then stopped herself. Who are you kidding? She won't examine you.

When the doctor returned Kathrin was perched on the table fully dressed.

"O.K. are we..." her voice trailed off as she realized Kathrin wasn't in an examination gown.

"Is there something wrong?" Dr. Cavanaugh asked, checking Kathrin's chart, "You're here for a pap, right?"

Kathrin nodded.

"Well then, I'll need you to take off."

"I'm pregnant."

The doctor stopped reading the chart and looked up. "I'm sorry?"

"I'm pregnant."
Dr. Cavanaugh searched Kathrin’s face to determine her feelings. “You don’t sound happy about it.”

“I want an abortion.”

The doctor frowned. “You’ve thought about it?”

“Long and hard. I don’t want this baby.”

Dr. Cavanaugh leaned against the counter. “Well, sometimes that’s the best reason not to have one. It might be the bravest decision you’ll ever make,” she paused, and looked at Kathrin intently. “O.K. then here’s what we have to do: I’ll have to do another pregnancy test here and we’ll calculate how far you are. Then we can determine the best way to approach the procedure. But first, let’s just talk about it, O.K.?”

Kathrin nodded glumly.

Kathrin left the room almost five weeks pregnant and armed with another batch of pamphlets. They’d agreed that Kathrin would go for a session of counseling at the Women’s College Hospital before the procedure. To prepare her for the loss and the possibility of the accompanying depression. And Kathrin agreed to think about the other options, but knew she couldn’t go through with them. The only thing that they couldn’t agree on was Dr. Ernststein’s involvement. Kathrin refused to see her, even after Dr. Cavanaugh advised it.

“Kathrin,” Dr. Cavanaugh pleaded, “she knows your medical condition better than I do. This isn’t going to be a walk in the park with your previous condition. There may be some complications, and I think you need her input.”

“Dr. Cavanaugh, I know you think she’s great, but isn’t there someone else as equally qualified as her?”

“Not someone as familiar with your case. You don’t like her?”

Kathrin sighed. “It’s not that. She makes me uncomfortable.”

“But she’s a great doctor.”

“I know, I know. It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?” Dr. Cavanaugh asked.

“Well, this is embarrassing, but the last time I saw her she handed me a bunch of pamphlets on celibacy, and I felt stupid.”

Dr. Cavanaugh cleared her throat. “I can assure you she did so on a professional level. She wasn’t judging you Kathrin.”
“Well, that’s what it felt like.”

“Listen to me. I have been your doctor for years. If she hadn’t been the one to give you those pamphlets, I would have. Because we’re concerned for your health, not because we want to offer you our opinions on your life. Can you appreciate that, even if you can’t understand it?”

Kathrin nodded. “Are you sure there isn’t someone else?”

“Kathrin, please. It’s in your own best interest.”

Kathrin gave in.

“I’ll have the receptionist call you about an appointment.”

Kathrin stared at her, stunned. “I, well…”

“Don’t worry. she’ll call you at work. I know you’re staying at your mother’s.”

“Thank you.”

She walked out into the waiting room to gather her belongings and felt a little bit better. In a week, it would all be over and she could get on with her life. She wrapped her scarf around her neck and glanced at the clock. It was still before noon. She would grab a quick bit to eat and then head over to the client’s head office. She had a few ideas up her sleeve. As she put on her coat she noticed a young woman sitting behind her. and watched as the woman flipped through the baby pictures in the photo album. The woman traced her fingers over the plastic sheets and carefully wiped a smudge from one of the babies’ faces. Kathrin did up her coat and left the office, as a pang of regret hit her.

* *

Kathrin managed to stop in at work on her way back from meeting with her client. She hadn’t moved two feet before Jane handed her a stack of phone messages and mail. “Thanks.” Kathrin grumbled.

“Hey.” Jane replied. “you’re the one who won’t let me put anything through to your voice-mail. How come, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Kathrin looked at her. “I’ve been getting a lot of crank calls recently. It’s frustrating to listen to hang-up after hang-up.” she lied.

She had been getting hang-ups, but only at home. Sometimes a few times a night, but when she pressed *69 the number couldn’t be traced. Not that she needed to trace it. She knew who it was.

Jane seemed satisfied with the answer, and Kathrin walked to her office. Once inside she sat down and checked her e-mail. She downloaded a few proofs for the campaign, and then leafed
through her phone messages. Her mother, Carol, her mother again, and a message to call the
doctor’s office. *That didn’t take long.* She looked at the clock. It was after five. She’d have to
call in the morning. She copied the graphics from the beer campaign onto disk, then went to
Jamie’s desk to drop it off. On her way back, Jane poked her head around the corner. “Oh, there
you are. Elizabeth just called. I tried to buzz you, but you weren’t in your office. She says she
needs to know your decision. A. S. A. P.”

Kathrin groaned. “O. K. Thanks.”

“No problem. Good night.”

“Oh, Jane,” Kathrin said, and Jane turned around, “I’ll be off-site for the next two days.
Field my calls would you? I’ll check in at lunch and before I go home.”

“Sure.”

Kathrin went into her office and shut the door. There were still a few people buzzing
around the office, but they were too busy to pay her any attention. She placed her head on the desk
and breathed slowly. The last thing she wanted to do was talk to Elizabeth and tell her that she still
hadn’t made up her mind. She knew that she didn’t have much time left, but she wasn’t ready to
deal with the future. She had to deal with the past and the present first.

It wasn’t fair. It was unreal. Jen had carried her baby for five months, then lost it without
any warning. The doctors couldn’t tell her anything - they just frowned. There were no
indications, no previous problems. Just ‘*better luck next time*’. And then Kathrin had gone
through the most stressful weeks of her life and still couldn’t lose the baby she didn’t want. Every
time she saw Jen she was ridden with guilt at the unfairness of it all. Even months later her sister
still stared into space sometimes, and her pain showed clearly on her face. Kathrin wished she
could change places with her sister. Swap bellies. Yet, she hadn’t told any of her family members
about the pregnancy. She knew they wouldn’t understand. They’d try to, but she knew their
feelings about abortion. Still, it wasn’t as if she wanted to get pregnant in the first place. In
retrospect, it felt like she had been stalked, raped and left for dead.

She looked up and scanned the portrait of the lion head. When she was having really bad
days the colours of the painting usually *cheered her up* because they reminded her of when she’d
been ill, and how she’d thought things wouldn’t get better. And then they had - for a while. But as
she glanced at the painting, she didn’t feel better, she only felt the hollow emptiness growing in her
heart.

*"*
She did a full tour of the brewery the next day, and completely forgot to call the doctor’s office until late in the afternoon. As soon as she remembered she excused herself from the afternoon meeting and darted for the guest phone in the lobby. When the receptionist answered Kathrin gave her name. The receptionist paused. “Oh. I’m glad you called. I left the information with your secretary at work, but now I’ll know you got it directly.”

Kathrin was dumbfounded. “What?”

“Well, we didn’t hear back from you and I wanted to make sure you got the message. You have a consultation with Dr. Einstein next Monday at eleven. At Woman’s College. I didn’t mention to the secretary it was a hospital.”

Kathrin breathed a sigh of relief. “O.K. Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.”

Kathrin hung up the phone. Monday. Less than a week. The procedure a few days later. Then it would be all over. She went back to finish the meeting.

Sunday night she couldn’t sleep. She tossed and turned until two in the morning, then decided to get up and walk around the house. She snuck down the stairs quietly so as not to wake her mother. The living room was dark, and she walked carefully to the front door. Outside, there were only a few patches of snow on the ground, and she opened the front door to catch a breath of fresh air. Everything was silent, except her breathing. It was strange. Usually if she couldn’t sleep, she’d have a couple of cigarettes and then go back to bed, but since the pregnancy, she couldn’t think about smoking without feeling ill. She knew that it wouldn’t matter if she smoked or not - the fetus wouldn’t be affected. It was going to get sucked out of her anyway. Still, she couldn’t bring herself to smoke or drink, much less think about it.

She ran a cold hand over her flat stomach and looked down. Nothing about the way she looked had changed. She didn’t seem any different, but at odd moments she’d suddenly feel protective over her body and the resident within. And then, as if a tiny microscope allowed her a view, she could see the fetus in her mind, growing larger every second. Eventually she thought she heard the unmistakable sound of a tiny heartbeat hammering away beneath her own. But at the moment she felt the little eyes might open and stare up at her, she shut the microscope off. If she saw the eyes, she was doomed.

A sudden noise startled her, and she froze on the porch. She waited with bated breath for another sound, but nothing came. Then she heard a rustle near the back of the house. She grabbed
the broom from the front porch and quietly stepped down the staircase wearing her bathrobe and slippers. She moved quickly around the corner, but when she got there, there was no movement or sound. Kathrin scanned the dark hedge to her left and peered into the back yard. She couldn’t make out anything in the darkness. Suddenly she felt very afraid. She held the broom tighter and felt the rush of adrenaline pump over her. “Who’s there?” she called out.

There was silence, and Kathrin realized that whoever or whatever had been there was gone. She retraced her steps, and quickly went inside, shutting the door and locking it behind her. Then she pulled down all the blinds, and crept to the kitchen window in the darkness. She couldn’t make out any shapes or figures in the back yard, but she stood there for over fifteen minutes until she was sure there was no movement. All around her the night sounds of the house buzzed in the air. She heard a creak upstairs, and she jumped back. Every noise frightened her more than the last, until she felt like she was surrounded by something - some unseen force that was trying to drive her crazy. Finally, she slipped up the stairs and into her room. She got back into bed, and lay quietly under the covers. Then, for the first time in seventeen years she pulled her teddy off the rocker by her bed, and cradled him in her arms.

She arrived at the hospital and searched the street for a parking space. There weren’t any. She drove into the multi-level parking lot and circled the floors until she finally found an empty spot on the sixth level. She got out, locked the doors, then proceeded passed all the other cars to the elevator. All the way down her stomach sunk with the lift and when she finally arrived at the ground floor she felt as if she was going to throw up. She shut her eyes for a moment to settle herself, then moved towards the hospital entrance. Two cafeteria workers stepped out of her way, blowing smoke around her. She caught a whiff and nearly gagged.

Once inside the hospital she followed the signs to the prenatal unit and found Dr. Ernstine standing in the waiting room. The doctor gestured to a door and Kathrin followed her in. The walls were a pale pink colour and the floor was littered with building blocks and children’s toys. “It’s the nursery,” Dr. Ernstine explained, “but no one will bother us in here. Why don’t you sit down?”

Kathrin took off her coat and sat down at the play station on a tiny chair. Dr. Ernstine followed suit and pulled open the file she had been carrying. “We’re just meeting so we can go over your medical history. Then the counselor will meet with you. If you have any questions don’t be afraid to ask, O. K.?”
“All right.”
“Good. How are you feeling?”
Kathrin shrugged. “Fine.”
“No abnormal pains, or urination problems - discharge or anything?”
“No.”
“Good. Now how are you?”
Kathrin frowned. “I don’t know what you mean.”
“How are you feeling emotionally?”
“Fine. A little tired sometimes, a bit depressed, but I’m coping.”
Dr. Ernstien made a note then looked at Kathrin. “Are you sure?”
Kathrin nodded. “Yes. I’m fine.”
“Well then, I’m just going to lay this on the line,” Dr. Ernstien said, then paused and put down her pen, “Kathrin, do you ever want to have a child?”
“Yes, of course,” she replied, “why are you asking me that?”
Dr. Ernstien ran her fingers through her hair. Kathrin could tell she was trying to say something. “Is there something wrong? Did the tests…”
“No. No, it’s not that.”
“Well then, what is?” Kathrin asked.
Dr. Ernstien smiled reassuringly. “I’m not saying this is going to happen, keep that in mind, but I am going to give you the worst case scenario. The chances of you having gotten pregnant in the first place were a little doubtful. With a history of PID and an STD - and one that went undiagnosed for such a relatively long period of time, well they lessened your odds considerably. Added to that you have some scar tissue from the cauterization. All of these factors don’t usually allow for a fertile uterine environment. Especially less than a year after treatment. I’d say you had at most a 70% chance going in.”

Kathrin listened intently, but didn’t fully understand where the doctor was going with it.
“And?”
“And you still got pregnant. Which in any other case would be a major triumph. Unfortunately this isn’t a good time for you. As a doctor, a career woman, and a mother I can understand that completely.”
“But?” Kathrin interjected.
“Don’t get me wrong - today the procedure is very simple and safe, it usually has no complications, but it will - no, it may affect your chances of conceiving in the future dramatically.”

Kathrin paled. “You mean I won’t be able to have children?”

“Not won’t. Of course I’m not saying that,” she corrected. “but it will be harder.”

“So, what does this mean for me?”

The doctor shrugged slightly. “I just wanted to let you know. So you could think about your options and come up with the best choice for you.”

Kathrin let out a long sigh. “Thank you for telling me. I will.”

“I’ll be there to make sure everything goes well, and I don’t want you to worry about the procedure. I’ve seen it done hundreds of times.”

“O.K.” Kathrin said somewhat relieved. “What else?”

“Well, we’ve decided to give you a local anaesthetic, which means you’ll be awake for it, but you won’t see or feel anything. And you can’t eat before the surgery, but all that information is in the pamphlet I’ll give you. The most important thing is that you must have someone come and pick you up. Do you have a friend or family member you can ask?”

Kathrin nodded.

“Good. Do you have any questions?”

“When?”

Dr. Ernststein scanned the file. “We’ve booked you in for this Friday, in the morning. After that I want you to go straight home and relax for the weekend. Don’t over-exert yourself, because the last thing I want is for you to start hemorrhaging like last year. If anything does happen after, you call me and you come right back here. But don’t worry, it’ll be fine. Anything else?”

Kathrin couldn’t barely think, let alone think of a question to ask. “No, not right now.”

“O.K. I have a patient to see, so I’ll leave you here. Do you still have my number?” she asked politely.

“I think so.”

“Here,” Dr. Ernststein said, writing it down on the pamphlet she handed to Kathrin.

“Thanks.”

Dr. Ernststein got up. “Take care, Kathrin. And call me if you need anything.”

She slipped out of the room and the door shut silently after her. Kathrin watched her leave and then picked up the pamphlet, swearing it was the last one she’d ever accept.
She was exhausted by the time she left the hospital and more confused than when she'd entered. Still, part of her felt lighter. After Dr. Ernst had left, an older woman came in to talk to Kathrin. Immediately she warmed to the woman who introduced herself as Roberta. They chatted idly for a few minutes and Kathrin began to relax. By the end of an hour Roberta had struck the tip of the iceberg, but Kathrin still wasn’t volunteering all the available information she had in her head. Roberta tried to ease the words out of Kathrin’s mouth, but they wouldn’t come. Finally Roberta looked at her. “Are you afraid to have this baby? Do you fear for it?”

And then it had all come tumbling out in a flood of words. The whole story about Aaron, and Lily and the baby. As Roberta sat by and listened Kathrin related all her feelings and fears. That Aaron would never leave her alone if she had the child, and how her family would think she was doing a terrible thing, even with the circumstances that surrounded the pregnancy. And finally Kathrin told her about the dream. The same dream she’d been having since the pregnancy.

“I’m sitting in the doctor’s office, waiting to be seen. Every time I look down my stomach is swollen bigger than the last time I looked down. And all these people are staring at me. Finally the doctor comes out to see me. She asks if I’m ready, and suddenly my gut splits open, and this huge baby covered in blood comes out. Like in ‘Alien’, but the baby has Aaron’s face. I scream, and everyone looks on like it’s the most normal thing in the world. And then I wake up.”

When Kathrin had finally finished speaking, Roberta smiled with composure but was rattled underneath. She offered Kathrin a tissue. “I bet you must feel a hundred times better.”

And it was true, in a way. She did feel like she’d gotten everything off her chest - unlike when she’d talked to Carol or Elaine. She’d only give them the edited stories - only told them what she was able to talk about, and had kept the rest hidden. But Roberta had somehow managed to get every detail out of her, and while it renewed her anger and shame it had also soothed a little bit of the hurt. It was like her mother had said, how it happened a little every day. And Kathrin felt that she was finally able to start and begin to get better.

She reached the parking lot and stepped into the elevator. The nausea in her gut had quelled and she was starving. She’d grab something on the way to the office. When the elevator reached the sixth floor she got off and walked in the direction of the car. The lot, which had been full of cars when she’d arrived, was nearly empty, and only then did she realize just how far away she’d had to park. She crossed to the far side of the lot, which was separated by a row of pillars, and saw her car parked alone. She moved towards the car, as a gust of cold wind rustled her hair. *Damn, it’s getting colder.* She pulled her coat in tighter, and rummaged through her purse to find
her keys. She pulled them out and pushed her key in the lock. It wouldn’t go in. Kathrin rubbed
the lock with her hand and tried again. Still no luck. “Damn locks,” Kathrin muttered to herself.

The locks usually froze at least once a year on the old car, but had been fine earlier that morning. Still it had gotten colder since then. She rubbed the lock again, and then the key. The
key still wouldn’t go in. She hit the window, and then ducked down to blow on the lock. When she
looked into the lock, she was taken by surprise. There was something wedged into the lock.
Kathrin frowned. “What the hell?”

“Need any help?” a voice behind her asked.

“My lock’s been tampered,” she stated, then turned around.

The figure looked at her and Kathrin felt her body reel. She jumped up suddenly and
stepped back. “Did you do this?” she demanded furiously.

Aaron gave her a large grin. “I thought you might need some help.”

Kathrin tensed. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Funny. I was going to ask you the same question.”

“What the hell is my own goddamned business! Now get away from the car!”

He took a few steps back. “Relax,” he said holding up his arms in a gesture of defense,
“but I disagree with you. I think it is my business.”

Her eyes scanned the lot frantically. There was no one else around. She didn’t know what
to do. Aaron had her cornered. “How did you find me?” she asked quietly, knowing she was
defeated for the moment.

“It’s a good story actually. Do you have time?”

“Listen Aaron,” she could hear her agitation echo through the lot, “I have things to do.
Get away from the car now!”

“Or what? You’ll scream for help? You’ll kill me?”

She swallowed, knowing she had to remain calm. “What do you want?”

He gestured for her to come closer. “I want to tell you my story. Come here.”

“I’m not coming any closer.”

He shrugged. “Fine. Suit yourself.”

She looked at him in alarm. In her mind she knew that she should try to make a break for
it, and run for the elevator, but she also knew the results would be disastrous. She wouldn’t get
more than two feet. “Tell me what you have to say and then go.”
He smiled. “It really is a funny story. All these coincidences that happened to fall my way…”

“Get to the fucking point!” she seethed.

Aaron looked at her with an amused look on his face. “Aren’t we irritated? It must be that time of the month, huh Kathrin? Or maybe not. See, I got this call from Elaine a little over a week ago, and you know that sister of mine - she never calls. But, out of the blue she did indeed call, and she wanted to know how you were. I mean, how we were. She seemed genuinely concerned. And I told her you were fine, because well you are fine, aren’t you?”

Kathrin didn’t respond.

“Look at me!” he barked, “Aren’t you.”

“Yes,” she said evenly and turned to face him, “I am fine.”

“That’s what I told her. But she didn’t seem to believe me. She thought that maybe I had some issues from the past to address before you and I get on with our future. But our future is secure, and I told her that. And then she started saying that maybe I should see someone - someone who’d make me feel better. I have been feeling a little under the weather recently, so I took her advice. And I came to find you. Because you always make me feel better. And I thought that you might know who had given her the idea in the first place. Do you anyone who might have done that?”

Kathrin clenched her teeth. “No,” she retorted.

“Well, needless to say, it got me thinking, and I thought immediately of you. But the funniest thing is, when I called you up I couldn’t think of anything to say. So I kept hanging up. But I tried. God, did I ever try. Then I thought of a new plan of action. I called you at work, and had a long conversation with Jane. She said you weren’t in the office, but she was very nice about it. And then I knew that you hadn’t told anyone about our little misunderstanding. She seemed to think that everything was fine and was somehow under the impression that I’d see you before she would. So she asked me to pass along a message. Something about seeing a professor at the Women’s College. I, of course, obliged…”

“You fucking asshole!”

He took a step closer. “Whoa. Wait a minute. She told me, I didn’t ask.”

Kathrin’s face went white. “Who gives you the right? I sure as Hell don’t! Now get the fuck away from me!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.
Aaron smiled pleasantly. “I haven’t even gotten to the good part yet. See, at first the information meant nothing to me. I didn’t know why you’d want to meet with some professor. But something was familiar. The name. And I racked my brains to figure out what I was missing. And last night, it suddenly came to me. There’s no Women’s College. It was the hospital. And it was the hospital that happens to do some tremendous prenatal work. Fertilization, deliveries, you name it. The doctors also provide abortion services. And then it all made sense to me.”

Kathrin took a step forward. “And what if I told you that’s not why I’m here?”

He brushed his bangs off his face. “Well, that would be a lie, because I watched you go in.”

Kathrin faltered. “You followed me?”

“Sometimes. I considered it taking care of my business.”

Kathrin swallowed. He’d been at the house the night before. He’d probably been following her for weeks. A surge of energy bolted through her and she moved recklessly towards him. “You piece of shit! How dare you?” she hissed as she swung her purse at his head. “This isn’t your business! YOU HAVE NO SAY IN THE MATTER!”

He grabbed her purse and wrenched it out of her hands. Then he seized her by the shoulders and flung her face-down onto the hood of the car, knocking the wind completely out of her. Kathrin tried to catch a breath under the weight of his crushing pressure, and squirmed to get away. He held her against the car. “Listen you selfish bitch! That’s my baby and don’t think for one minute you’re walking away from our family!”

Kathrin gasped for air. “You’re hurting me,” she said between wheezes.

Aaron loosened his grip slightly, but kept a firm hold of her shoulders. “You want to know how I know so much about the hospital? You know why I’ve always wanted a baby? I’ll tell you: Lily came here for fertility tests and drug therapy so we could have a baby. For over two years. And that worthless cunt couldn’t conceive. She couldn’t even do that right! But you can. And you and I are going to have that baby, and be perfect parents and have a perfect family. We are,” he paused, and brushed her hair off her face. “you’re such a good girl.”

Kathrin rolled her head over to face him. “I am not going to make up for your childhood.”

He leaned in closer to her face. “What did you say?” he asked in a thick voice.

“If you think I’m going to have your monster baby, you’re out of your fucking mind!” she growled.
Aaron looked at her vacantly, and Kathrin sniffed pathetically under his weight. Then she arched her head and sent a wad of spit hurtling towards his face where it landed with a heavy smack. He waited a moment then calmly wiped the spit off with his hand. A maniacal grin covered his face. He yanked Kathrin’s hair and lifted her head from the hood as she cried out in pain. “What?” he howled, slamming her face into the hood of the car. “You fucking whore! That baby’s ours. I’m the father. I AM THE FUCKING FATHER!”

Kathrin felt his hands release her, and then heard the thud of her purse hitting the hood. She remained still until Aaron’s footsteps faded, and long after the sound of a car gunning to life and peeling out of the parking lot had ebbed in the distance. Her entire body was shaking and tears rolled down her face. She couldn’t stand up, so she lay across the car sobbing.

Eventually she ran her fingers over her cheekbone. It was tender, but not broken or bleeding. A little ice, and it would be all right. At least he didn’t hurt the baby. And then the thought made her sob even harder.

 Harold opened the door and gasped in surprise. “Oh dear God, what happened to you?”

Kathrin stumbled into the apartment, and Carol hugged her while Harold went to get ice. Then Carol led her into the living room, where Kathrin approached the mirror tentatively. A huge red welt rose from her cheekbone and it had already started turning a vibrant shade of purple.

Kathrin moaned. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled to Carol. “I couldn’t go to my mom’s.”

Carol placed the ice on Kathrin’s face. “Who did this to you?”

“Aaron.”

“What?”

“He found out about the baby.”

“What? How? That’s it!” Carol jumped up, “This has gone far enough. We’re calling the police.”

Kathrin held up her hand. “No, please. Carol. It’ll only make things worse.”

“Things can’t get any worse Kathrin!” Carol snapped.

“If I press charges against him I’ll have to go to court. But after Friday, I won’t be any good to him anymore. Then he’ll leave me alone.”

Carol looked doubtful. “How can you be sure of that?”

“He doesn’t want me. He wants the baby.”

Carol and Harold looked at her compassionately.
Kathrin cuddled up on the couch. “Can I stay here tonight? I don’t want to go back to my mother’s, at least not until the swelling goes down.”

“Of course. Oh Kathrin, I can’t even tell you how sorry I am.”
Kathrin nodded in response. “Well, at least nothing’s broken.”
Carol and Harold exchanged glances. “Yeah,” they finally agreed in unison, knowing it was only to pacify Kathrin.

She called her mother to let her know her plans, left a message at the garage where she’d had the car towed, then slipped into a pair of Carol’s pyjamas. All three of them watched T. V. and by ten Kathrin’s swelling had gone down a lot. But it was still going to look ugly for a long while.

She woke up early on Tuesday morning and got to the bathroom just in time to vomit into the toilet bowl. Carol came running in. “What’s wrong?”
Kathrin smiled weakly, but the pain in her cheek stopped her. “Either something I ate, or morning sickness.”
Carol patted her on the back, and fought her own sudden queasiness. “Well, good luck then,” she offered, and shut the door on her way out.

Kathrin vomited twice more, then took a shower. She felt much better after the water hit her body, and she stayed in the shower for twenty minutes. When she got out the mirror was completely covered in steam - which was a good thing, because she nearly fainted after she dressed in Carol’s clothes and looked in the mirror. The bruise was a brilliant mixture of blue, purple and red and the size of a golf ball. Kathrin nearly cried as Carol spent ten minutes applying concealer. There was still some evident discoloration, but Kathrin’s hair covered most of the damage.

She threw her clothes into a plastic grocery bag and went to work. She had a lot of things to do. The first stop she made was at the garage to pick up her car. The locks had been checked, and dejammed for an eighty dollar fee. Kathrin gritted her teeth as she signed the credit card slip. Then she went to work and stopped at the reception desk, where Jane greeted her warmly. Kathrin took a deep breath. “Aaron and I broke up. I don’t want to talk about it with anyone in the office. I won’t take his calls or receive any messages from him,” she said, producing a sheet of paper, “this is my new address and telephone number.”

Jane took the paper silently and Kathrin slipped past her. “I don’t want to be disturbed for an hour.”
She went into her office, dropped her briefcase on her desk and turned on the computer. She glanced at the clock. Nine twenty. She didn’t have much time to spare. She had to be at the client site by eleven with the final sketches complete. She had anticipated getting the work done the previous day, but at least she was good under pressure. She’d get it done, with about ten minutes to spare.

At ten o’clock, she called Jamie to clean up a couple of the sketches, and he entered her office nervously. Kathrin glanced up, and knew that the word had already gone around the office. “Come in. I don’t want to talk about it. Let’s just get this done.”

He seemed relieved by her calmness. He sat down and they tore through the sketches, adding emphasis in certain places and inserting the graphics into the text setup. At ten thirty, Kathrin packed up her laptop and headed for the door, having finished everything. She left Jamie at the reception desk and he wished her good luck. Jamie turned to Jane. “I’d say she’s taking it really well.”

The client meeting was much shorter than Kathrin expected and she was done by four. She thought about going back to the office, but decided to call instead. If there was nothing to do, she’d rather go home and take a nap. Jane was frantic when she called. “Oh thank goodness. Your mother called here about half an hour ago and she sounded really upset. She wants you to call her as soon as you can.”

Kathrin hung up and dialed her mother. After the fifth ring Ingrid picked up the phone. Kathrin could tell by the quiver in her voice that something was wrong. “Mom, it’s Kath. Is everything all right?”

“Oh Kathrin, the most awful…it’s terrible…I still can’t…”

“Mom, calm down. Tell me what happened.”

Kathrin could hear noise in the background and suddenly Ingrid’s voice faded away from the phone. “Mom?” Kathrin called out in panic.

“It’s Jen, Kath.”

“What’s going on?”

“You better get here as soon as you can. And brace yourself. All your stuff has been trashed.”

Kathrin gasped. “Oh my God! In the garage? I’ll be right there.”
She ran for the door and headed for her car. As soon as she got on the highway she sped up and raced across the city. With every passing exit she grew more agitated and pressed her foot harder on the accelerator. You are so stupid! You should have called the police like Carol said. She thought of her mother, and how scared and worried she must have been. How could she have been so foolish to believe that Aaron would leave her be until after the surgery. Stupid! Stupid! She crossed the city in twenty minutes, and finally pulled up in the driveway. She raced into the house, where her sister and mother were seated on the edge of their chairs. Kathrin crossed to her mother and crouched down. "What happened?"

Ingrid blew her nose. "I woke up this morning and everything was fine. I was trying to find my old quilting square for Andria when I remembered it was in the garage. When I went out, the side door was swinging wide open. I thought it was strange, but I figured you had forgotten to shut and lock it. So I went in and turned on the light. I got the square and then thought I should check to make sure everything was there. When I got to the front where your things are, everything was in shambles. I'm so sorry Kathrin."

Kathrin swallowed at got to her feet. "I'll go look."

"Let me go with you." Jen said standing up.

They went out the front door and headed for the garage. Kathrin pulled out her key, slipped it into the garage lock, and slowly turned the handle. Then she and Jen lifted the door and pushed it above their heads. Kathrin's immediate response was disbelief. All of her boxes had been thrown on the floor, and several of them were upturned, with their contents spilling out. A few boxes were slashed. She couldn't tell about the state of the things behind the first jumbled row of boxes. She scanned the larger items of furniture. Most of the pieces seemed all right. Kathrin sighed.

Jen moved into the garage. "It's not so bad. At least none of the really expensive stuff was touched. I think it's just some of the boxes that are in rough shape."

Kathrin stepped towards the boxes and began turning them over. A wave of relief washed over her. Jen was right. There were only a few boxes that were bent or dented. It almost looked like a heavy gust of wind had knocked them over. Almost. Kathrin turned to Jen. "When do you think this happened?"

Jen shrugged. "Last night maybe. Mom would have heard it today, she was up and around. But her room's on the other side of the house. She wouldn't have heard anything if she was asleep."
Kathrin leaned against the wall. “It was Aaron.”

“I think so.”

“O.K. Well, it’s not so bad. But maybe we should move this stuff inside anyway. Can you take a few boxes?”

Jen nodded. “Sure.”

Kathrin passed Jen a box and her sister disappeared around the corner. Kathrin continued shifting boxes to the front of the garage. When she’d gathered all the relatively undamaged boxes, she moved further into the garage to pick up the contents of the dumped boxes that had been strewn all over the floor. One box had contained all her summer clothes, but when she looked closer each item had been completely trashed. She picked up the bridesmaid dress from Alison’s wedding and choked back her anger. The dress was ripped apart at every hem line. It was destroyed beyond repair. Kathrin picked up a shirt. The same thing. As she picked up each article of clothing, she grew more despondent. All of her clothes were ruined. Finally she reached down and picked up the large corduroy dress Andria had given her. It hadn’t been touched. Kathrin felt like she was going to be ill.

She grabbed a garbage bag off the top shelf and began filling it with clothing, shoving everything in without looking at it. Then she lifted up the gutted box that had contained her clothing. That was when she saw it. On the floor, under the box, a piece of shattered glass poked out from the rubble. Kathrin dropped to her knees and scooped up the glass. Then she pushed the boxes and pieces of clothing out of the way, and peered down in horror. On the floor, her collection of Christmas ornaments lay in broken pieces. She picked up the remains of the glass lovebirds, and her crystal heart, and felt her own heart shatter into a million pieces. Out of everything she owned, she treasured her ornaments the most. And Aaron had broken only those things she cherished, knowing how much it would upset her. She picked up some pieces of gold-leafed metal. They had been hammered down to nothing, but she knew they were the trumpets. Her fingers dug through the wreckage, clawing over glass and metal with no regard to pain or blood. She continued probing until she found what she was looking for. In the far corner, she clutched at a velvet ribbon and it pulled it out. The silver was battered into a deformed globe. Next to it was another piece of bent silver, with some fine silver chains still attached to it. Her father’s ornaments. Anguish racked her body and she hugged the battered pieces of metal to her chest. Kathrin felt the tears come, and let them flow on as she uncovered the beautiful silver threaded scarves her father had sent. Each one had been cut into small scraps of material, and
Kathrin let out a agonizing wail. Everything she had ever loved had been destroyed. She searched frantically through the rest of her boxes. Nothing else had been touched. Only her clothes and her ornaments. Still, she couldn't find the one thing she was missing. The lion head. She moved the boxes out onto the driveway, and checked each one. When all the boxes were moved, and the floor was cleared, she checked every crack, every open space. It wasn't anywhere. Kathrin thought long and hard. She'd told Aaron about the story of the angel - she knew at once that Aaron had taken it with him. Or destroyed it completely.

She got to her feet and began to pace the garage. A swirl of thoughts and images twisted through her head, and she grasped her arms tightly around her body to master her heartache then squeezed her eyes shut. There was nothing she could do to bring any of those things back. They were gone forever, and with them her whole existence seemed to renounce itself. It was as if she suddenly had no past, no family, and no assurance that her father had ever been. She thought of all the times she had ever resented or forsaken him, and knew that it was those terrible thoughts that had come back to haunt her. Because she'd never believed in anything but those ornaments. Not her mother's words, not her family's love. Nothing. To her he had always and only been those ornaments and scarves.

She clasped her hands together and lifted her closed eyes to the ceiling. Then with all the power she possessed in her body, she prayed silently and with conviction. When she was done, she opened her eyes and saw an angel floating from the rafter above her head. She watched in horror as it twirled lazily in the wind, its macabre animal face spinning around and around. Kathrin searched the garage. She grabbed a footstool and climbed up until she could grab the lion. She tugged it down with all her might and it tumbled into her hands. But it wasn't the lion - it was a mass of torched ribbon and hair. The entire face had been badly burnt and the tattered lace pulled away and drooped from the body. Kathrin collapsed against the stack of boxes and touched the lion tenderly. It was utterly destroyed. She gently turned it over and searched for the inscription. It was covered in thick, greasy soot, but she could still make out the words.

_Coeur de léon._ And then she thought of the old man with despair - the wrinkled man who had given her the ornament because he'd known it was exactly what she wanted, maybe even needed. The poor old man who'd handed her his prized possession as a means of letting go. He hadn't told her that; he hadn't needed to. The moment he'd given her his business card she'd known that he was J. D.

She slipped down to the floor and gathered up all the ornaments.
Jen found her there, her hands covered in blood, rocking back and forth on the floor.

“Kathrin? Kathrin?” she called, moving to her sister.

Kathrin didn’t respond.

“Kathrin!” Jen said urgently.

Kathrin looked up, turned in a daze, and then looked through Jen. Slowly her eyes focused. “I’ve got to get out.”
Pulling herself out of bed was the hardest thing to do on Wednesday morning, but she knew that she had to. She had to go to work, and pretend that nothing was wrong. That nothing had effected her, so she could keep it all together. She climbed out of bed, went to the bathroom and then headed for the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee. When she got to the stairs the scent of bacon and eggs cooking wafted up her nose and she had to race back down the hall and into the bathroom to vomit. She tried to be as quiet as possible. The last thing she needed was for her mother to hear her. She only threw up once, and felt much better afterwards. Then she rinsed out her mouth, brushed her teeth, and tried one more time. She slipped down the stairs. Her mother was bent over the stove, and the smell made Kathrin gag, but she forced herself to proceed into the kitchen.

“Good morning,” she offered, her smile weak.
Her mother turned. “Are you going to work today?”
Kathrin nodded. “Why?”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”
“I feel fine,” Kathrin said, tucking her hair behind her ears.

“Really?” her mother looked at her with concern, then gasped, “Dear Lord, what happened to your face Kathrin?”
Kathrin froze. She’d forgotten all about the bruise. It probably looked worse than the day before. She hadn’t even noticed it in the bathroom because her hair covered it. Automatically she brought her hand to her cheekbone. “I had a run in with Aaron.”
Her mother’s eyes watered. “He did that to you?”
“Yeah. Don’t worry, it looks much worse than it feels.”

“Did you go to the doctor’s office?”
Kathrin sighed. “No. Mom promise me you won’t worry. I’m fine.”

Her mother stifled her outrage. “It’s amazing you’re still alive with the things he’s done. That man needs to be locked up.”

“I agree.”

Ingrid stared at her daughter’s face. Aside from the bruise she had never seen Kathrin so frail and ashen. It was like every bit of happiness had drained out of her daughter’s life in the past few weeks. And she could understand why, and feel compassion and sympathy for her daughter, but she couldn’t make it any better. The fact that she couldn’t fix it up with a kiss or a Band-Aid made her feel useless and old. What had happened to the little girl who had so much spunk and
rebellion, who fought every battle like it was her last? She'd grown up and exchanged pretend for the real world. But whatever the real world was, her daughter didn't deserve the things that had happened to her.

Ingrid sighed and crossed to her daughter. "Give me a hug," she ordered.

Kathrin pressed her body against her mother's and squeezed her arms around Ingrid's waist. Ingrid hugged her tightly. "I love you, sweetie."

"I love you too, Mom."

Then Ingrid pulled her arms away from her daughter and looked into Kathrin's eyes. "I know you don't think it's going to get any better, but it will. You just have to believe that it will, and it will."

Kathrin smiled weakly. "I know."

"Good. Now, you want some breakfast?"

Kathrin sat down. "Yep."

Her mother filled a plate for her, and Kathrin gulped down the eggs and bacon, quickly shoveling the food into her mouth without speaking. Ingrid looked on in awe. "You know?" she said. "You amaze me. Where on earth does that food go? It's like you're eating for five people every time you sit down."

Kathrin tried not to react. "Well, I'm a growing girl."

"One of these days, you'll reach your limit, and then you're going to get bigger than a house."

Kathrin drank the last of her coffee. "So you say."

She took her plate to the sink, rinsed it off, and then deposited it into the dishwasher. "Thanks, Mom."

Her mother nodded, and Kathrin went back upstairs to get ready for work. She took a long shower, dried her hair, and applied make-up to her bruise. It was worse, but a tiny bit smaller. That relieved her. When she opened her closet she selected the most professional outfit she had. It was the suit she had worn for her initial interview with Richardson and somehow seemed appropriate. Then she got dressed, checked her face one last time, and headed for the door. She was nervous, but knew what she had to do.

She stopped at Jane's desk on the way in. "Mr. Richardson in?"

"Not yet," Jane said shaking her head.
“O. K. Thanks.”

Kathrin walked to her office and opened the door. She flicked the light switch and then put her laptop and purse on the desk. Then she sat down behind her desk, and scanned the room. The painting her sister had done was still on the floor. It had been there ever since she’d hung the lion up. Maybe she’d take Andria’s painting home with her and hang it on the bedroom wall. She looked at the wall, and felt awful. In the painting her beautiful lion was restored to her. But it wasn’t like the real thing. It would never replace the real thing, but she was pacified that she still had the lion in some shape. Even if it was only two-dimensional.

Kathrin looked over her pictures, her bookshelf, and arranged everything on her desk. She knew that she was procrastinating, but couldn’t help herself. She really didn’t want to rush into anything. Oh well, she finally sighed, it’s better to get it over with. She picked up the phone and dialed. After giving her name she was put through. The phone rang a few times, and then a warm voice answered. Kathrin felt a sudden sense of release.

“Mama, it’s Kathrin,” she said and then waited for Elizabeth to stop speaking, “I wanted to let you know that you can count me in.”

There was a buzz of excitement on the other end of the line, and Kathrin smiled. “As soon a possible, but I need at least a week.”

She remained on the line while Mama Fashion gave her Yoshi’s telephone number and address. Kathrin listened to her elated banter. She hadn’t felt any sense of excitement in too long. As it turned out Elizabeth was going to London the next Sunday, and invited Kathrin to join her on the same flight.

“Don’t worry dear,” Mama giggled, “I’ll give Yoshi my flight number and he can work something out. Maybe he’ll even splurge for a first-class seat.”

Mama’s exuberance was contagious, and Kathrin found herself cheering up. She could get everything in ship shape order in a week. Her passport was still valid, she didn’t have to worry about rent, and she was ready to go. There was nothing holding her in Toronto. After Friday, she’d be a free woman. The two women talked for a good half hour, and planned the trip. Then Kathrin reluctantly let Mama get back to work, and turned to her own computer. The giddy feeling in her chest remained, and Kathrin stretched out her arms in happiness. Only one small spot in the back of her head kept nagging her. She was sure that the worst wasn’t over. There had to be at least one trick up Aaron’s sleeve. One thing he could and would do to stop her. She found her only consolation in the fact that she had the element of surprise on her side. He didn’t know when
her appointment was. If only she could figure out a way of getting in and out without him seeing her.

She abandoned her thoughts when she heard a tap on her door. She looked out the window, but couldn’t see who it was. “Come in,” she stated.

Mr. Richardson opened the door. “Hi. Jane said you were looking for me.”

Kathrin gnawed on her lower lip. “Yes. I wanted to talk to you. But when you’re not busy.”

He smiled. “I’m not busy now. Your office or mine?”

Kathrin swallowed. “Yours. Just give me five minutes.”

Richardson nodded and shut the door. Kathrin’s heart was racing. She needed to be calm. It wasn’t as if she was leaving him with a sinking ship. And she’d been there over three years. It was time to move on. She stood up awkwardly and cracked her knuckles. No time like the present.

She went to the office kitchen and grabbed herself a glass of water. It shook in her hand as she carried it down the hall. When she got to Richardson’s office the secretary greeted her with a fearful smile.

“He’s expecting me,” Kathrin offered.

The secretary indicated to the door, and Kathrin approached it while taking a deep breath. Richardson looked up from a stack of paper work. “Sit down,” he said, and Kathrin obliged.

She looked at him and waited until he had cleared up the mess in front of him. “What can I do for you?” he asked.

Kathrin put down her glass. “This is very hard for me to say to you. I’ve given it a lot of thought, and I finally decided last night. I’ve been offered a contract.”

Richardson took the news with composure. “You haven’t been very happy recently, have you?”

Kathrin shook her head. “No. It’s not because of work though.”

“I know. Jane told me what happened. I’m sorry that things turned out badly. And I’m sorry that I behaved so terribly. Even though I thought it was in your best interest. I hope I don’t have anything to do with your decision.”

Kathrin smiled. “Jim, you’ve never been anything but good to me. I enjoy working here, but this is the chance I’ve been waiting for.”
“What is it?”

“The fashion documentary.” Kathrin explained. “started it. I came up with the idea of scanning drawings into the computer, and creating a computer-based catalogue. Where customers can see what each piece of clothing will look like with other pieces. A whole ensemble can be seen in minutes. A new Japanese designer wants me to develop the product and work with a web designer to create a web-site to host it. That way the clients don’t have to fly in and look around. They can see the designs, pick what they want and then just come in for the final fitting. It’s pretty exciting, and I really want to do it.”

Richardson looked at her in awe. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“I didn’t think you’d be interested.”

He grinned. “Why? Because I don’t know the first thing about fashion?”

Kathrin smiled, but kept her mouth closed. “Will you let me go?”

“I don’t have a say in that matter. How long?”

“A few months. Five, six at most.”

He nodded. “I’ll let you go. When do you start?”

Kathrin grimaced. He wasn’t going to be happy. “It looks like a week Monday. I haven’t heard the final plan yet.”

“Monday?” he asked and then let out a low whistle.

“I know it’s soon, but I have to leave before I change my mind. The beer campaign is mostly done, and Jamie can handle the rest of it. You’ve already dealt with the clients. I think they’re pretty satisfied.”

He leaned back in his chair. “I’ll take care of them. I just want to make sure you’re happy. Will this make you happy?”

Kathrin nodded vigorously.

“Well then, good luck, and I’ll see you when you get back.”

She jumped up and ran around the desk to hug him. “Thank you. SO much.”

He laughed as she hugged him. “O. K., O. K. just don’t squeeze me to death.”

She told her mother all about it when she got home and Ingrid was ecstatic. “I love England. It’s so beautiful there, and you’ll get to spend the summer. Oh, I’m so jealous. I wish I could go.”
Kathrin smiled. “I expect you to come for at least a month, once I get settled. I’ll have my own place. It’ll be wonderful.”

Her sisters were equally pleased. The only person who was concerned was Carol. She didn’t like the thought of losing her best friend again. Different circumstances, but a loss all the same. Kathrin placated her with an invitation to visit and pick up some art for the gallery. Immediately Carol warmed to the idea. “Come to think of it, it won’t be so bad. And we’ll give you a huge going away party.”

Kathrin laughed. “O.K. But I get to see the guest list.”

Carol stopped. “Kathrin, don’t even joke about that. Have you heard any more from him?”

“No since the devastation in the garage.”

“Hmm,” Carol responded, “is your mother there?”

“No, why?”

“I just want to know the plan for Friday.”

Kathrin glanced around the living room even though no one was in the house. “I’ll take the subway down. Early in the morning. Maybe that way I can slip in before he sees me. That is, if he’s out looking for me. But I don’t think he will be. He must think I’ve changed hospitals or already gone to a clinic. At least, I hope that’s what he thinks. The hospital said I’d need a pick-up around noon. Are you O.K. with that?”

“Fine.”

“Great. I’ll give you a call tomorrow night, just to check in and let you know where you’re going.”

Kathrin hung up the phone. She had so many things to do, and she couldn’t keep them straight in her mind. Thursday she had a two-hour conference call booked with Yoshi about the fine details. Then she’d find out the flight plans and all the arrangements. She was tempted to go over her presentation, but it wouldn’t do her any more good. Mama had sent print samples of his designs before Christmas and she liked them a lot. It was going to be fine, but she was still nervous. Mostly about driving on the other side of the road, and adjusting to a new home away from the old one. But, for the most part her excitement overrode her anxiety.

She coasted through Thursday, and the call went better than she anticipated. Yoshi was going to courier her ticket, her townhouse key, and all the necessary forms for her to fill out. He’d
pick her and Mama up from the airport personally, and take her to her new place. Then he'd let her rest for a few days before she met with his staff and the web designer. It was whirlwind, and she loved it. She started counting down the days.

In the afternoon, she went over to the client site and met with the corporate head to let him know about her upcoming leave. He took it well, extended thanks from the whole team, and then he wished her luck on the venture. Kathrin was ecstatic. Everything was going perfectly.

When she got home Thursday night she was exhausted. She sat down for dinner with her mother and then watched the news. Half an hour, she promised herself as she settled in on the couch. When the news ended she forced herself up from the couch and put on her boots. She couldn't sit still. There were still so many things to do.

She had left a couple of boxes in the garage and decided to move them out. Her weekend was going to be a write-off anyway, and for her last week Richardson had decided to place her on one of the other campaigns to help out. It wasn't going to be pretty - the new campaign was due on the Friday. A lot of late nights and take-out dinners.

She called Carol and confirmed their meeting for the following day. Then Kathrin agreed to go to bed as early as she could. Both of them knew it wouldn't be early at all. Kathrin hung up and then put on her coat and went out into the garage. There were only four or five boxes left to move, and she carried each one from the garage to the basement. On her third trip she picked up a box and began to move to the front of the garage. She stopped and gently placed the box down. On the top the words "files, papers" were written in her neat cursive. She stepped around the box and picked up another instead.

When she finally returned for the displaced box she carried it into the house, but not to the basement. Instead she took it to her room. Then she went back outside and shut and locked the garage door. She glanced around the outside of the house and then stepped quickly in through the side door. Her mother was still watching television and Kathrin moved up the stairs quickly. Once inside her room she shut and locked the door, then turned her attention to the box. It hadn't been opened since she'd moved into Aaron's apartment. There had been something on her mind ever since she'd decided to go to England. Something she'd been putting off for over a year, waiting until she found a convenient time.

She pulled back the box flaps and began removing her old photo albums and yearbooks. Eventually she had pulled all the objects from the box, and stacked them across her bed. A feeling of relief washed over her. At least he didn't get to this box. If he had touched her old memories it
would have finished her off. They would have had to cart her down to the psychiatric hospital and dressed her in a straight jacket.

She started with her yearbooks, and flipped through them slowly, reading every note and autograph within. A few things made her smile. Some made her sad. One note was from a friend who had died in a car crash a few years after high school. Most of the scribble was in Carol’s distinctive handwriting. Kathrin laughed. One of the notes was from Jen.

After the yearbooks she moved onto her photo albums, and rearranged some of the pictures. Then she went through an old shoe box that contained letters from friends, and report cards, and small trinkets she no longer remembered where she had gotten in the first place. She straightened the box, and then placed the yearbooks, albums and shoe box back into the larger box. It was after eleven. She had heard her mother go to bed a few minutes earlier, no doubt thinking Kathrin was already asleep. The silence was nice.

And then there was only one thing left on the bed: the package of her father’s papers her mother had given her two Christmases earlier. Kathrin looked at it hesitantly, almost afraid it might reach out and bite her. *C’mon,* she prodded, *it’s not as if you’re going to sleep tonight anyway.*

She picked up the package and untied the string. It came away easily, and Kathrin unwrapped the packaging paper. She glanced at the papers again, and then started sifting through them. They were in chronological order. Kathrin hadn’t noticed that the first time she looked at them. She decided to start at the beginning.

By two o’clock she was three quarters of the way through. She’d read most of her father’s letters, and was touched by his eloquence. It obviously hadn’t been handed down to her. His articles were equally well written, but didn’t contain the same tenderness as the letters to her mother. She was surprised at that. She hadn’t expected them to strike her as tender. Every so often she would stumble upon one of the stories her mother had repeated to her as a child. And her mother had repeated them nearly word for word from the letters.

Kathrin flipped through the clippings and cut-outs quickly. Her father had won a couple of awards for his articles and each article was attached to its corresponding newspaper write up. As the night wore on, the pictures of her father developed into a character, and by the final letters she felt as if she could see him speaking the words in her head. It was strange. After twenty-nine years she finally felt as if she knew what her father looked like, acted like, and even sounded like.
Finally she reached the last letter. It was dated a few months before his death. Kathrin lay down on her bed, and read it slowly.

Ingrid.

August 15, 1970

I hope this letter finds you and our two mischievous angels happy and healthy. And that of course includes the third one on its way— and I am sure I will see his or her little face before too long. I loved the drawings Jenny sent, and the pictures of them brought tears to my eyes. How much I miss them. I can’t even convey in words.

Turkey is beautiful now, but very hot and dry. I’ve spent this last week in Istanbul and fallen in love with the entire city. The Bosphorus bridges the span between Europe and Asia with regal serenity, as if knowing it is the passageway between two separate universes— the past and the present.

The first day I made my way through the city in a taxi. Luckily my driver spoke very good English— or I fear I wouldn’t have made it past the front gates of the hotel. He dropped me off at the Covered Bazaar after the tour, and I wasn’t prepared for the size of it— even after what everyone had told me. 18 gates, 65 ‘streets’, and over 3000 small shops. The streets are areas where each trade finds a home— silver, gold, carpets etc. It truly is a cacophony of sound, brilliant colours and intricate designs. You would have loved it. This is where I purchased the silver chones for the girls: in the Is Bedesten (the core) from a wrinkled old couple who spoke as little English as I speak Turkish.

In the afternoon I walked through the streets and found the great mosques. I ended up at the Blue Mosque just after sunset and waited for the light and sound show to begin. It was fabulous. Music and flood lights lit up the sky. It reminded me of Canada Day— such a brilliance in the night, and I suddenly felt home-sick for my country, my wife, and my children. Every day I think of you and pray that you all have everything you desire.

The next few days I continued my tour. I went to Topkapi Palace and Galata Tower, which was a 120 m. high fire-sighting station. The view was incredible. Then on to the underground cisterns and the Hippodrome. I could almost feel the energy of the chariot races still lingering there. There is so much to see and do here that I can’t capture in the right words. When I get back we’ll go over the pictures and then you’ll understand the beauty.

From Istanbul I’m renting a car and traveling to Pamukkale to visit the springs. I am fortunate to have a fellow traveler to go with me. He’s a young Scotsman, but well beyond his years in maturity and wisdom. We met at the
while the door was open, and became fast friends. I must tell you the story in my own words, for you must hear it from me.

I entered the room, my heart and soul in full knowledge of the impending danger. I opened the door, and was greeted by a warm smile. It seemed as if the world had stopped for me to enter. I approached the man, and he smiled back, inviting me into his presence. We talked of nothing in particular, but of life, of the world, and of the mysteries of the human soul. I was welcomed, and I was accepted.

The American moved to the window, and watched the surrounding street. He turned to me, and said, "Do you know the feeling of being lost? Do you know the feeling of being alone in this world?"

I nodded, understanding what he meant. "I have felt that way before," I said. "It's a feeling that never goes away, no matter how hard you try to escape it."

He smiled, and said, "That's why we must hold on, and never let go of the hope that we can make a difference."

I nodded again, and we continued our conversation. It seemed as if time had stood still, and we were the only ones in the world.

He looked at me, and said, "Do you ever feel like you're lost, and that you'll never find your way back?"

I shook my head, and said, "No, I don't feel that way. I believe in the power of the human spirit, and I believe that we can overcome any obstacle.

He smiled, and said, "That's why we must always keep moving forward, and never give up."

I nodded, understanding what he meant. "I will always be here for you, no matter what," I said. "And I will always be here for you, no matter what."
you more and more for that. And I realize that in pursuing my own desires and wishes, I have never done the right thing by you. I have left our small family, because I was afraid of failing—afraid I would never be good enough for you and them. I thought that if I was always leaving you'd think of me as some kind of fairy-tale knight, and love me even more. Afraid of settling down and letting others get ahead.

But now I've decided to hear that lion I've been carrying around with me since the day we met. And I know that the right thing to do is to return to Canada and be with the people I love and care for. You may not believe me. I've said it a hundred times before to pacify you, but this time it's the real McCoy. I've decided that my next contract will be the last, and then I'll settle onto a boring, comfortable job in Toronto. And I'll love every minute of it. When I get back from Thailand you'll find me the husband you always wanted. Love to my little angels. Give my sweetheart Jenny a big kiss from Daddy, and give that tiger Kathrin a fierce hug.

Loving you always,
Patrick

Kathrin put the letter down, rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling.

89

She got three hours of sleep, but was up and alert at seven. She grabbed a quick shower and darted out the door before her mother got out of bed. At the subway station she parked her car and quickly jumped out. Carefully she scanned the parking lot and then the street. It was clear. She rushed for the subway entrance.

The subway was empty. It wouldn't get busy for another hour. She slipped into the single seat by the conductor booth and shut her eyes. She wasn't tired, and once her eyes shut her vision was replaced by thoughts racing under her eyelids. All sorts of ideas flashed through her mind, and she tried to keep control of every impression that flipped itself over in her brain. It was like being on a Ferris wheel that was going too fast. Kathrin felt nauseous and realized suddenly that she hadn't yet thrown up that morning. She tried to calm herself down and stop the queasiness. Her eyes flew open, and she looked around distractedly. Once the subway car came into focus she felt better. She repeated to herself she couldn't throw up on the subway. Could not. It worked. In a few minutes she felt a little better, but the thoughts in her head continued to bombard her.

By the time she got to the hospital she was a mess. She had worn her sunglasses and a toque borrowed from her mother. When she got off the Bay Street bus she scanned the street. There were only three cars parked up and down the road. Immediately she felt better. She had
calculated all the things that could possibly go wrong, and the list seemed endless. But the fact that Aaron wasn’t anywhere around made her feel better. She walked quickly down the street and stepped inside the hospital. Then she darted for the lobby phone and stood there for a few minutes, pretending to dial, to make sure no one had followed her. Only one other woman came in after her. Kathrin breathed a sigh of relief and headed for the waiting room. The receptionist took her name and told her to take a seat.

Kathrin sat so she could see anyone coming down the hallway. Aside from the receptionist and another patient, no one was around. She pulled her arms out of her coat, and then glanced down at her watch. She had half an hour. *Maybe they’ll take me in early.* She removed her toque, sunglasses and gloves and felt better. Even if Aaron showed up, she was in a public place. He couldn’t do anything to her.

She picked up a magazine and looked at it. It was a parenting guide. She put it down with haste. The next magazine was the same. In fact, every magazine on the table was a parenting publication. She coughed nervously. *Jesus, would one time be so out of line?* Finally she picked up the first magazine and flipped through the pages. There were pictures of perfect little babies everywhere, and ads for strollers, and walkers, and cribs, and clothing. Kathrin knew she shouldn’t be looking at the ads, given what she was doing, but she couldn’t help herself. It was like looking at an accident at the side of the road. A terrible urge to see the thing that would make you sick.

The sound of footsteps down the hallway caused her to glance up. She relaxed when she saw it was only a female patient. The woman gave her name at the desk and then strolled over to the blue plastic chairs. She took off her coat laboriously, and Kathrin noted the swell in her belly. She looked away quickly and down at her magazine. Then she shut the magazine and placed it on the table. She could handle half an hour. Half an hour was nothing.

By quarter to nine there were three fully bloated women in the waiting room, two other ‘non-determined’, and one husband. Kathrin kept glancing at the reception desk, waiting for the nurse to take her out of her misery. She couldn’t handle all the pregnant women, and wondered how the hospital could ever put her in a room with them. To top it all of she was dying of hunger, and getting really warm. She twiddled her thumbs nervously, and when she finally noticed, she began to pick at her nail polish. Every time she looked up she caught someone’s eye and tried not to look apprehensive. She practiced her theatre exercises and tried to slow her breathing down, and
isolate each part of her body. Nothing worked. Within seconds she’d lose her train of thought and have to start over again. That’s it, you’re definitely losing your mind.

She thought she was going to crack when the nurse finally called out her name. Kathrin rose unsteadily to her feet, and moved over to the reception desk. Dr. Ernstine was standing there scrutinizing Kathrin with a strange look in her eye. Kathrin tried to smile as Dr. Ernstine took her arm. “Kathrin, are you all right?”

Kathrin nodded. “I’m hungry. and it’s really hot in here.”

Dr. Ernstine nodded. “O.K. Come with me. and we’ll get you into something more comfortable.”

She led Kathrin through a set of double doors, and Kathrin walked forward slowly, her head spinning. The doors shut with a swoosh behind them.

Carol arrived at the hospital shortly after noon. She followed the directions Kathrin had given her, and arrived at the desk. The receptionist looked up. “Name?”

Carol smiled. “I’m here to pick someone up.” she said. looking around the waiting room to catch a glimpse of Kathrin.

“Oh. what’s their name?”

“Kathrin Connelly.”

The nurse smiled sadly. “You must be Carol.”

“Yes.”

“She left a message for you. The doctors got done with her pretty early, and she didn’t want to wait around. She left a message at your office. She’s already been picked up.”

Carol felt a flash of panic rise through her chest. “Do you know by whom?”

“Yes. her sister. I think her name was Jen.”

Carol put her hand over her heart. “Thank goodness,” she mumbled under her breath, and then to the receptionist. “thanks a lot.”

“No problem.”

She lay in Jen’s lap sobbing, while Jen ran her hand through Kathrin’s long curly hair.

“Shh.” she kept whispering. “Shh. It’s O. K. It’ll be O. K.”

Kathrin couldn’t respond. She felt awful. Not so much physically, but emotionally distraught. She just lay there and cried while Jen rocked back and forth.
Kathrin gasped for air. “Then…how…come I…feel…so awful?”
“Because it was a hard decision for you to make. You had doubts. We all have doubts sometimes. But you have to do what is best for you, and never worry about what other people tell you, or what the world expects from you.”
Kathrin hugged her chest tighter. “But I feel so guilty, and I wonder if it was the right decision.”
Jen continued smoothing her hair. “I wish you had told me sooner.”
“I couldn’t. Not with the miscarriage.”
“The miscarriage doesn’t change how much I care about you.”
“I know, but I thought you’d be mad. You couldn’t have your baby, and I didn’t want mine.” Kathrin sniffed loudly.
“It’s all right. Everything is going to be fine now. Of course I wouldn’t have been mad.”
“I was afraid you’d hate me for killing it.”
Jen looked down at her. “Kathrin. What is right for some people is not right for others. I have never put my beliefs on someone’s shoulders, and I hope that I never will. And Kathrin, I want to tell you something that I truly believe. God isn’t unforgiving. He understands that there are exceptions to every rule. And he knows that sometimes, even if things don’t happen the way he wants them to, they still happen for the best.”
Kathrin reached up and gripped Jen’s hand tightly. “Thank you, Jen.”
There was a tap at the door, and then Andria stepped into the room. “I got here as fast as I could,” she said crossing to the bed. “How is she?”
Kathrin moaned. “Awful.”
Jen patted Kathrin’s head. “She’s seen better days. But she’ll be fine.”
“Oh good,” Andria said, looking down at her sister. “Kathrin, you should have told us.”
“I know,” Kathrin mumbled, and started crying again.
Her sisters looked at each other empathetically. Then Andria touched Kathrin’s shoulder. Kathrin rolled over to face her sister, and offered her a swollen-faced smile. Andria stepped back startled. “What happened to your face?”
Kathrin laughed weakly. “Don’t worry. It’ll heal.”
There was a moment of silence, as Andria looked from one sister to the other. Finally she spoke. “Were you two in a private conversation? Don’t worry,” she said, stepping towards the door, “I can come back.”

Kathrin looked up at her, and then slowly smiled. She patted the bed. “No. Come sit with us.”

Andria approached the bed and sat down tentatively. Jen moved her legs for her sister, gently shifted Kathrin’s head, and then slowly pulled Andria’s head towards her until both younger sisters’ heads rested in her lap. Then Jen began humming, and smoothed each woman’s hair in time with the melody.
The courier envelope lay unopened on her desk. She picked it up and felt the keys slide across the cardboard. The small pull-tab tore easily under her grip and she ran her hand inside the envelope. The ticket, keys and forms were intact and she pulled the latter from the envelope. Placing her work socks on the desk she perused the forms. She read over each word in the contract and smiled at the rigidity of it all. Four pages of strict, mechanical font which amounted to one thing: she was going to London, England.

After re-reading the contract two more times she pulled her expensive Waterman from the velvet box in her desk drawer and tested the ink on a scrap of paper. Then she arched her hand over the contract and signed her name in large, precise strokes. Carefully she put down the pen and stared at her signature. God, it's so definite. So happening. But it can't happen until I do one last thing.

Kathrin got up and walked around her desk. She paused at the door of her office and scanned the room. She was going to miss her work-space: her name on the metal plate, Jamie, even Jane. She approached Richardson's secretary cautiously. "Is he in?"

The secretary nodded. "Just let me buzz him."

Kathrin waited patiently as the secretary called through to her boss. Kathrin looked at the woman, and tried to recall her name. Michelle, she finally remembered. It was funny. Richardson had had the same secretary for as long as Kathrin could remember, but she'd never seemed to exist in any other capacity. She never went to the office parties, or joined anyone for drinks after a contract closed. Kathrin found herself staring at Michelle, and felt a cringe spread through her body. In some weird way, I could have been her.

Michelle hung up the phone. "O.K. He'll see you now."

"Thanks Michelle."

The secretary seemed taken aback at first, then smiled. "No problem."

Kathrin stepped into the office. Richardson's back was to her and he was scribbling frantically on her dry erase board. After a moment her stepped back. He turned to Kathrin, still holding a marker in his hand. "You know, if you decide to change your mind, I've got a great contract for you."

Kathrin laughed. "No way. You make it sound appealing, but I know your definition of great: hard work, long hours, and a sever pain in the back."

"I'm just offering the chance," he replied, "what's up?"

"We need to talk."

He groaned and capped the marker. "Last time we talked you told me that you were leaving. Still, I suppose it can't get any worse. Sit down."
He groaned and capped the marker. "Last time we talked you told me that you were leaving. Still, I suppose it can't get any worse. Sit down."

Kathrin sat. She waited until Richardson was seated as well, then cleared her throat. "I want to know when you want me to clean out my office."

Richardson smiled. "Don't. It can stay empty for a couple of months." He looked up at Kathrin suddenly, then his face sunk. "You're not asking me, are you?"

Kathrin's mouth puckered. "No."

Richardson set the marker down on the desk. "What are you saying?"

She kept her hands clenched in her lap. "I can't promise you that when I come back I'll be here."

He frowned. "What are you going to do?"

"It depends. If things go well maybe I'll try to do some other contracts here. If it's only a one-shot deal, I think I'd rather work from home. As it is now, I'm barely in the office anyway. You're only wasting space."

"I don't think of it like that," he countered.

"I'll still be on staff, and come in whenever you needed me."

He leaned back in his chair. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I honestly didn't know."

He nodded. "Kathrin, level with me. What is going on in that head of yours?"

Her smile was fleeting. "Wow," she responded, "sometimes I don't even know. You know how crazy this past year's been; I think I'm re-evaluating everything. Let me ask you a question: do you ever get tired of dealing with clients and contracts, and always coming up with new ideas that no one's ever thought of before?"

"Sure," he said, "but that's part of the appeal."

She smiled. "I know, but sometimes it seems as if my life is made up of little, tiny pieces that never meet in the middle. I can't go home at night with something tangible in my hands and say 'look, I did this, it's all mine'."

She took a breath. "My whole life," she continued, "has always been like that. Little pieces on the fringe that blend into nothing in the middle. Like the centre is this worn patch of rug and everything bleeds into it, but doesn't fill it. And that's where I should be, but I'm not. I've never been. I don't expect you to understand, but I'm going to tell you anyway, because no matter what I've said and done, I value your opinion. This is probably the only time I'd ever admit it to
you.

Ever since I was a little girl I thought that the only thing that mattered was me. I’ve done things – horrible things that have hurt my family and my friends. But I didn’t care. And this job is the only thing I’ve ever been good at. I mean really good at. You know why? Because it doesn’t involve people or emotions. It involves manipulating space and colour and they don’t have feelings. They don’t care how you treat them. I’m good at this because it’s a separate entity. It’s been the centre of the picture that doesn’t join. It won’t ever join. To fix the picture I thought I could just stretch that image – that my work would bridge over. I didn’t realize that you can’t join something from the inside out. That’s why I need to do this. I have to make my work part of me so everything holds everything else together. Do you know what I mean?”

He nodded slowly. “Sometimes I feel like that. And then it’s when I get home that my family reminds me that I do have something. That’s why I thought. and don’t get mad. that’s why I thought Aaron would be good for you…”

She interrupted. “And I did too. At least at first. Then I slowly realized that he fragmented what I already had. Each piece a little more. Jim, if I had stayed with him, there wouldn’t even be a rug. There would just be bare thread and a few patches. I don’t want to sound melodramatic, but you know what they say about it taking some terrible misfortune to make you realize how wrong you’ve been? Part of me feels like that. Of course that part is hidden under a mountain of anger and regret so big that I’ll never get completely over it. But every once in a while I see it.”

He ran his hand over his balding scalp. “Just don’t expect too much.”

She fought the urge to laugh knowing how caustic it would sound. “Don’t worry. I won’t.”

He reached his hand across the desk. “I’ll be sorry to see you go.”

She took his hand and grasped it firmly. “Part of me feels the same way.”

They shook hands then Kathrin got to her feet. “Oh by the way, did you invite Michelle to my going-away party?”

He looked at her trying to appear surprised. “Party?” he asked incredulously.

“I’d like her to come.” Kathrin grinned.

He smiled back. “Maybe I’m really going to be glad to see you go.”

She stepped towards the door.

“Hey, Kathrin,” he called out, and she turned back. “Go get ‘em tiger!”
contents and her painting. It wouldn’t even be heavy.

She and Jamie went out for lunch on Friday. She hadn’t seen much of him in the previous weeks: either he was working on a different project or he was spending time with his new girlfriend.

“Is she coming tonight?” Kathrin asked over lunch.

Jamie frowned. “Tonight?”

“To the party. C’mon Jamie, I’m not stupid.”

“Yes,” he grudgingly admitted, “she’ll be there.”

Kathrin clapped her hands together. “Finally, I weaseled it out of someone!”

He shot her a look of pure malice. “If anyone asks, I didn’t tell you.”

“So,” she prodded, “what’s she like?”

“She’s great,” he beamed, “but we’re not taking it slow.”

Kathrin smiled. “How come?”

“It’s better this way. Plus the fact, if we moved in her parents would kill her. Catholic,” he explained, and Kathrin dissolved into laughter, “you know, if you asked me a month ago, I would have said I’d sworn off women for good. I wasn’t even looking, but I’m glad I found her. It’s amazing how resilient the heart is – how you can find love when you thought none would ever grown again.”

Kathrin groaned melodramatically. “No, seriously.” he continued, “let me share my sappiness with you. It’s like a poem I read. Something about winter and how when the ground freezes the heart had no choice but to hibernate. Until spring arrives and the ground and the heart begin to thaw. That’s how I feel.”

Kathrin laughed. “You didn’t read that!”

He smiled sheepishly. “O.K. Rachel told me, but it’s still true.”

“Rachel huh? She sounds pretty smart to me.”

“Oh yeah, she is. She’s brilliant….”

And the rest of the conversation revolved around Rachel.

When they got back to the office Kathrin went through her hard drive deleting files, saving a few on her diskette. It felt neat – almost as if she was erasing her past and only keeping the good things. If only, she mused and smiled. You do it every day. Just like the bruise: things were fading from her mind. She hadn’t had that awful dream for over a week. She still thought of Aaron every day, but no longer looked over her shoulder everywhere she went. She, Andria, Jen and her mother had planned their visits to England and each morning she woke up at peace ad a little more excited than when she went to bed. So how come, she wondered, this is so sad?
All over her desk, items lay waiting to be put in her file box. She hesitated, feeling strangely full of remorse, and each possession appeared too comfortable to move. Kathrin took a deep breath and then slowly started depositing her things into the box. After a few minutes it got easier, and finally, she had placed everything in the box. Jamie would move in on Monday. She quickly jotted down an inspirational note and deposited it in the top drawer, along with her elegant Waterman and her Velcro balls and board. Then she walked around the desk and shut the blinds. Immediately the room got darker. She stepped over to the painting and gently eased it off the wall. Maybe, she mused, I’ll take it with me to England. She carried it to her box and slipped it in. It fit across, but was at least a foot taller than the side. Still, she could carry the box comfortably.

She sat down and lifted her feet onto the desk. Dr. Ernst had told her to elevate her feet as often as she could if she felt weak, but since the morning after the hospital visit she’d never felt better. The clock above her desk ticked on while she shut her eyes. Finally she pulled herself up from the chair. It was nearly four o’clock. If she wanted to miss the afternoon subway traffic, she should get a move on.

She picked up the box and deposited it outside her office door. One last glance around the office confirmed her departure and she shut off the lights, then closed the door. Once it was shut she carefully extracted her name-plate from the door and slipped it into the box. Say goodbye Kathrin.

“Goodbye Kathrin,” one of the passing designers saluted. “good luck.”

“Thanks,” she responded, “see you around.”

She said a few goodbyes, then headed for the reception area. No need to say goodbye to everyone – she’d see most of them later that night. She approached the desk and rested her box on the counter. “Hey Jane,” she smiled, “take all my messages.”

Jane laughed. “I can’t guarantee they’ll still be here when you get back.”

“That’s O.K. See you tonight?”

Jane squirmed, looked around, then smiled. “See you later.”

“Bye,” Kathrin stepped through the doorway and pressed the elevator button.

She put down the box after she’d stepped into the elevator and pressed the lobby button. The lift stopped at several floors to let other people on. They all had the same intention of getting on the road early. Finally the elevator stopped at the main level and Kathrin got off. She carried the box to the front door and put it down so she could do up her coat. A stream of people passed her and she looked outside. It was a beautiful day. No snow, no wind. Only consistent sunshine and it agreed with her mood. She slipped on her gloves and then moved with the box to the
reverberating door. The sun hit her full on when she stepped outside and headed for the subway.

It wasn’t until she had gone ten feet that she saw Aaron leaning against the side of the building a few metres ahead of her. It appeared as if he hadn’t seen her, and she quickly spun around and headed the other way. She moved stiffly, praying he hadn’t noticed her. She was tempted to turn back, but couldn’t risk detection.

It didn’t matter. She could feel his body closing the space between them until he was beside her. She pretended to ignore his presence as he kept pace with her furious stride.

“Kathrin,” he pleaded, “Kath.”

She kept walking. Up ahead she could see the King Street subway sign and viewed it as a milestone. *Just get there. If you can get there you’ll be fine.*

“Please,” Aaron begged, “Just one minute. I need to talk to you.”

She sped up. It was only another fifty feet. Not even. Her breath was coming in short searing gasps in response to the weight of the box, the pace and her frustration. The sun and her own body heat only added to the sudden sense of claustrophobia that was clamping down on her heart.

Suddenly Aaron jumped in front of her, waving a bouquet of flowers in her face. She altered her course and tried to step around him. He anticipated her move and stepped over, bringing her to a dead-stop. “Please,” he said.

She held the box between them. “Get out of my way.”

He refused. “Just one minute.”

She looked at him determinedly. “One second, then I scream bloody murder.”

He seemed shocked by her response. “I’m sorry,” he said clearly.

Kathrin stared at him, her face taking on a look of absolute disgust. “That’s all you have to say to me?” she demanded.

He looked at her sheepishly. “My therapist told me to start small.”

Kathrin fought the urge to laugh wretchedly. She looked into his eyes and realized that he was completely serious. “Good,” she responded slowly, “I’m glad. Have a nice life.”

She stepped around him and continued walking. Within seconds he was by her side again. “That’s all you’re going to say?”

She kept her eyes on the subway sign and walked forward. “What do you want me to say? That it make everything all better?”

“Well,” he said, dodging oncoming pedestrians, “something more than you’re glad.”

She approached the light. It was red and oncoming traffic fierce. Only twenty feet away. She stopped, gazing fiercely at the pedestrian crossing sign, waiting for the moment it changed.
Aaron stepped in front of her again. “Kathrin, we had something.”

She stared at him in awe. “What we had,” she snapped, keeping her voice low, “was something out of the Twilight Zone. And what makes you think you can march up to me and tell me that you’re cured after one, maybe two sessions with a therapist? That hasn’t changed you. You’re a leopard Aaron, now leave me alone.”

The light changed and Kathrin crossed the street, stepping quickly through a mob of people. She reached the other side of the street and walked briskly towards King. At the corner she turned left and darted for the steps. It wasn’t until she reached the bottom that Aaron caught up with her.

“Kathrin,” he said, his voice suddenly louder and more urgent in the tunnel, “just give me a second.”

Kathrin adjusted the box so she could manage it with one arm, and tried to find her subway token in the pocket of her winter coat. “I have nothing more to say to you. I hope you get better. Not for me - for you.”

She deposited the token in the fare-box and pushed her hip into the metal turnstile, hearing the metallic clank of the counter turning. Then she pushed her way through the crowd and headed down the staircase, paying no attention to the slippery steps. She hoped desperately that Aaron had given up and let her slip through the turnstile without following her. At the bottom of the stairs she swerved around a mob of people getting off the subway and darted for the last car, as the subway doors eased shut in front of her. “Dammit!” she muttered as the subway lurched into motion.

She turned around and could make out Aaron’s legs stepping down the stairs. The ceiling cut him off at the waist. She moved quickly towards the other end of the platform.

“Kathrin,” he called loudly, and she noticed a few other people glance towards his voice, “hold on.”

More people were stepping onto the platform on both sides of the subway. Just ignore him, she ordered. She refused to turn around, and brought herself to a halt at the designated waiting area. It was where most people seemed to stand, and a crowd was exactly what she needed. She put her box down and stood against the wall. He stopped beside her and she could hear heavy breaths coming from his mouth. “You’re not giving me a chance.”

She looked at him with incredulity. “What can’t you just leave me alone? I don’t want you in my life. Not ever. Can’t you just accept that?”

“No,” he responded furiously, “I can’t.”

She looked around. People on both sides of the tracks were looking at them with
curiosity. "Go away," she said with more force, "just leave me alone."

He stared at her. "You promised me," he spoke clearly, "you wouldn't leave me. You swore!"

She swallowed and felt an embarrassed tension rise in her chest. "And what did you do?" she retorted.

"Don't you want to know why?"

Kathrin shook her head fiercely. "Don't pin this one on your father, Aaron. I heard enough about that from Elaine. People affect you, but they don't rule your fucking life. You want someone to blame— blame yourself. I do every day."

"I only did it for you!"

"For me? FOR ME?" she knew her voice was getting louder and shriller, but didn't care what anyone heard. "You lied to me! You betrayed me and you physically hurt me, and now you have the gall to say it was for me?"

"I wanted us to be happy."

She could no longer see anyone but Aaron in front of her. "If you want to do something for me, just go away! I have nothing to say to you, and I have nothing that belongs to you anymore!"

He took a step towards her, and she picked up the box, knowing it was the only thing she could put between them. But Aaron stopped moving suddenly, and his body receded once again from hers. A huge frown spread across his face, and Kathrin looked at him keenly, suddenly realizing the cause of the change in his behaviour. "What?" she asked, growing bolder. "Did you need a therapist to tell you not to touch me?"

She had hit a raw nerve and she knew it. Immediately she regretted her words and glanced towards the tunnel. There was no train in sight. All around, people were staring at them, transfixed by the scene. "Go away!" she ordered fiercely.

Aaron glowered at her. "I did everything for you, and this is how you repay me?"

She swallowed as he took a menacing step forward. "Can somebody help me?" she called down the platform.

Her words took on a strange surreal echo, but no one moved. Aaron looked at her with disgust. "This doesn't involve anyone else!" he growled.

"Please," she called frantically, "can someone get a ticket agent? This man is scaring me!"

She didn't get a chance to see if anyone heeded her cries. She stood, holding the box and the next thing she knew, Aaron had reached out to grab her, and the box was lifted from her arms.
Everything seemed to hang in the air for a moment before the box plummeted for the ground.
She reached out to grope for the box, and caught one side, upturning the cardboard and sending
pens and paper clips hurtling through the air. Underneath the sound of the struggle she could hear
her anguished cry above the hum of an oncoming train on the other side of the tracks.

The sound of glass smashing brought her attention to the floor of the platform. Pieces of
shattered glass and frame scattered across the floor and she stared in horror as the painting fell
face down in front of her. There was a moment of stillness as the subway came to a halt, then
Kathrin scrambled over to the box. All around, pens and paper clips lay strewn on the platform
tiles. She tried to gather them as quickly as possible and shove them back in the box. Aaron
crouched down beside her.

"GET AWAY!" she screamed. "GET AWAY FROM ME FOR ONCE AND FOR ALL!
YOU'VE DESTROYED EVERYTHING I'VE EVER LOVED. NOW GET THE FUCK AWAY
FROM ME!"

He was about to touch her when four strong arms hoisted him up. Kathrin looked up
through a stream of tears to see two fare collectors restraining Aaron, as he struggled furiously to
free himself. "Kathrin, please," he pleaded passionately, "tell them it's all right. I wasn't trying
to hurt you."

She gathered the painting in her arms and held it in her hands. A gust of wind rustled
through the tunnel and she could vaguely hear the sound of an approaching subway. "Never," she
responded quietly, "Don't ever come near me again."

She glanced from one collector to the other. Finally one spoke. "Don't worry about the
mess miss. We'll send someone down to clean it up. Do you want to press charges?"

"No. Just get him away from me."

They began to haul Aaron off, as he kicked and battled to break free. "Kathrin, please,"
he sobbed, as the subway pulled in, "I need you."

Kathrin refused to look at him. She dropped the painting into her box, and then slowly
bent to pick it up. The subway doors opened and she waited until the passengers got off. Then
she took a step towards the door, and heard a howl rise up through the station. "KATHRIN, I
LOVE YOU..."

She took a deep breath, to still the sudden nausea sweeping her body and then stepped
into the car. She leaned back against the door-frame, and the car doors slammed shut behind her.
Then she made her way to an empty seat and sat down, placing the box and its shattered contents
beside her. Slowly, the subway lurched forward, and Kathrin stared out the window. The metal
pillars drifted by her lazily, and then gradually moved faster until the car was flung into darkness.
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Kathrin wiped her face with the backs of her hands, and then gently let her hands fall onto her stomach and gently cradled the small, hot mound of belly which seemed to hold a faster and stronger heartbeat under her own pulse. And then she let the microscope take over.
Vita Autoris

Julie Stoyka was born in Toronto on August 30, 1973. She received her combined English and Theatre B.A. Hons. degree from the University of Western Ontario in 1996.