

AS YOU WERE

Kelli Joe Baeli

As You Were

1

BLUE SPRUCE SHOULDERED CLUMPS OF UNSULLIED SNOW along the icy driveway leading to the secluded brick and cedar house atop Castle Mountain.

The dream faded, as the dreamer began the process of lifting heavy lids. Eyes focusing, she saw the blond woman standing over her in an apron blotted with myriad colors, liberated from the twisted tubes onto her palette. She reached out with the camel hair brush and dotted her lover's nose with Cadmium red.

"I had this weird dream." Tru wiped at the paint on her nose.

"You forgot to tell me good morning." Brittany handed her lover a rag as colorful as her apron.

"Good morning, Baby..." She wiped the paint off.

"A dream woke me up early, too."

Handing her back the rag, she asked, "What was it about?"

"It was unpleasant... tell me yours."

"...I was headlining Lilith Fair and you were working on this gigantic back drop of a rose."

"A rose, huh? How original of me."

"No, well... it looked like a rose on first glance, but really, it was a vulva with a giant pink—"

“Oh, Lord.”

“Seriously, every time a performer would take the stage, the giant vulva would light up and pulsate. The crowd was really into it, but it was subliminal, ya know? And the singers would keep turning away from the audience to see the display. What do you think that means?”

“I think it means you mixed your liquors too much last night.”

“Ya think?” Tru Morgan pushed her fingers through sleep-afflicted short black hair and climbed out of bed, heading for the bathroom. “Gotta tee-tee.”

“Don’t stay in there too long,” Brittany called. “I have to tee-tee, too.” A minute later, Tru heard Brittany at the door, speaking as if into a walkie-talkie. “Tee-Tee One, this is Tee-Tee Two. What’s your ETD?”

Tru laughed, flushed the toilet, and opened the door, wrapping her arms around Brittany with a sleepy giggle. “Weirdo.”

Brittany slipped past her into the bathroom.

They led a bucolic life; preferred by Brittany, and necessary for Tru. Touring and being in the public eye made her want solitude even more. Tru had recorded two independent CD’s with the help of her manager, Macy, and an attentive gay audience. A contradictory creature, she loved being on stage, with a crowd of people happily attentive, applauding, and singing along to her music, yet she also craved the stillness the buffering snow provided on Castle Mountain.

Brittany enjoyed taking pictures of errant wildlife on their land, and had managed to eke out a good living from the sale of them to nature magazines, galleries and sometimes wealthy debutantes who wanted to pretend they were the outdoorsy type. She also worked part time at a photography studio and as a freelance photographer for regional newspapers.

When Tru was not performing or touring, their days were filled with artistic endeavor, horseback rides in the wooded hills behind the house, and evenings of gourmet coffee and movies. It was enough.

“Hey, Macy.” Tru approached the table and leaned over to hug her manager.

“Hey, Honey.” She fingered a thick strand of brown hair behind one ear, as she studied the calendar in front of her again. “Have a seat.”

They were in the corner of the club, farthest away from the blaring reverberation of the stage speakers. The music would only get louder as late afternoon turned to evening.

Tru smiled at Macy’s brother, sitting across from her. “I didn’t expect to see you, Travis.” Tru took a seat near Macy and glanced at the calendar.

“I’ve been on vacation, too.” He admired how her 501’s hugged the curves, wishing the black T-shirt was something lacey. But he knew Tru wasn’t the lacey type. And he wished her black hair was longer like Brittany’s, instead of shoulder-length.

“I heard. Did you learn your lesson?”

“The charges were bogus. I was framed.”

“Right. They had to cut loose the pot-heads so they would have room for the real criminals.”

“You joke, but that’s for real.” He took a drink of beer and swished it in his mouth, as if rinsing something out. “I certainly want them to have room for the Highwayman.”

“Shit, Travis, they’re not going to catch him. He’s too slick,” Macy responded, without looking up.

Tru’s eyes slid back and forth between them. “The Highwayman?”

Travis squeaked, “Don’t you watch the news anymore, girl?”

“Well, not local news. I usually watch CNN.”

“Well it’s going to end up on CNN, I’m sure.” Macy put a hand on her arm. “There’s this guy who follows women on the highway, and then he lures them out of their cars and chases them down and kills them.”

“God.”

“They’ve dubbed him the Highwayman.”

“Why does he chase them?”

“The psychologists they interviewed about it believe he gets off on it.” Travis offered. “Like he thinks he’s some kind of predator.”

Tru shook her head. “Can we talk about something else?”

Travis licked his lips and grinned. “My sister tells me you’re about to stage a comeback.”

She wiped at an errant ring of moisture atop the laminated table, wiping it on the thigh of her jeans. “Something like that. Though comebacks indicate previous stardom. I never got that far.”

“Well, you were a star to all the lesbians. Let me congratulate you with a margarita?”

“Sure.” Mildly suspicious of the gesture, Tru watched him get up and go to the bar. Travis wasn’t typically generous with his money unless he wanted something.

Macy, however, could be counted on for pragmatism. “Okay, girl. After we get the band up to speed on the new sets, you need to gig here, and then I’m already working on a few out of town gigs.” She picked up her electronic cigarette from the table, took a long draw of banana flavored vapor, and thumbed through her Day-Timer. “Christmas is just around the corner, and I know you’ll want some time at home. But right after that, you’ll do a show here.”

Tru pulled out her own eCig, and drew on it, happy that she had added a side-business in distribution for this new technology that not only helped people quit tobacco, but provided a safe form of oral fixation. That was her addiction now. To eCigs. But she felt good about it, or she wouldn't have taken on a distributorship, and started selling to everyone she knew, and many she didn't. Selling in person and from a website, she had customers in almost every state. It was a bittersweet endeavor, since she had the electronic cigarette idea many years ago, but didn't have the money for a patent and a prototype. So some guy in China thought of it as well, a few years ago, and now he was the one getting rich instead of her. She tried to tell herself it just wasn't her path and that the music was what she was supposed to be doing.

Tru watched the patrons step up and down the stairs of the mezzanine entrance to the show-bar, *Lost & Found*. Their table, no bigger than a garbage can lid, served its purpose by giving them a place to put drinks and elbows. "Did you talk to Nathan?"

"Yeah, he's checking his calendar and he'll let me know. He was all about it."

"I was afraid I was old news already."

"It's your own fault. You've been obsessing on Brittany lately."

"We needed a break."

"Well, I hope you got that out of your system for a while. We need to get serious. The momentum you built is going to be in the toilet."

Two years earlier, Macy Palmer had approached Tru after a coffeehouse gig, handing her a business card for Macy Management, her newly begun musical artist management company, and snared Tru as her first client. Tru spent a few hours talking to the woman over drinks, and decided she liked her. She gave it a trial run to see what evolved.

Macy proved effective as a booking agent and personal manager. Tru found herself with gigs every week, as they began to make important connections

in the music community.

Now, Macy added items to a list in her To Be Done in December section, and sipped her White Russian, sucked her eCig. “I was serious about focusing more on getting you into the mainstream. We can’t continue to depend on the gay audience. You need to start gigging in the mainstream venues. I’m working on a nation-wide schedule.”

Travis returned with the margarita, and saw Tru make a face. “Oh, Brit’s gonna love that.”

He watched Tru take a long, swift drink. “Trouble in paradise?” he asked.

She knew that ‘paradise’ was something that only happened in the first few months of a relationship—before reality kicked in. But they had adjusted to reality just fine. “Not really. I think Brit isn’t too keen on the idea of me being on the road again.”

Travis sang, “*On the road again, just can’t wait to get on the road again...*”

“Don’t quit your day job, Travis,” Macy snorted.

He held his glass up like a trophy, and made a mock speech. “I’d like to thank the Academy, and my dear sister, Macy, for her encouragement and support...”

“Reality check, Travis.”

“I’m firmly entrenched, Sis, don’t worry.”

She didn’t seem convinced. “Anyway...Tru, if you could drop in on Nathan for a few minutes, I’m sure that would go a long way.”

“I’ll do that before I leave.”

They spent the next half-hour discussing details, to include the excitement from the band that they would no longer play exclusively in gay venues. She would be offering them full-time positions as Tru’s backup band. She closed the calendar and stuck it in her attaché case. “I gotta go. I’ll call you

later.” She downed the rest of her drink and squeezed Tru’s shoulder on the way out.

“Bye, Sis,” Travis called.

She tossed a bit of exasperated sisterly acknowledgement over her shoulder and waved.

Travis turned his attention back to Tru. “Wanna talk about it?” He peeled at the corner of the label on his beer and waited, knowing he would have to be careful not to say too much.

“You wouldn’t understand,” she said simply, licking salt from the rim of her glass and chasing it with a swallow.

“I might. Is it something beyond repair?” Travis unfastened the top button of his shirt and smoothed the back of his hair.

“Probably not. Only your average petty jealousy.”

“She’s jealous, or you’re jealous?”

“Both of us, I guess.” Tru pulled her eCig from her pocket again, took a pull on the mouthpiece and apple-flavored vapor surrounded her head, as she took another long drink, and did not stop Travis when he motioned to the waitress for another margarita. “She’s jealous of my fans, and I’m jealous of hers.”

Travis chuckled. “I know about your fans, but who are hers?”

“Any red-blooded American male who sees her, it seems.”

“Ah,” he said knowingly, taking a small sip of his drink.

The tequila loosened her tongue. “Every time a guy walks past her, his eyes get bigger and he has to do a double take. I keep expecting some guy to throw his jacket down over the puddles in front of her.”

“Maybe you ought to be flattered, I mean she is with you.”

She nodded. “I am flattered, but it gets old. I get this odd sort of pleasure when she wakes up with a blemish on her face.”

“It’s perfectly natural for a beautiful woman to give a man a boner.”

She peered up at him curiously. “Do all men think with their dicks?”

Travis shifted in his seat and chuckled. “I don’t think ...I’m qualified to speak for all men. But I can understand why they respond that way to her.”

The lime-green liquid among the ice cubes in her glass reminded her of antifreeze. But that thought was merely mental subterfuge. “I know you’re one of them, Travis.”

He cleared his throat and repositioned his chair. “Well, I don’t know if I ‘think with my dick,’ as you so colorfully put it, but I’d be a liar if I denied that Brittany was drop-dead gorgeous.” When Tru shot a few visual daggers at him, he raised his hands innocently. “But I know she belongs to you.”

“If you knew her very well, you’d know that she belongs to no one. That’s what attracted me to her in the first place—her aloofness.” Tru finished the margarita in time to begin the new one the waitress brought.

“But not that she’s hot?”

She agitated the drink with her straw. “Well, sure. Okay. I’m human, too.” Tru could get on stage and perform to the adulation of a crowd, but when it came to Brit, she found herself wary of the ogling when they were in public. Who would be the next fool to drool? When would there be another incoming testosterone missile, with a lusty smile and a rehearsed opening line? Most of the time, the idiots didn’t even acknowledge Tru’s presence. In fairness, Tru had to admit that Brittany was altogether gracious toward her would-be suitors, adroitly turning them down in such a way that they walked away feeling more blessed by an audience with her, than saddled with a rejection. Being mad at Brit seemed a difficult task, ultimately. Even though the repeated amorous-deflection situations were very much like sandpaper in Tru’s brain.

The room had grown darker with sunset, and the dim candlelight of the corner mezzanine would be calming if not for the dance music filling the room. Tru became rudely aware that she did not want chaos, but calm.

Travis leaned back, pulling an extra eCigar from his pocket, having fallen prey to Tru's sales pitch long ago, and shelling out over a hundred dollars for two eCigar versions of the alternative smoking device. His was regular tobacco-flavored, as he couldn't get used to the unconventional flavors available and chose to stick with a taste he knew.

Tru mused about her lover, puffed her apple eCig, and worked toward the bottom of her fresh drink. "How come you didn't order another drink for yourself, Travis?"

Travis expelled a lungful of vapor. "I have to drive home."

"A Highway Hero. Commendable. We need a few more of those." Tru studied the blond young woman in the corner, wearing cowboy boots and jeans, a leather vest buttoned tightly over her otherwise bare torso. Tru thought the woman looked like a model for western wear in one of those magazines that appear in the mailbox, compliments of the direct-marketing industry. "Travis, why do you come in here so much? I mean, it's a gay bar. You realize you're barking up the wrong tree, right?"

"I come here because I like the dance floor." Travis watched the young woman in boots stride past their table and select a cue stick for a game of pool with another young woman.

"That's what they all say." She blew vapor at him. "I think it's more like an irresistible urge to pursue what you can never have."

"Who says I can't have it?" He grinned, his attention darted toward another garbage-lid table not far away, his blue eyes flickering over a tall blond woman sharing an animated conversation with her table-mates. Tru noticed that the young woman who had captured his unwavering interest favored Brittany. But not as pretty. Tru thought of Brit, pictured her sitting with her feet folded under her on the sofa in front of the fireplace, waiting for Tru to come home, or perhaps enjoying a good book, and her time alone.

A half hour later, Travis paid the cocktail waitress and tipped, after Tru waved away another drink and announced that she had to go.

“You’re in no condition to drive,” Travis reminded her.

“I din’ inten’ to...” She wobbled as she stood next to the table, holding the edge of it for balance. “I can’t believe this... I mus’ be more tired than I thought...”

Travis stood. Steadying her with a hand at her elbow. “You can’t drive like this, Tru. Let me give you a lift over to a hotel. The New West Inn has really good prices...”

She stared into space drunkenly. “No. S’okay... Brit expects me home...”

“Oh don’t worry. I’ll give her a call and let her know. You have to sleep this off. You don’t want her to see you like this.” More importantly, he wanted to get her out of there before one of her fans or one of the staff noticed her condition.

“No...not like thus...” She was humored by her mistake. “Thus...” she laughed. “This. Whatever.”

“Okay, come on. I’ll drop you at the hotel on my way out of town.”

“What the hell,” she agreed, following him, maneuvering the stairs leading outside the bar with apparent difficulty, and sliding into the passenger side of Travis’ black Chevy truck.

On 28th Street, across from the University, Travis came out of the New West Inn office with a key attached to an ugly gold piece of plastic. In the passenger seat, Tru had fallen asleep. He chuckled, driving around to the room, and helping her inside. Tru staggered to the bed and flopped down, soon fast asleep again. Travis tried to revive her for long moments, then leaned on the dresser and took a few puffs of his cigar for a few moments as he studied her there. “Margaritaville...” he said with a grin. Moving toward her, he leaned down, shook her firmly. “Tru?” She did not respond, her face

relaxed into the numb smoothness of an inanimate object; his grin grew into a smile.

Slowly, he pulled at the top of her 501's and the first button popped free.

2

A SWATH OF MORNING SUNSHINE FELL ACROSS TRU'S EYES, and she came awake, aware of the sharp pounding in her head, and the television which sat silent atop the TV stand. She vaguely remembered her decision to get a motel the night before, and wasn't sure whether she had been too drunk to remember to call Brittany and let her know. She didn't generally indulge in over-drinking, and wondered what had encouraged her to do so the night before. She pressed both hands against her head, wishing for ibuprofen.

Tru blinked her eyes into painful focus and saw her reflection in the mirror over the dresser. Her appearance told her more than she wanted to know about how much she had had to drink the night before. And she was shirtless, braless. Also in the reflection, a lump under the blanket next to her, and she turned quickly to find the lump was a leg, and that the leg belonged to Travis. He was naked, too. Tru jerked the sheet up under her arms and stared at him, horrified. "Travis?"

He stirred, his eyes fluttered open, and he smiled warmly. "Morning, Sugar." He ran his hand down her arm.

Tru jerked away, grabbing the sheet and drawing it around her as she got up. "What the hell are you doing here?" she rasped, swallowing the cotton that seemed to be growing abundantly on her tongue.

He pushed himself up into a sitting position, his face filled with a boyish grin. "Enjoying the morning after, Sugar—"

Tru coughed involuntarily and pressed a palm to her head. "Travis, we didn't—I mean, I don't—please tell me we—I don't remember what

happened last night—”

He lifted one eyebrow in a smirk. “I won’t ever forget it. I never suspected you of being such an animal in bed. You even—”

“Holy Christ! What have I done?!” Tru searched for and found her clothing heaped upon the floor by the bed, and began to dress beneath the sheet.

“Hey, why so uptight?”

“Why so uptight?” she squeaked. “Are you out of your mind? Do you have any idea what sort of mess this is? Oh, my God...she’ll kill me, I am dead meat. She’ll never understand this, I don’t understand this—” Tru dropped the sheet and began to button her shirt. “Travis, you have to swear you’ll never breathe a word of this. I was drunk. I didn’t know what I was doing —” she babbled.

“You most assuredly did know what you were doing. I can’t remember the last time I stayed that har—”

“Travis!” she shouted, groaning and holding her head, then more softly. “Spare me the sordid details.”

“Don’t worry, Tru. Your secret is safe with me. I wish you could stay a little longer—” He reached toward her and she lurched away, grabbing her socks and shoes and making a quick visual sweep of the room, before she headed for the door, hopping in place as she shoved the sneakers onto her bare feet.

“Where’s my Cherokee?” she asked, her hand on the doorknob. *And where’s my sense?*

Travis folded his arms. “Still at the club.”

Tru dug in her pockets and came up with twenty-five dollars, lifting her eyes to him, quizzically.

“I paid for the room, Sugar,” he admitted.

She slammed the door behind her, and hurried to the front office to call a cab.

Travis reclined, his fingers locked behind his head, admiring his reflection in the mirror. He flexed his pectorals and began to sing an old Carole King tune, *"It's too late, Baby, now it's too late..."* It had been remarkably easy. Remarkably. He checked his image in the mirror again, rubbing his chest with both hands, absently, and he began to whistle.

3

TRU SPENT THE ENTIRE TRIP BACK CONCOCTING THE STORY she would tell Brittany. On the 3rd, she had run over some debris on the road, and had blown a tire. Her call to Triple A Roadside Assistance had saved her. She had stuffed the receipt in her glove box, and somehow never thought to mention it when things got busy. Now, she was happy for it, because all she had to do was change the number three on the receipt into a number eight, which was today's date, and she had proof the incident happened today. Then she had to think about her excuse for not calling. She decided she needed a dead phone, so she turned the battery upside down.

She pulled over just before her driveway and grabbed the jack from the trunk, placing it in the floorboard in the back of the Cherokee. Then she drove up to the garage, used the remote to lift the door, drove in, and got out quickly to retrieve the jack and place it on the workbench.

Brittany opened the garage door at that moment, as Tru turned to get her guitar out of the back.

"Tru! Where the hell have you been?" Brittany said she had been up all night. She had called the bar. She had called Macy. She had called the hospitals.

Tru pleaded for forgiveness, and quickly told her the contrived story.

"I had a flat on the way home and no jack."

“Why didn’t you have a jack?”

“I used it in the garage to push apart those boards from the barn roof, when I was patching that hole, remember?”

“No... but...” Brittany’s eyes scanned the garage and fell on the jack, sitting atop the workbench. “Well, why didn’t you call Triple A?”

“My phone was dead. I had to wait until someone came by that I could flag down, and ask them to call. The first one that would actually stop didn’t have one. I got back into the car to warm up and fell asleep. Then when I finally got someone else to stop, it was an old lady, and she didn’t feel okay about handing her phone over. So I didn’t ask her to call you, too... then I had to wait for Triple A to show up.” They both stepped into the kitchen. Tru set her bag on the table. “So...here I am.”

Brittany considered this and then held out her hand.

“What?”

“Where’s your phone?”

She had hoped she wouldn’t ask, but she had covered the possibility. Tru first pulled out the Triple A receipt, dropping it on the table, and Brittany grabbed it and saw that it was indeed from that day, and then took the cell phone from Tru. Brittany eyed her suspiciously, flipped it open and held down the on button but the screen would not appear at all.

“Where’s your car charger?”

“I gave it to you because yours broke, remember?”

“Oh. Yeah. But I thought you were going to buy another one when you went into town?”

Oh, think fast. “I got busy. I just forgot. So...it’s like the Universe is conspiring against me today.”

Brittany rubbed at her cheek, and sighed. She handed the phone back. “Okay... well, I’m sorry, but I was so worried and I couldn’t figure out why you hadn’t called.”

“I’m so sorry I worried you, Baby.” Tru hugged her, kissed her, and went to the refrigerator for a Yoo-Hoo, craving something with vitamins in it, that also tasted good.

“Don’t ever leave here with a low battery again. I had to take a Xanax.”

“I’m so sorry, Brit. I promise I won’t let that happen again.”

“Next time you leave here, you will go straight to the store and buy another charger. And, go out there right now, and put that jack in your car.”

Tru didn’t balk at the parent-like reprimand. She did as she was told, relieved that her story had been an acceptable explanation, and that she would not have to tell Brittany what had really happened. She hated the way it felt. She had never lied to Brittany about anything, and she didn’t intend to make a habit of it now.

Tru had always been trustworthy. Her father and mother owned and operated Morgan’s Mercantile and Outfitters, a hunting and fishing shop in the outskirts of Grand Junction, Colorado. Her father trusted her with the store, and often left her in charge. The customers trusted her opinions about the best hunting and fishing sites. The county Sheriff trusted her to clean and service his sidearm. From an early age, Tru would serenade them with her guitar, and customers would linger by the wood stove on cold evenings, drinking coffee or more spirited libations, while she sang to them.

So Ben and Clara Morgan trusted Tru when she told them she needed to get out of Grand Junction and do something different with her life.

But when her trek to Denver and Colorado Springs only garnered her a history of odd jobs and dead-end opportunities, it forced her to examine what she really wanted from her life. If she couldn’t do what she loved, then what was the point? To work for her parents and never see anything but a little corner of the world? Or to go after a degree, and a job in the corporate

sector, work herself into retirement so that she could get a gold watch? Neither choice could be enough for her. So she made a plan. That plan began with enlisting in the Army Reserve, to toughen herself up while still getting a paycheck, and then going after her dreams.

During the eleven weeks of Advanced Individual Training after Boot Camp, Tru met Brittany Jabot.

She pegged her immediately as one of the “untouchables.” Not like Elliot Ness who took down Al Capone, but as formidable.

Feeling that her gift for music was her best tool, Tru had invited Brittany to a performance on Base one weekend, and managed to compromise her defenses. Eventually, the defenses were shattered when they shared a liaison at the Comfort Inn in Hopewell while on weekend furlough.

When Tru returned to Colorado after AIT, she knew they had shared something more meaningful than a fling. The thought that she might never see Brittany again was a melancholy niggling that appeared in her dreams at night and left her glum over morning coffee.

Ben and Clara Morgan knew that something had saddened their daughter, and they wanted her to be happy. They were proud of her for attempting to make something of herself, but they understood that she would not be marrying a man who would provide a home for her. Signing over the house on Castle Mountain was their way of expressing understanding. It had been an investment for her father, but he never seemed to have time to fix it up and re-sell it. Tru was capable and delighted to do it.

Having a home-base, Tru immediately immersed herself in the music communities throughout the state, forcing herself to forget Brittany. She spent the three weekends out of the month she wasn't at Drill, playing music wherever she could. In her off-hours, she worked on the house, renovating and improving it.

Meanwhile, Brittany sought solace in the concentrated discipline of the Military, hoping to become a photojournalist. When it became clear she was to be relegated to a secretary for other male officers and photographers, she

began to reconsider. And there was Tru. Without the focus of pursuing photojournalism, her thoughts wandered to the young woman who had disarmed her so completely with a mellow voice and dancing eyes. In a moment of careless whimsy, that sprang from still-another insult about her place in the pecking order, Brittany had confessed her sexuality to her platoon sergeant, and was summarily released under a general discharge.

A week later, she had appeared on Tru's doorstep.

4

THE PLUNK AND RATTLE OF A BROKEN GUITAR STRING stopped the music. Tru and Helki stared at each other in vexed silence.

"That's the second one," she grumbled to Helki, grabbing the flailing string and unwrapping it from the post on the headstock. "I need to go back to the Adamas strings. These keep breaking."

Helki smiled, "Maybe we should break, too," while leaning her bass against the wall of the modest home recording studio.

"That's cute," Tru acknowledged the pun, put her guitar in the stand and switched off the 16 track digital recorder. Together, they wandered into the kitchen, having smelled the aroma of baked chicken spaghetti. Brittany poured them all some wine and served dinner.

"So, how's the recording session going?" Brittany used tongs to transfer salad to Helki's plate.

Helki poured a generous amount of poppy-seed dressing on the green leaf lettuce. "I think it sounds great. I love Tru's music, or I wouldn't have left the Heads."

As an opening act for a band almost two years ago, Tru had stayed to listen to the headliners, a rock group called The Hard Heads. The bassist was Helki Sky. At the close of the first set, Tru had asked the waitress to give

Helki the drink of her choice, along with a note she had written on a napkin that read simply, “You rock.” When the waitress pointed her out, Helki had smiled and brought the wine over to Tru’s table.

The two women became fast friends. Helki soon left The Hard Heads, assuring Tru that she had been looking for a good excuse in the form of another band who played music more to her

liking; and, she added, a band that didn’t dabble in drugs and get drunk every night. Before long, the two women were taking part in various jam sessions around town, or doing duets in local pubs, all booked by Macy.

The daughter of a Miwok Indian Father and an Italian mother, Helki’s given name meant “touch.” Aptly, as Tru realized, she did indeed have the touch. Helki never forgot a groove, and her mane of dark hair, highlighted by two tiny braids in the front, bounced as she danced around the stage. Helki always held a knowing smile, and her music soared. “Sky” was also apropos as her last name. Her music touched the sky.

“Tru—” Brit started, filling her own wine. “When did Macy say you guys would start touring again?”

“Soon,” she answered, sucking an errant string of pasta into her mouth. “She’s still pounding out the details. We’ll do some local stuff first, push the new CD. But it should be within a month or so. I think the trip to Seattle next week will provide some insight.” She saw the disappointment in her lover’s eyes. “You could go with us.”

“Yeah,” Helki agreed. “You could keep her in line.”

Brittany’s answering expression spoke of doubt and amusement, before she continued. “There’s no one to take care of the house and the horses.”

“I could hire someone to do that.”

“Yeah,” Helki agreed. “Be the official photographer for the band. The other pictures you took at shows were great.”

“I think I would only be in the way.” Brittany sighed. “I don’t think Macy wants me there.”

“I want you there, Baby. Don’t worry about Macy.”

Helki nibbled off one section of rind from a cucumber slice, then ate the meat of it in one bite, discarding the remaining rind on her plate.

“I think I’d get motion sickness on a bus all the time.”

Helki swallowed the bite of cucumber and offered, “You could take Dramamine.”

Brittany half-smiled. “I’ve got some shmoozing to do at a couple of galleries. And I need to get my portfolio up to date anyway. I’ll stay busy and be here when you get back. Maybe you’ll get back sooner if you miss me.”

“You know I’ll miss you.” Tru leaned over and kissed her.

“How could you miss me? You’ve got hundreds of screaming girls throwing themselves at you.”

“No, they’re throwing themselves at me, Brit,” Helki joked.

Tru stayed up quite late, reviewing the recordings she and Helki had made that day. Her head did not hit the pillow until three in the morning. She snuggled up into a spooning position behind Brittany and slept.

Up at six-thirty, Brittany dislodged Tru’s snuggle-hold on her, and by eight, gathered her things for a meeting with gallery owners in Boulder.

“What time do you think you’ll be back?” Tru asked groggily from the warm folds of pillows and comforter.

“Oh, it’ll be tonight sometime. I’ll give you a call.” Brittany adjusted the blanket around Tru. “If the weather gets bad, I’ll stay with Brenda.”

Brittany enjoyed her jaunts into town. Often, her visits would be as much about socializing as about the sale of her artistic creations. At exhibits and other artistic events, she rubbed elbows with gallery owners, well-known artists, and collectors. Inevitably, she formed actual friendships with some of them.

Tru accepted the quick kiss at the corner of her mouth, with a contented sigh, her eyes fluttering closed again, as Brittany grabbed her things and headed for the door.

5

One Week Later

TRU FELT THE GENTLE PRESSURE OF DROPSI'S PAWS on her jeaned leg and lifted her head off her arms. She slid a hand across the rough-hewn wood of the kitchen table for the eCig, hoping nicotine would help her function just a little while longer. If she had been using tobacco cigarettes, her lungs would have been in bad shape by now. The vapor didn't even accost her eyes like real smoke, which was good, because she didn't care to force any more moisture from her tear ducts than had already come in the last few days.

The missing persons report had been a fruitless endeavor. When she had filed it, she got the distinct impression that the deputy knew she sought a gay lover, and didn't take it seriously.

So the search for Brittany had been dropped solely in her lap, and she had risen to the challenge only to be dashed again and again by dead-ends over the last three days. Helki had been helping her call around, but neither of them had discovered Brittany's whereabouts. The sick feeling this gave her was akin to drinking battery acid. Though the scene had been awful, the last time she saw Brit, she couldn't imagine why Brittany wouldn't have called. Just to have the common courtesy of letting her know she was okay. Unless she couldn't call. Tru was left with the abrasive, wounding truth that Brittany could not call. Something had happened to her.

“Police report?” he echoed, pressing the back of a numb hand beneath his cold-reddened nose.

“An officer should be here in a few minutes.” The LPN held her ballpoint Bic poised above the form on the clipboard. “It’s routine with any accident, sir.”

The young man took a step toward the entrance, his Nikes slipping slightly in a puddle of mud and slush left by his own foot on the way into the emergency room. “I told you I don’t even know her.”

She looked up and saw him moving toward the door, in his drenched clothes. “Sir—you should let the doctor look at you too...I could get you a blanket and something warm to drink. You might know something that would be helpful, and not realize it—”

He glanced down at his sodden clothing, suctioned against him like cellophane, the numbness of his skin beginning to give way to the warmth of the hospital lobby. “Okay,” he said evenly. “But I left the motor running. I need to go park my car. I’ll be right back.” He started for the mechanical doors, his rubber soles screaming on the linoleum with each step.

He did not return.

The fog...a mass of suspended murk, solid to her attempts toward escape; yielding, as it enveloped her, teasing her consciousness. The question, *Where am I?* broke from her lips, but its sound was caught in the undulant haze. She stretched out her hands and felt nothing but the cool mist, and a panic swelled inside her. *Let me out!* she screamed. *Help me! Someone...please help me...*

It seemed she wandered in the fog for hours. Days. Then finally, the fog drifted away from her, leaving in its place a murky void. She lifted her palms toward her face—

Her eyelids lifted, as the fog dissipated. No darkness...white, now, only white; her mind a labyrinth of thoughts and meanings, colored by a need for reason, as if flung from one world to another. Gradually, her senses gained

control of her emotions. *Walls. The white is on the walls. The walls are in a room. I am in the room. A white room—*

She wanted water, but again, her throat failed her. It seemed she had blinked the void gone, like Samantha on *Bewitched*, and she was left alone in the white room. *Bewitched?* She didn't know what her brain meant, now. Her arm came into view. *Wasn't it her arm?* An I.V. needle taped onto the top of her hand faded into her awareness, as did the plastic tube under her nose, its two rubbery prongs a mild assault on her nostrils. The cold, overly pure air from them incited a need to yank the contraption away from her face, but she could not get the message through to her hand. Unless it wasn't her hand.

She wanted to sit up; her tongue pushed at her arid lips. Her mouth tasted...*old?* She wanted to brush her teeth. She concentrated. Lifting a trembling hand, she tried to pull the tubing from her nose, and was prevented by the clipped plastic object on her finger. She rubbed her finger against her side, knocking the clip off her finger, and a nearby machine began to beep. She glanced at it. *Lights. Moving lines. Dials.* She dragged the rubber prongs from her nostrils and let her hand rest on her chest. The air smelled of disinfectant.

She breathed cautiously at first, like some wayward astronaut stepping from the ship on some unfamiliar planet. Then she tried to relax into it. Stretching her body, she found that it ached all over; a sudden movement caused a hundred muscles to scream, but she managed to lift her hand again, touch her cheek. *Cold and clammy.* Her fingers trailed upward to something thick, a bandage, she assumed, on her head. *I've hit my head is all...soon I'll remember what happened and I'll go home.*

Even as she thought it, she knew it would not be that simple.

Some thud from her right. *Movement.* A voice interrupted her confusion.

“Well hello there...”

A woman's face. Fog again... void. Fading back to white. Woman gone now. Fog. No... white again.

“Ah, welcome back,” the new voice said. “How do you feel?”

Her eyes went to the voice. *The voice is white like the walls. The voice wears white. The voice is a man.*

He placed fingers in her palm. “Can you squeeze my fingers?”

She blinked at him. *Fingers?*

“Can you squeeze my fingers?” he asked again, tapping her palm.

She squeezed.

“Good.” He reached over to her other hand and did the same. “Now on this side?”

She squeezed. *Why did he want me to squeeze his fingers?*

“Good. You’re in the hospital, young lady. You were in an accident, but you’re going to be fine. I’m Doctor Armstrong.”

Hos...pital...a...strong arm? There was reason to it, but what did it mean? *Strong arm, like—* An image came to her of a box of baking soda, with the proverbial arm and hammer. Something, some entity in her brain, seemed amused, and she stilled it to concentrate again on the words. Now the questions began to envelop her as surely as the fog had done.

He touched her eyelids. Bright light stung her pupils. “Do you know who the president is?” the white voice asked. She tried to answer, but could find no moisture in her throat; the words were trapped there, as she had been trapped in the mist.

“Try to focus, now. Who’s the President of the United States?”

She tried to retrieve the information. Saw a quick image. “Clinton?” she rasped.

“Well...close, but one administration off.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” he said, touching her arm. “We’ll talk later. The nurse will be in to help you in a minute. Rest now. You’re going to be okay.”

She strained to peer down at her body, a sharp pain in her neck giving her pause. A bandaged left arm lay by her side, numb. For a quick moment she wondered if her legs were damaged... or gone. Lifting the edge of the sheet, relief flooded her at the sight of both appendages, present

and intact, although wrapped at both knees. There was some white elastic tights of some kind on her legs. *Someone dressed me...*she thought absently.

A deep breath sent a dagger of pain through her elastic bandaged ribs. That’s when she noticed the tube that snaked up from between her legs, secured to her thigh with white tape. She suddenly knew what it was. Knew the name of it. *Catheter. Someone did more than dress me.*

She eased back into the pillow and considered her situation with controlled alarm. *What happened to me?* She tried to find a familiar frame of reference to start with. *My name is...*she began, then drew a perfect blank. *How ridiculous...I’m...my name...*she swallowed thickly. *I don’t know my own name*—touching the gauze on her head, the words “brain damage” presented themselves abruptly in her mind. *If I were brain damaged, would I be able to consider that I was brain damaged?* She assured herself that she would not. *What day is this? Where am I? Who am I?* The questions were inane and began to pound inside her head. She squeezed her eyes closed, trying to calm the questions as a fierce headache, keen and sudden, filled her skull. *Where was that nurse?* She took some consolation in having remembered what the doctor told her, but she had questions for the next person who came through that door, though her throat felt swollen and dead.

As if on cue, the door whooshed open, and the sound swept through her head, saber-sharp, intensifying the barbed throbbing. A nurse appeared there, smiling as she approached. Her eyes were kind. “Hello there! Glad you’ve joined us again. Are you able to talk, Brittany?”

She frowned... *yes, that is my name... isn't it?* She touched her throat, trying to swallow, hoping the nurse would understand.

“Thirsty, huh?” The nurse smiled warmly. “Here—” she picked up a bowl and plucked something out pushing it into her mouth. Cold. Melting.

“Ice chips. Let them dissolve.”

As Brittany felt the cold permeate her tongue and dribble into her throat, the nurse pored water in another plastic bowl on the table over the bed, dipped a cloth in it, and pressed it to Brittany’s parched lips. It felt better. She mashed her lips together, forcing the moisture to soak in. The nurse dipped the cloth again and moistened her lips a second time. “Better?”

Brittany nodded almost imperceptibly. The nurse gave her more ice chips and Brittany suckled them greedily, the cool liquid soothing her parched throat and swollen tongue, and then took the cloth away, waiting for Brittany to swallow the desert in her mouth.

“You’re in Montrose Memorial Hospital, Hon’. You’re recuperating from a serious accident. But you’re gonna be okay.”

Brittany took a cautious breath and asked roughly. “How long... have I been here?”

“About a week.”

Brittany’s eyes grew wide, as the nurse replaced the clamp on Brittany’s finger, glancing at the machine. “Your body just needed time to heal, that’s all... you had a car accident... you remember?”

Brittany tried to conjure the image, but nothing came to mind. “No.”

“What we know, is that you swerved off the road somehow, and ended up in the water. You were soaked when you were brought in.”

Brittany’s eyes grew again, and her words were pumice across her throat. “How did I—?”

“A young man pulled you out of the car. You’re very lucky to be alive.” She fitted the prongs of the cannula back into the young woman’s nostrils.

“Who?”

“Max. We don’t know his last name. He brought you in, and stayed long enough to see that you were taken care of, and then he left.”

Brittany looked down at herself. “How bad?” The words were coming a bit easier.

“Well,” she said, checking the screen of a machine near the bed. “The doctor will explain all that.”

“Please... I’m scared...”

“Hon’, you’re gonna be just fine.” She closed a hand over Brittany’s.

The door swooshed open again and Doctor Armstrong entered, tall, broad-shouldered, with a Kirk Douglas dimple in his chin, and a touch of gray at his temples. Brittany had not noticed this before. All she could focus on in their initial meeting was the white that saturated the room, and the smooth baritone of his voice. Now, she saw him talking, but she faded in and out of listening, endured the searing beams of the penlight, and his attempts to be reassuring. Periodically, her attention fastened on certain words he said. *Bruising... impact injury... ribs... Swelling... head injury...*

Brain damage? She found herself thinking again, with some alarm. She didn’t like the taste of her tongue... *what was he saying, now?*

“...kneecaps... forearm and wrist... hypothermia... avoid pneumonia...”

His voice seemed somehow connected to a bad radio signal. Except she couldn’t seem to turn the dial and make him come in any clearer. “How long...will I be here?” she heard herself say.

“Depends on... heal. Plus... haven’t... locate any of your family... name on a watch... who I should call?”

Who should he call? Who should he call? Brittany imagined her memory as a freshly-cleaned chalkboard: dark, dusty, empty, useless. “I can’t...I don’t know—”

“Don’t worry... memory loss... common... head trauma... quite an ordeal... the brain just gives you a vacation—”

Did he say my brain was on vacation?

“...time. Do you remember anything before the accident?”

She concentrated on this, and tears came to her eyes. “No.”

Brittany’s head began to swim again, and all she wanted to do was sleep. *No more questions, no more thinking... just sleep...* She closed her eyes and a tear released and moved down her cheek.

Tru’s parents were on a cruise to Greece for the holiday, and she didn’t see the point in ruining their vacation with the recent turn of events in her own life. They wouldn’t be back until after New Year’s Day. Her mother could hear something in her voice, though, and she only half-lied by telling her she was just tired.

She was tired. The street maps, photocopied telephone listings, and gas credit card receipts lay in a pile on the kitchen table where they had been gathering for the last week. Thursday she had tossed them there, prepared to give up the ghost, for only a little while. How many more police stations would she call, how many more salvage yards would she have to wander through, praying to find Brittany’s car, and praying not to find it?

The Nissan had been a gift from her only surviving Uncle. Her previous car’s transmission was sounding the death knell anyway so the timing had been perfect. Her Uncle had been a hermit, and Brittany was the only visitor he ever got. The neighbor-lady had contacted Brittany when her uncle passed away, and had told her that her Uncle would want her to have the car. She hadn’t had a chance to switch the title into her own name.

With all the computerized information, Tru could not fathom why nothing turned up in the uncle's name. It was as though Brittany and the Nissan had been abducted by aliens.

6

BRITTANY MADE HER WAY BACK TO HER ROOM, moving carefully down the corridor, and saw the officer at the nurse's station. The nurse pointed to her, and the officer moved in her direction.

"Miss... uh, you're Brittany?"

"Yes."

"I'm investigating the accident... can I have a few minutes with you?"

He was young, a bit nervous. They had assigned a rookie. An obvious illustration of where

her case fell on the list of priorities. "Sure."

He took her arm at the elbow and walked slowly beside her until they came to her room and

she sat on the bed.

"We found a gray Nissan in the river near Gunnison. I'm assuming it's yours?" He dropped

his memo pad and picked it up quickly, leafing through until he found his page again. "Sounds like it, but really, I can't tell you what my car looked like."

"The nurse briefed me on your condition... but can you recall anything that might help?" She folded the bedding back and climbed in. "I can't even remember my last name, officer." He released a resigned breath. "Well... the license plate was missing, and there was no

identification inside. We ran the VIN number and it was registered to Henry Long. Does that

name ring a bell?”

Her eyes moved left to right, reading something inside her mind. She shook her head. “I’m

sorry, I can’t remember.”

Nodding, he checked his notepad.

“Did you talk to him?”

He pressed his lips together, sheepishly. “I went to the address, and the house was being

renovated by the owner. He said that Henry Long had died a few months earlier.”

Brittany knew she would normally feel remorse or grief, but had no feelings attached to

Henry Long. “Can’t you find out who his relatives are, and maybe find out who I am that way?”

“Well, that’s what I thought. I spoke with a man across the street, and he told me he had seen a woman fitting your description several times, visiting Mr. Long. But he said that Henry Long had no relatives that he knew of, and kept to himself. A lady next door said she only spoke to you once, after his death. She said she gave you Mr. Long’s car, at his request. But she didn’t know if you were related to him. That explains why the car was registered in his name. I guess you hadn’t changed it over yet.”

Brittany sighed. “Did the neighbor lady know my last name?”

He shook his head. “And there’s no record of a Brittany Long, either.”

Brittany released another pent-up breath. "So I'm right back where I started."

The officer closed his notebook. "Well, for now. Someone must be looking for you and they

would probably know to look for accident reports involving Henry Long's car. I'll see if I can

find some history on him. Meanwhile, I'll have something published in the local paper. If

anything turns up, I'll let you know." He stood. "If you remember anything at all that might help, call me." He handed her a business card.

Brittany pushed the nurse's hand away, insisting on climbing into bed on her own. "You're awfully stubborn, young lady," Nurse Sturgis grumbled. Brittany tugged the covers up under her arms and pushed her hair away from the scar on her

forehead, considering the churlish woman who had been her night-shift nemesis since day one.

"The harder I work, the quicker I get out of here, right?"

The nurse frowned. "That's true in theory, but if you overdo it on these little walks down the hall, you'll be right back where you started."

"Ridiculous," she sneered. "I feel better every day."

Nurse Sturgis nodded without conviction. "Stay in bed the rest of the day."

"Nurse Sturgis, can I ask you a question?" Brittany inquired sweetly. The old nurse grunted

her permission. "Why do you always wake me up at night to give me another sleeping pill?"

Nurse Sturgis scowled at her, annoyed by the impertinence of the young woman. “Doctor’s orders, Missy. You should let us do what’s best for you, and stop trying to do everything by yourself.”

The rotund woman turned to go, and Brittany thought of how much she resembled a bloated marshmallow. “Oh, Nurse—” Brittany called. “I am allowed to get up and piss by myself, aren’t I?”

The nurse grunted and squirmed out of the room on her white crepe soles.

Brittany released a groaning breath, clutching her side, and stifling a smile. She took the tabloid from the night stand, anxious to finish the ridiculous story about the woman who gave birth to a lizard.

Tru checked her watch. Five a.m. *Tuesday? Wednesday?* She had come home late Sunday night, after a long night of driving, searching... realizing in a stupor that it was New Year’s Eve. Thankfully, the last holiday of the year; Christmas had only been bearable because she had refused to put up the tree, avoided the obligatory *It’s a Wonderful Life* on T V. In fact, she had kept both the TV and the radio off, except for news, that way she wouldn’t have to listen to the plethora of Christmas cheer permeating the airwaves. The only acknowledgment she had allowed herself was the Cinnamon Schnapps she had bought at a ratty old liquor store Sunday night on her way home from searching.

She had brought in the New Year watching videos of she and Brittany, playing in the snow. They put the camera on a tripod and built a snowman, and Brittany insisted on giving the snowman a cucumber penis. They laughed at passersby, who stared as they drove up the winding road. “You’re going to cause an accident,” Tru had said, her chastisement met only by giggles of delight.

The videos seemed endless, a history that had become antiquity, while she warmed her throat and deadened her nerves with frequent shots of the Schnapps. She stayed there well past midnight, into that Monday morning. She had given up on writing a new song, burdened by the difficulty of creative concentration. She had only managed to break a string, from strumming too hard on the Ovation Adamas.

All she could think about was how she used to come running into the living room with her guitar to share it. She could still see her lover's face as she sang each new song to her. *Brit was gone now.*

So she had stumbled in the back door Monday night, after another fruitless search, shuffled through the kitchen, and collapsed on the sofa for a few hours. Had she slept since then? No... she went searching again and came home last night to sit at the table and drink more coffee.

Coffee had become a drug for her; she often thought the effects would be the same if she merely leaned over the canister and snorted the black grains directly, or grabbed a handful, and munched them like the dry Shredded Wheat she had eaten days ago, straight from the box.

Tru had endured another sleepless night here at the kitchen table; sleepless, save the nap she had taken with her head on her arms just before she had reached for her eCig. *It was Tuesday...*

Tru put her head down on her arms again and closed her eyes, banishing the images of Brit, if only for an hour. Long enough to rest—

The sound of the paper boy's Toyota jarred her awake again as she drifted off. A double beam of headlights flashed over the walls when he turned around in the driveway. Mechanically, she pushed herself up and went through the living room to the front door. Dropsi followed her and darted out to tiptoe cautiously in the snow. Leaving the door open, she watched the calico pounce on the orange polybag in the slush of the yard, rolling on it as if it were filled with catnip. Tru wandered across the drive to drag the paper out from under the writhing cat, brusquely aware that her well-worn sweatshirt didn't possess enough thickness to fend off the

cold, and moved slowly back into the house, as if an army of leeches had also sucked her as dry as the Shredded Wheat.

She held the bagged paper by the open end with two fingers, avoiding the muck that slid down the plastic and slapped onto the concrete walk that led to the porch. No matter how often she had reprimanded that delivery boy,

the kid always threw the paper in the yard. Drying out papers by the fireplace had become a habit for her and Brit—

Tru shook off the memory and freed the paper from the bag, dropping it flat onto the fireplace ledge to dry. She could have spared her weary brain cells the task of figuring out what day it was, by merely waiting for the paper—another indication of her exhaustion, she guessed.

She stared at the front page of the Denver Post, the headlines shouted foreign policy, inflammatory comments made by the some politician about his gay sister, and another report about The Highwayman. He had claimed his third victim. She whispered a silent prayer that Brittany was safe somewhere, and would not become the fourth on his list.

The newspaper was a frightening place to search for news of a missing loved-one, unless it was in the want-ads. *But when will I stop?* Staring at the paper, splotchy with the moisture from the ground, she left it on the hearth and went to turn down the bed.

Removing her jeans and Naropa University sweatshirt, she likened the hard void inside herself to the cliché, *you don't miss the water 'til the well runs dry*. She had no idea how deeply rooted in Brit her world had been, nor the value of that bond, until severed. Another dull pain thumped through her chest and she knew it as a pain impervious to any human-made panacea. Sleep would be the only offering of release—if only from the exhaustion. Finally, that idea alone was enough.

Tru slid beneath the black sheet and matching geometric design of the comforter that used to warm her and Brittany on those cold Colorado nights, recalling the vividly unsettling images of that evening, weeks ago, with Travis in that hotel. Did she deserve, then, the emptiness that had taken over her life since it all crystallized into this current hell? Was she singularly at fault? Tru did not have the strength to will her eyes dry again. She sighed, letting go of the churnings in her mind, focusing only on the gentle purring of Dropsi, who had taken her usual place on the pillow above Tru's head. She drifted into a deep sleep, feeling the slight vibration of the cat's internal motor on her scalp, knowing that by morning the tears would be a memory soon refreshed.

Brittany lay in her hospital bed, knowing she'd be released today, and wondering where the hell a person goes when she doesn't know where she belongs. The Women's Shelter would be the temporary solution. A solution, Nurse Sturgis told her, that was standard operating procedure for the hospital in cases like hers. She looked at the clock. *Eight a.m.* The sun tried to shine, but the bitter cold kept it from warming the window and permeating the room. Feeling a chill, she got up carefully and put on the robe and slippers. *Nobody's robe, nobody's slippers*—some articles of clothing that had been given to someone with only one name, by a nurse who took pity.

She strayed to the window and examined the new day. The first day of a new life which would be full of searches for the old one. The first day of the rest of her past.

The hospital staff had taken up a collection so that she would not be penniless when she walked out of here, along with the directions to the shelter, and a list of other organizations that might help her. She had refused psychological counseling because it made her feel somehow threatened; still not used to this disconnected universe her memory loss had caused, she certainly didn't want some stranger with a psychiatric degree poking around in her head when she wasn't sure what was in there, trapped beyond her grasp.

A perky volunteer named Trina picked her up outside the hospital entrance, her hair thin and a dull blond, her birdlike arms reminiscent of recent heroine-abuse ads. The young woman tried to make conversation, but Brittany didn't feel particularly talkative. Trina seemed not to notice, one hand clenching a newly lit clove cigarette, periodically thumping the ash out the cracked

window. She launched into a waterfall of information about all aspects of life at the women's shelter, crediting them for her newfound purpose in life. They had helped her find the job she had after she'd escaped an abusive husband. As she drove with her left leg bent, foot in the seat, Brittany hoped, with a generous amount of anxiety, that the girl's reflexes were quick enough to get her right foot off the accelerator and onto the brake, should the need arise.

Trina's words faded back into Brittany's awareness.

"...not that everyone down there isn't nice, it's just that, well, they all have their little problems or else they wouldn't be there, ya know?"

The door to the Shelter's community room opened, and Brittany placed the paper down on her lap, anticipating the appearance of her visitor.

A young man in his early thirties, wearing round spectacles, strode up to her. "Hi," he said simply.

"I'm sorry—" she began.

"I know." He held up his hand. "The hospital told me about your amnesia. My name is Max. I'm the one who brought you in after the accident."

Her face softened. "Oh, Max... I'm... what can I say? You saved my life. A thank-you seems a little inadequate."

"Good enough for me." He dragged a chair back as if to sit, but didn't. "Are they treating you okay?"

"They're great. I don't think I'm an easy border, though." She guessed by his demeanor and the glasses that he wasn't a Casanova. He wore a thick MIT sweatshirt, khaki pants and old dirty sneakers.

He ran his fingers through the shock of brown hair at his forehead, and flashed a charismatic smile. "I guess that's understandable." Then adding a bit sadly, "I'm sorry you don't know where home is—"

She watched him sit down, cross his ankle over his knee and struggle with some discomfort that seemed to be about a deficit in social interaction. "How did you happen to find me after the accident?"

He snapped his head up, seemingly pleased for some prompting. "Oh, I was, um—I saw the accident happen... I was coming around the curve after supper with my mom, and I was behind you about the time your car went —" he stopped himself. "I'm sorry. That was very insensitive of me."

She shrugged. “It’s okay. I haven’t been able to remember the accident, either. Maybe it’s a blessing in disguise.”

“Maybe.” He pushed out of the chair, plunging his hands into the front pockets of his slacks, and strode to the window. “Where will you go when you leave here?”

“That’s a good question.” Brittany rolled the tabloid she was holding into a tube and bounced it on her leg, noticing the way he continually jingled the change in his pocket. “I don’t know if I have an answer to it yet. I’ll stay here until I figure it out.”

“Well, hey, it seems...” He looked around. “like a nice enough place to be...” An awkward silence ensued, and he jingled more change, his eyes wandering to the windows. “I’m sorry. I’m... I’m not a big people-person. I’m a bit of a nerd, I’m afraid.” He punctuated this information by pushing his glasses up higher on his nose.

Brittany’s face relaxed into a half-grin. “That’s all right.”

“You’re a strong young woman.” He moved back to the chair, but again, did not sit. The smile reappeared briefly. He grasped the back of the chair with both hands, regarding her timidly.

“Thank you.”

“So. Will you leave a forwarding address...when you—when you know where you’re going, so I can at least send flowers?” He shoved his hands in his back pockets, then, and studied his dirty sneakers.

“You don’t have to send flowers, Max. You saved my life. I’d say that was quite sufficient.” She tried to smile warmly.

“Um... ok. Maybe we could... um... go get lunch sometime—” —adding quickly, “Or not, that’s up to you, I mean—” He rubbed the palm of one hand hard with his other thumb.

Brittany nodded. “Well, maybe. I think I have a lot on my plate right now. Anyway, thanks for coming by. I wish I could repay the favor, but—” she shrugged, smiling.

“Forget it. Just get better.” He smoothed the front of his slacks. “Good luck.” He lifted his hand in a brief wave and backed away, turning to stride from the room. Brittany noticed that he walked with more deliberation in his departure than in his arrival. Probably relieved to go back to his little basement and into the cyber world where he was more comfortable. *Shy young man. Not many of those left.*

She touched the white gold watch at her wrist. The one that she had been wearing when she arrived. They gave it back to her along with some other jewelry in a zippy bag when she checked out. The engraving on the back had given hospital personnel her first name.

Precious little existed to reveal who she was. Most of it was white gold jewelry: a small band ringed with tiny turquoise stones, a nugget ring and the matching wristwatch, which was still ticking, even after being dunked in a river; a necklace with a strange emblem dangling from it that appeared to be an upside-down y, and a few crumpled dollar bills. Nothing that spoke of her identity. She unclasped the watch and read the engraving.

Merry Xmas ‘04, Brittany. I love you. T.

*Who was “T”? Someone who loved me, obviously...*She focused intently on the letter “T,” hoping a name would come to mind this time, but instead exhaled her frustration, put the watch over her wrist and fastened it again.

POISED ON THE THRESHOLD BETWEEN DREAMS AND REALITY, distracted by the noise which niggled her eyes almost open, Tru guessed that the phone had been ringing for some time. She lifted the handset at the bedside table and rolled over on her back as she put the receiver to her ear. Her voice crackled like January leaves as she said hello. The voice at the

other end identified itself as Macy, and she forced herself to sit up and rub her eyes, clear her throat. “Oh, Macy... I’m sorry... what’s—what’s up?”

“You sound terrible—”

“I was asleep.” Tru tried to focus on the crystalline snow clinging to the window pane across the dim room.

“I’m sorry. I almost hung up,” Macy said. “but I really feel like we need to talk.”

Tru rubbed her neck. “What’s wrong?”

“You are, kiddo. Your mother called me. She’s worried about you. You’ve got to snap out of it.”

“Macy, please, I—”

“Tru, I know what you’ve been going through, and believe me, I understand. But life goes on, or at least it’s supposed to. You’re going to lose everything you’ve worked so hard for if you don’t start thinking about yourself.”

Unaware that she cried, until a tear fell onto her hand, Tru wiped it away gruffly. “I know, Macy, but I... I don’t know if she’s even alive, dammit! If I knew she was okay, maybe—”

“Sweetheart, listen to me. You have done everything in your power to find her. Maybe she doesn’t want to be found. In the meantime, your career is going down the tubes. I can’t keep rescheduling these gigs. You’ve got to get back in the studio and back on stage—soon.”

Tru felt her defenses go up. Macy didn’t seem to get it. Brittany was not some bed-buddy, she had been her lifemate. It had been as meaningful a union as any heterosexual marriage license would testify. And in one quick series of events, it had disappeared like melting snow in noonday sunshine. Tru experienced her absence as a quickening in her heart, a void space in her stomach, a dread. *Something happened to her.*

Macy waited on the line for Tru to answer, and it seemed long minutes before she heard her sniffing. “Tru? Honey, listen—do you need me to come up there?”

Tru lifted the neck of her T-shirt up to wipe her eyes. “No. I’m just worn out...”

“Didn’t you get some sleep?”

Tru blinked her vision into focus on the clock. “I had about six hours.”

“What are you going to do, Darlin’?” Macy’s voice came softly over the line, almost coaxing.

Tru’s attention was caught by the Raven beyond the window as it used a pine tree branch for a trampoline; the snow from the brittle limbs fell in puffs to the frozen ground. Tru wished her life were as simple as finding limbs to bounce on. She remembered a literature class in college, where they studied Poe’s, *The Raven*, and how it represented change and death. She had chosen Raven as her stage-name for the aspects of change it represented. Now she wondered if she’d only see it as a harbinger of death. *No. Brittany was not dead*. She wouldn’t allow herself to go there. *Quoth the Raven, ‘Nevermore...’*

“Tru?”

The bird launched into the sky in a flurry of snow and feathers. Maybe it was a sign. “When do you want me in the studio?”

“Can you make it in the morning?”

“Yeah. I’ll be there.”

“Good girl. There’s money to be made with those golden pipes of yours. Hang tough, I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Try to catch up on the rest of your sleep before then, okay?” Macy’s voice had softened a bit more. “Do you still have Xanax?”

“Yeah.”

“Take one. Or take two. But get some rest. Give your mind and body a chance to recover.”

“I’ll try.” Tru tossed the receiver back into its cradle and pushed her fingers through her hair, scratching her scalp. Macy was right, of course. She had to start focusing on her career. The funds were getting low and she’d be getting behind in the bills in another month. Tru pushed herself up and went into the bathroom.

Facing herself in the mirror, she said, “Life’s a bitch, Private Morgan. Suck it up and drive on. Be all that you can be—” The pep talk was without sincerity, and she shook her head at the sad, dark-rimmed eyes of the young woman in the mirror. *Maybe one more search...* one more town today, and then she’d throw in the towel. She’d sleep for awhile and then get up and give it one more time.

She opened the bottle of Xanax.

Tru slid into the cold seat of the Cherokee and started the engine, feeling more rested since her additional five hours of sleep. As she waited for the heater to warm, she stared at the square panels which made up the garage door in front of her. If those squares were counties, she would surely have driven in all of them, searching for the one love who had given her life some color. Tru poured herself a cup of coffee from the thermos, knowing it to be the first of many, and

fastened the seat-belt. She backed the Cherokee and turned around, beginning a cautious journey down Castle Mountain Road.

Her cell phone chirped, and she grabbed it off the console, flipping it open. *Helki.*

“Hey girl Just wanted to call and check on you.”

“Hey. Thanks.”

“*What cha doin’?*”

“I’m on my way to check out another crop of salvage yards.”

An awkward silence, then: “*Tru...I’m really sorry things are so...*”

“I know. Thanks. When are you going be back?” Helki was visiting her family in Alaska for the holidays.

“*My return flight is on the fifth, but, if you need me to—*”

“Oh no. Don’t even go there. I’m okay. You need to be there. You don’t get to visit with your family very often. There’s nothing you can do anyway.”

“*I can be there to support you, help you look for her... something.*”

“You are being supportive. Just enjoy your visit. I’ve got to lay down the new guitar tracks and scratch vocals anyway starting tomorrow. We’ll hook up when you get back and go through the set list again, just you and me.”

After she closed the phone, she made a mental note to herself to spend more time developing a friendship with Helki. It was rare to find her sort these days, and she was a little fearful that she might need that very soon.

She released the direction of her thoughts to the fates, and focused on driving. Careful of slippery patches on the asphalt, Tru glanced over the map she held at eye level, noting its red circles; each circle signifying a town she had driven through, hoping for a sign of Brittany. She had called every police station, scouted every salvage yard, until the map looked like a polka-dotted swatch of fabric, without the dots colored in. With a Sharpie marker from the console, she drew the last circle around Montrose, tossed the map in the seat beside her, and settled in for another protracted, vexing journey down the mountain toward the miniscule hope of finding her lover.

Climbing back into the Cherokee, Tru grabbed the notebook from the dash, crossing out another address to another salvage yard, and stared at the only

two left on the page for Montrose. If both of them yielded nothing, she would surrender to this vicious spiral of fate.

She drove to the address listed, and parked in front; it was a small yard. On foot, she searched the rows of cars to one side and began to make her way back up the other. As she stepped over a bumper in front of a jacked-up and recently rolled Bronco, she stopped. The silver paint caught the light and flashed in her eyes like a signal. The metal logo with the chrome letters, NISSAN, dangled bent, from the front fender.

Her knees began to quake, her heart hammering in her ears, as she moved around the mangled left front fender, the metal twisted, the paint removed in an ugly path of grooves and gouges. She bent to view the interior through unbroken windows. The seats and carpeting had sustained obvious water damage.

Her hand fluttered out for the stabilizing edge of the roof, and she moved toward the rear of the vehicle, turning toward the dash with her eyes closed. There's nothing to indicate it is Brittany's, she reassured herself, there are lots of Nissans this color, this year model... she opened her eyes and saw that the knobs on the radio were covered by two Coke bottle caps.

She tried to step back, but in a quick whirl of grief, she stumbled, fell, got up and began to pace back and forth, the length of the car. Finally, she stopped at the driver's door and stared through the window at the bottle caps. Her hands shot out and flipped up the door handle, firmly at first, then violently when it did not open. Desperately, she searched the ground around the vehicle until she found a rock. Heaving it into the window, the glass shattered and she kicked out

the remaining webbed pieces, and pushed it through onto the seat, leaned in, and pressed the waistband of her jeans on the jagged edges of the window to wrench the bottle caps from the radio knobs.

She held them, studying the red and white colors of the logo. Then, clenching them in her fist, she turned and ran back to the gate, barely missing a collision with a greasy old man holding a grimy brake drum. Still running, she stepped onto the sidewalk and ran faster, her legs pumping

harder, harder. Soon, the walk fed into the main street of the tiny burg. She passed the shops in the small town—the bakery, the clothing store, the shoe store, the hardware store, and kept running, tears flowing like water from a faucet, her lungs heaving the frigid air in and out in a burning, rasping succession of breaths. Her body began to ache all over and she felt her muscles giving in to the burn. Finally, she stopped to lean against the brick building, her breath making long, streaming clouds in front of her.

She licked her stinging lips and let the tears keep falling. “Brit...” she whispered weakly, sorrowfully, “God, Brit—what happened?” She took a deep breath and drew her sleeve under her nose.

A creaking sound took her eyes to the shingle swaying above her in the breeze. ED’S CAFE. She rubbed her eyes dry on her sweatshirt and pushed the door open. Numbness descended on her as she found a booth near the back of the thankfully quiet diner. She heard herself order coffee from a tired waitress, felt her hands fumbling for the eCig in the pocket of her leather jacket. As she thrust the bottle caps into another pocket and filled her aching lungs with the feathery vapor, the waitress set the cup down in front of her, and she began to drink from it, thankful for the way it burned her already-raw throat.

Tru leaned her forehead into her hands, elbows braced at either side of the cup, its steamy, strong contents snaking upward to tickle her nose.

A heart could be broken, a heart could ache, a heart could be sick...Tru wondered why she never heard of anyone getting heart cancer. It seemed the most logical organ to be afflicted with cells that attacked themselves. Maybe it was because the heart could be in enough pain all by itself. Just from having loved. From having lost.

Long moments later, she had calmed. She was empty. The tears were gone, and she sat there, staring at the red vinyl of the booth seat across from her; her eyes were fixed on the brown foam rubber which seemed to have exploded from a small tear in the redness of it. She thought of how much it resembled a wound, and how much she felt like her insides were that foam rubber stuffing.

Across the aisle, a man got up from his booth and left an empty coffee cup, a dollar and a crumpled newspaper on the Formica tabletop, tossing her a brief expression of sympathy. Tru slid out of her booth and went over to get the paper. When she sat back down, she began to turn the pages, trying to focus on something other than the pain she knew lurked somewhere deep inside her like a swelling hunk of foam rubber.

Near the last page of the small gazette, was a photo: a young blond woman, eyes stark against an obviously bruised and tumescent face, sitting up in a white bed... Tru jerked spasmodically, knowing, and yet afraid to believe...her eyes fell to the caption: *'Amnesia Victim Searching For Family...Do You Know Me?'* Below the question, the address of Montrose Memorial Hospital, and a phone number. Tru lifted the paper to her lips, pressing the photo against them. New tears began to stream down her cheeks. "Brit..." she whispered into the newsprint.

8

THE SNOW WAS TORRENTIAL. IT REMINDED HER of last night's dream... she was out in the snow, feeling every bite of the icy wind, wishing she was warm again. And all she could see in the dream was her black boots; all she could hear in the dream was the *crunch crunch crunch* rhythm of other boots in the snow; and all she could feel in the dream was the wind—and someone else—

She didn't know who she felt, but looking out over the shelter's modest lawn, now blanketed and clean, she decided she didn't want to know; she decided it might hurt too much. But she didn't know why she felt that way.

The shelter was a modified hotel, bought with city funds and renovated with mostly volunteer help. It allowed the women with children to have a room of their own, and Brittany was relieved to have one to herself. She wanted the privacy.

A knock. "Come in."

The door to her room opened, and she turned to face the director of the shelter.

“Good morning, Brittany.” Ms. Sheldon smiled. “How ya doin’ today?”

“Better. The pain’s almost gone.”

“Good. Um... I, um—there’s been a development in your case. There’s someone here to see you. I told her about your condition, so—”

“Who is it?”

“Your sister.”

Brittany flinched. “I thought I didn’t have relatives?”

“Well, the police said she had photos of you two, and all kinds of documentation to prove you live with her.”

Ms. Sheldon opened the door wide, and the young woman entered the room. First, Brittany noticed her black hair. Such a contrast to her own blond. *This woman is my sister?*

“Brit? Oh, thank God you’re alive...” The young woman lost her breath for a moment, her eyes traveling the length of Brittany’s body, almost devouring the sight of her. Then she caught her stare. “I... you don’t remember me, do you?”

Brittany tried to concentrate on her face, and all she got was a headache. “I’m sorry. You’re a stranger to me.”

The young woman’s face contorted in an expression of grief and longing, but she got control of whatever slammed around in her head. “That’s okay... I’ve been looking for you. You disappeared off the face of the earth.” She cleared the choking sensation in her throat. “I didn’t know... how to find you until I saw your picture in the paper.” Tears began to well in her eyes. “I called the hospital and they put me in touch with the police officer who was working on your case. You don’t know how relieved I was—”

The director cleared her throat. “Well, I’ll leave you two alone.” She closed the door quietly behind her.

The young woman set the knapsack and coat she held on the bed. “I brought you some of your clothes.” She sniffled. “And a coat. It’s getting really wicked out there, the roads are almost too icy to dri—”

“What did you say your name was?” she interrupted.

That pained expression came again, then, “Tru.”

Odd name. Brittany touched the watch on her wrist, remembering the inscription. She had not taken it off, for fear it would make her less a person, somehow.

“I gave you that watch last Christmas... well, I mean, the one before this one. You never took it off... except to shower.” She attempted to smile but failed.

Brittany noticed the silver and turquoise rings that Tru wore on five of her fingers. She saw, too, the similar earrings and other jewelry and wondered what the obsession was. When she focused on Tru again, Brittany noticed that the dark-haired woman still had trouble catching her breath. “This is very awkward.”

“Yeah. It’s—I’ve missed you so much, Brit.” Tru stepped forward, as if to embrace her, and Brittany leaned back, confused. She changed her tone. “Hey, I brought your favorite jeans and that black turtle neck, and that pink flannel shirt you like.”

Brittany went around the bed and unzipped the knapsack, digging the clothing out, momentarily pleased to have something of her past. She noticed the leather tag sewn into the back of the knapsack. Beside NAME, was written BRITTANY JABOT. “How do I pronounce my last name?”

“Its French. It’s pronounced *zhah-bow*.”

Brittany repeated the name to herself several times, but it didn't feel familiar. "What's your last name?"

She hesitated. "Morgan... why?"

"Why is my last name different? Are you married?" She removed her robe and hospital gown and put the turtle neck on.

Tru averted her eyes as Brittany changed clothes. "Hardly. I'll explain it all to you when we get home."

Brittany added the flannel shirt and began to button it. "Home? What if I'm not ready to go anywhere with you?"

Tru gasped. "Where else have you got to go?"

"I can stay here as long as I need to. I can take a cab where I need to go. Where are our parents?"

"Brit, I'll explain all that when we get home." Tru put on one glove.

"What's this 'we' stuff?" Brittany tucked the shirt in and zipped up her jeans. They were a bit loose.

"We have a house together. Why wouldn't you want to go to your own home?"

Brittany stared at her, feeling lost, trapped. "What if I don't want to go there?"

Tru sighed. "What are you afraid of? Maybe seeing where you live will help you get your memory back."

Brittany went around her and stood at the window. The snow was still a cascade of white. What reason did she have for not going with her? Brittany had no answer, but was nonetheless on tenterhooks. The idea of being dependent on someone else to give her memories back to her was disturbing; she wanted to get them back on her own, so she'd be certain they were indeed hers, and not manufactured by another person who might

have a hidden agenda. Besides, she didn't trust this woman, and that was reason enough.

"Let's get out of here. We'll talk later." Brittany did not respond to the flat tone of Tru's voice, she only ran her hand down a flannel sleeve. "You've lost weight."

"Thanks for... I appreciate the clothes." She turned and went to the night stand again, this time tossing the contents of the drawer on the bed. In an unusual act of kindness, Nurse Sturgis had bought a brush for her, and she worked it through the tangles in her tousled, wavy hair.

"I'm the only family you've got."

Alarmed, Brittany turned to examine this sister she did not recognize. "What—do you mean?"

"You don't have any other relatives. Your last relative died a few months ago. Look. I'd rather not start this conversation until we can finish it. I know everything important there is to know about you." Brittany sat on the bed, placing the items there into the knapsack, one by one. "Brit, you don't understand. This may take a while. Come home with me. Get settled. We have a lot to talk about."

Ms. Sheldon walked them out, and Tru ran into the parking lot, disappearing into the bleached void, to bring the Cherokee around so Brittany would not have to walk that far.

"By the way," Ms. Sheldon said. "A reporter called while ago and wanted to know if you had found your family. "

Brittany's eyebrows went up, and then she grimaced.

"Don't worry. I told them you had, but I didn't give him any details. I didn't think you wanted the publicity."

"Thanks."

The woman rubbed her arms and shivered. “Are you sure this is your sister?”

Brittany shrugged. “Well, she knew what was engraved on the watch without seeing it, first. And she did have all that documentation. If the cops think she’s okay, I guess she is.”

The older woman nodded, handing her a business card. “Don’t forget this address. That’s my cell phone... in case you want to get in touch, or if...you know, you need anything.”

Brittany hugged the woman, as Tru braked at the entrance and disengaged the passenger door lock. She climbed in carefully, and closed the door, zipping out the seat belt. “How do I even know you’re my sister?” she snapped, clicking the belt in place.

Tru filled her lungs with the damp, cold air that had traveled with Brittany into the cab. “You don’t, I guess.”

U.S. Highway Fifty took them out of Montrose, and it would be another fifty miles through the snowy weather before Gunnison. The white flakes covered the window after each swipe of the windshield wipers, and Tru had to keep the Cherokee well under the limit to maintain control on the icy roadway.

“How far is it?”

“You’d better get comfortable, it’ll be another three hundred twenty miles before we get there.”

“Jesus Christ! Where do you live—Tibet?”

“I live on Castle Mountain...” She peered over at her pointedly. “So do you.”

“Then what was I doing way over here in Montrose?”

Tru eyed her briefly, swallowing her remark. “The doctor told me that the accident was on the other side of Gunnison, but that Montrose had the

closest trauma center.” *Don’t ask why you were in Gunnison.*

“Oh.” Brittany sighed and unbuckled the seat belt to struggle out of her coat. Tru reached over to help her wriggle a sleeve off. “I can do it!” she sniped.

Tru decided not to voice her natural response to Brittany’s uncharacteristic petulance. *Could a concussion change someone’s personality?* The past was the past, however, and she had found her after all this time, she was alive, and that mattered more than anything. “Castle Mountain’s pretty secluded. Just above Estes Park. You liked it that way. We both enjoyed the privacy and the peace and quiet. But it’s close enough to Longmont and Boulder and other cities, so that we could go out when we wanted to.”

“I don’t think I’ll be going out any time soon.”

“Probably not,” Tru agreed, unzipping her black leather jacket and turning the heater down one notch. “Technically, we live in Estes Park, pretty close to Rocky Mountain National Park...”

Brittany gave her a blank look, and shook her head.

“Well, I’m sure all that will come back to you. We should be in Gunnison in an hour and a half—unless this snow keeps up. We can stop there and get something to eat if you want.”

“Fine,” Brittany responded wearily, running a hand through her hair. “Do I have my own money?”

“Of course. You always hide some at the house. Although if you didn’t tell me about it, you might not be able to find it...And we can go to the bank and get you a new check card.” Tru wanted to ask a thousand questions, but thought better of each, afraid the conversation would lead into areas she felt Brittany could not confront. And more than likely, Brittany wouldn’t have the answers anyway. “Feel free to take a nap if you need one,” she suggested, hoping to avoid the

taboo subjects the easy way. Brittany did not seem interested in sleeping, so Tru kept her eyes on the road and concentrated on driving, as much as the vividly surfacing memories would allow.

Brittany turned toward her now and again, considering her with unabashed curiosity; an action which Tru failed to ignore with rather perilous transparency. Finally, Brittany cleared her throat and asked, “Why do we look like total opposites?”

Tru closed her eyes for a second longer than a blink, and knew the tension in the car threatened to grow stronger. She had to be careful how she answered the inevitable questions that would arise before they were home. “It has something to do with genetics, I would guess.”

Brittany loosened her seat belt and twisted, lifting her left foot up onto the seat to face the dark-haired young woman. “Does it have something to do with what you said we had to discuss later?”

“Yes,” Tru answered truthfully, reluctant to spill the information without some degree of probing on Brittany’s part. It was a witness stand, and the attorney in her mind coached her to give only direct answers to the questions asked.

Brittany waited an interminable amount of time before she spoke again. “So, are you going to tell me what the big secret is?”

Tru shifted in the seat and turned the heater down another notch. “I don’t think this is the proper time or place for this conversation.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not going to be very easy.”

Brittany looked down at the console thoughtfully. “Is it about our parents? Did we have different fathers or mothers or something?”

“No. Well, yes.”

“Am I adopted?”

“No.”

“Well, this is like pulling teeth. Are you gonna tell me or not?”

“Honestly, I’d rather wait until we get home.”

“That’s another three-hundred-something miles, you said. Are we gonna sit in silence until then?”

“I’m sure we can find another topic.”

Brittany frowned. “What have we got to talk about? I don’t even know you.”

Tru cringed, and gripped the wheel tighter.

“Why do you do that?”

“What?”

“Why do you get so...tense when I tell you I don’t remember you?”

“Well, I’d say that’s pretty obvious. We were very close, and you disappear, and I search all over creation for you, afraid you’re dead, and then when I finally find you, you have amnesia.”

“You seem a little too tense, that’s all. And it’s not my fault I have amnesia; it was an accident.”

“I didn’t say it was your fault—”

“Well, you’re acting like you think so.”

Tru sighed and pulled what looked like an ink pen out of her jacket pocket, and put the end in her mouth, sucked it, and vapor came out.

Brittany noticed. “What’s that?”

“An eCig.”

“A what?”

“An electronic cigarette.”

Brittany kept frowning.

“They haven’t been around that long, only a couple of years. But they allowed us both to quit tobacco.”

“It’s not tobacco?”

“No, it’s electronic. Battery heats an atomizer and creates a vapor. No tobacco, no toxins. Just nicotine and whatever flavor you prefer.”

“It smells good. What kind is that?”

“Apple.” Tru glanced at her. “I sell them. I have a distributorship and a website.” When Brittany didn’t say anything else, she thought about their harsh exchange of words before the eCig came up. “Maybe it’s my fault.”

“What?”

“Your amnesia. We had a fight the night you had the accident. I asked you to leave.”

“I thought you said we were close.”

“We were—are—but... shit happens. We had a fight, that’s all.”

“What was the fight about?”

Tru took another drag. “It doesn’t matter, now. It’s water under the bridge.” She experienced an emotional flash the second she made the comment. She imagined Brittany in that car, underwater, drowning...

Brittany leaned her cheek over onto the headrest, and scrutinized Tru as she puffed the eCig, watched the road, and occasionally checked the rearview mirror. She witnessed the fight with some emotion that kept leaping to Tru’s face. “I’m not trying to cause trouble, Tru, I’m trying to find out who I am.”

Tru pulled the eCig out of her mouth. “Give it some time. It’ll come back to you when you’re ready to remember it. That’s what the doctor told me.”

Brittany adjusted the rings on her fingers. “What’s the story with all this silver and turquoise jewelry?”

Tru looked over at Brittany’s hands, pleased to see that she wore the rings, even though they were on the wrong fingers. “I bought them for you. There’s this jeweler in Boulder that you like. She designs some wonderful things.”

“Oh.” Brittany seemed satisfied, and fell quiet for several miles.

When Tru took the first Gunnison exit, they were both ready to eat an early lunch and go to the bathroom—not necessarily in that order.

Tru carried the pump coffee dispenser inside with her, noting that she had a habit of keeping it with her the last few weeks. She left it for the clerk to refill, and bought two packs of gum, while Brittany ordered cheeseburgers, fries, and drinks from the snack bar. They took the food to go, and trudged through the snow to the parking lot.

“I hope you like cheeseburgers, cause that’s what I got,” Brittany announced. Tru clicked the security module on her key ring to unlock Brittany’s door for her and held it open while she got in. “Gentlemanly of you,” Brittany remarked, looking at Tru oddly.

Tru closed the door and went around to get in, and they were on their way again.

Brittany took the burgers out of the sack, and handed one to Tru. As they ate, Brittany considered the distance they had gone, and still had to go, before Castle Mountain. “Tru—” she said around a mouthful. “How come I was here in Gunnison when I had the accident?”

Tru swallowed her own bite and glanced at Brittany, taking a quick drink of Dr. Pepper. “I guess you kept driving after you left that night. I told you I had a hard time tracking you down.”

“Were you looking for me the whole time I was gone?”

“Night and day. I was afraid—”

“—that I was dead,” she finished for her.

Tru took another bite and remained silent.

“I guess that must have been hard on you.”

“Hard doesn’t even begin to cover it. It was really horrible getting through the holidays all alone. I haven’t had a full night’s sleep since you disappeared.”

Brittany frowned and extracted a large ring of white onion from her burger. She tossed it onto the bag next to the fries on the console between them. “Lots of onions.”

Tru glanced down at the white ring stained with mustard. “You like onions.”

Brittany halted before she took another bite. “I do?”

“I don’t like it when you eat them—” Tru heard an editing machine click on in her brain. *Way to be stupid!*

Brittany still held her burger aloft, waiting for Tru to finish her sentence.

“I guess they don’t do great things for my breath,” Brit added.

Well, fine. I’d rather have you say it, than me.

“Are you going to tell me what we had that fight about?”

Tru shook her head. “No sense in opening old wounds.”

“They’re new to me.” She picked up the onion and put it back between the buns.

Tru filled her mouth with a huge portion of burger to avoid a response entirely.

“It’s okay, I’ll wait until you finish your lunch,” she offered smartly, taking a bite.

Tru sighed, and continued to chew, feeling dreadfully like she was in an interrogation room at the police department. She dropped the remainder of the burger onto the bag with the fries, and swallowed. “Why can’t you wait until we get home?”

“I can’t,” Brit dropped her burger next to Tru’s. “I have too many questions.”

“So do I.”

“Like what?”

“You can’t answer them until you get your memory back,” she said matter-of-factly. “Grab that thermos behind your seat. I need some coffee.”

Brittany obliged, and even poured them each a cup, moving their soft drinks to the rear holders and placing the coffee cups in the console. “Okay. We’ve had lunch, I’m not sleepy, and we both have coffee. Now what subject can we talk about without playing cat and mouse?”

“I want to know what the doctor told you. I mean, are you going to be okay?”

Brittany lifted the cup to her lips and blew on the steamy liquid. “I guess I’ll be as good as new eventually. Provided I get my memory back.”

Tru tore her eyes away from the road, briefly. “I thought the amnesia was only temporary.”

“I don’t think they know for sure.”

“What about your arm—isn’t it supposed to be in the sling?”

“Too confining. My arm’s much better, anyway. It’s my head they worried about. I got over the banged up knees and other stuff. Ribs are still a little sore, though.”

Tru lifted her cup and blew on the coffee. “You had a concussion, right?”

“Yeah. Dr. Armstrong said I bruised my brain. Isn’t that charming?”

“You’re okay now, though, right?”

“I guess so. They released me, didn’t they?”

Tru sipped the coffee. “Are you going to need anything? Prescriptions, or the like?”

“I’ve got enough to last a month or so. Why all the questions? You sound more like my mother than my sister.”

“I want to make sure everything’s in order before we get to the house. Sometimes it’s hard to get back off the mountain in bad weather.”

“Oh.” Brittany picked up her cheeseburger and took another bite. Through a mash of pickles and ground beef, she said, “What are you hiding?”

Tru’s foot came off the accelerator almost imperceptibly, then resumed its original pressure. “Who says I’m hiding anything?”

“You’re somewhat transparent.”

Tru glanced over at her, trying not to lose sight of the roadway. “Heavily into body language, now, are you?”

“Don’t try to change the subject again.”

Tru set the windshield wipers on a slower speed, to counteract the noise they were beginning to make as the snowfall eased. “I think my information is best discussed after we get home, like I said before.”

“Your ‘information’? You sound like a double agent.”

“Close.”

Brittany put her foot back on the floor and faced the front. “This is getting old. You can’t even tell me what this is all about.”

“It doesn’t bother me. I know who I am. It will, however, bother you.”

“How do you know?”

Tru cast a look her direction. “Educated guess.”

“Why don’t you let me be the judge?”

“The judge—” Tru smirked. “That’s a good word. You might want to sentence me to hell when you find out.”

“Find out what, dammit!?” Brittany turned in the seat again.

“Want some gum?” Tru fished in her pocket.

“No, I don’t want any stupid damn gum! Spill it!”

Tru released a lungful of air. “I don’t know how to say this...don’t freak out, okay?”

“Tell me,” she ordered.

“I’m not your sister.”

Brittany sat stone-faced, absorbing this information. “Okay...you’re not my sister. . .that’s not a total shock. Why—why did you tell me you were?”

“So you’d trust me and come home.”

“Okay, we’re not sisters. That explains why we look like total opposites, but —”

“We’re lovers.”

Brittany froze, letting this newest tidbit soak in atop the others. “We’re what?”

“Lovers,” Tru confirmed. “You’re gay. I’m gay. We live together. We share a life. We’re lovers.”

Brittany eased herself back against the seat and stared at the dashboard. She put her coffee in the console and blinked a few times, swallowing as if she had something foreign in her throat that would not go down. “Stop the car.”

“What?”

“Stop the fucking car!”

9

TRU ROLLED HER EYES ON A SIGH, her foot pressing only slightly on the brake. “Don’t be ridiculous—”

“Damn you! I said stop the fucking car!” Brittany shouted, her fingers gripping the door handle, forewarning.

Tru took her foot off the accelerator dubiously. When she saw Brittany pry on the handle and release the door, she braked. “Okay! Okay! Jeez, calm down—” The Cherokee skidded to a halt sideways in the gravelly sludge of the shoulder.

Brittany launched herself out of the car, Tru suffering the sensation of cold air rushing into her right ear.

Tru gasped, wiggling a fingertip in her ear to release the pressure. She saw the other young woman trudging down the road ahead of her. *Where does she think she’s going?*

Brittany stomped through the snow, pausing every few steps to kick clumps of it out of her path. Tru sighed, refreshing her coffee from the thermos, and letting the steam warm her face as

she continued to watch Brittany, fully expecting her to grasp the irrational nature of her response. Minutes passed, with Tru drumming her fingers on the steering wheel, watching the woman's form shrinking into the distance. Shaking her head, she dropped the gear shift into drive and let the Cherokee creep along the side of the glassy blacktop.

After walking the length of a football field, Brittany began to clench her side and huff, and Tru thought she looked like an angry human freight train, as her breath formed billows around her head. Tru eased up beside her and fingered the electric window switch on her door. The glass hummed down into the passenger door. "Pretty cold out there. Aren't you cooled off, yet?"

Brittany shot a glance at her and kept walking.

Tru examined the curve in the road ahead, careful of any oncoming traffic. "Brit. Where are you planning to walk?"

"To hell if I have to!" she sneered.

"You don't have to go there to get warm." Tru leaned back to avoid the oncoming scowl Brittany tossed over her shoulder at her. She realized that sarcasm would not get her back in the car, and tried to imagine what Brittany would want to hear. "We have a big fireplace at home—"

"Shut up!" Brittany thrust her hands in her jeans and continued.

"Brit, do you realize how stupid this is?" Tru crept along beside her and listened for a response, that did not come. "Shit." Tru stopped and lifted the shift into park. Carrying the coffee with her, she got out and caught up with the young woman. "Brit. Hey. Slow down." Tru snagged her at the elbow, and Brittany wrenched her arm away, the action causing a sharp pain in her tender ribs. She stopped to wrap her arms around herself. "Hey," Tru stopped beside her. "You okay?"

"Fucking fantastic!" Brittany straightened with a stunted sigh, her eyes studying the snow-laden trees beside the road. *I can't be gay. Why does my mind want to reject something I can't even remember?*

Tru stepped in front of her and offered her the coffee. “You’re going to get sick out here.”

“I’m already sick.” Brittany took the steaming Styrofoam cup and held it between her red fingers, then suddenly threw it on a clump of snow in front of her. The brown liquid sank into a tiny indentation, steam rising from it in puffs which caught in the wind and were gone.

“Hey, that’s from my finest collection of Styrofoam,” Tru tried to joke. “I swear, we can’t have nice things—“ Brittany ignored her. *Okay, jokes aren’t working.*

Brittany stood with her arms around herself. *Is it really wrong to be gay, or is what I feel a knee-jerk response?*

“This isn’t going to help anything. Get back in the car. Please?”

A pickup truck whooshed by, splattering Brit’s leg with slush. “Oh perfect,” she grunted, looking up at the shrinking tail lights of the offending vehicle. Then she froze. Taking a sudden step forward, she crushed the cup into the snow, walking stiffly, as if mesmerized, toward the bend in the road.

Tru frowned. “Brit? What’s the matter with you?”

Brittany kept walking, oblivious to Tru’s interrogations. Tru glanced back at the Jeep, its engine idling, the exhaust creating clouds at the back bumper, and decided to leave it to follow Brit around the bend in the road. She watched her move to the rail on the bridge and stop. Tru came up to her and searched her face. Brittany released all the air from her lungs and swallowed thickly.

“What’s wrong? Are you really sick?”

Brittany’s only response was to put her arms back around herself, her breath coming in short wisps in the frigid air.

“Brit? What’s—”

“It was here—” she gasped, swallowing over and over as if the action would remove the feeling. She stared, transfixed, at the new reflective steel posts which had been placed in the break between the poles; the railing ends were jagged and curled in a sinister metal grin.

Tru watched her, suddenly afraid to speak, recognizing the crippling memory as it enveloped the other woman.

“The wreck,” Brit whispered, focusing beyond the rail, now.

Tru surveyed the icy river beneath them on the bridge, conjured an image of Brittany’s car smashing the guard rail and plunging into the wintry water—saw her trapped inside the car—and a haunting, rippling queasiness passed through her.

Tru managed to get Brittany back into the Cherokee, tossing the empty Styrofoam cup she had retrieved from the roadside into the back floorboard. She fixed the seat belt around the woman and buckled it, as Brittany leaned her head against the headrest and stared over the hood onto the road. Tru fastened her own belt and inched out onto the blacktop once more.

Tru glanced over at her, and back at the road sign. “We’ve still got a long way to go. Can we just be civil?” When she saw that Brittany did not intend to respond, she got another Styrofoam cup from the bag under the seat and set it in the console between them. “Drink some coffee. You need to warm up.”

Brittany looked down at the thermos numbly, as if she could not, at first, identify its function. Then she picked it up.

Little was said over the next few hours. Tru took comfort in the radio, tuning to Brittany’s favorite station. Tru remembered a song as it began, and turned up the volume. “This is one of your favorite songs,” she said. Brittany looked down at the radio as if it were a TV. “It’s Heart... remember?” Brittany listened to the driving guitar and lyrics of *‘Barracuda’*. *‘So this ain’t the end, I saw you again... today...’* and shook her head. Tru leaned back and let it play, remembering what Brittany could not.

By the time Tru made it to Arvada, she glanced over at Brittany, hoping she'd remember the area, but saw that she still slept soundly. She had either been asleep for the last four hours, or pretending to be asleep. Either way, she did not wake her, but let herself enjoy the tension that had drained from the cab of the Cherokee since Brittany had closed her eyes and dozed off. Two hours later, with Boulder in the rearview mirror, she turned off Fall River Road, onto Castle Mountain Road, and crept into a long driveway, braking softly in front of the garage door.

"We're home," she whispered. Brittany did not stir, and Tru leaned her head on the steering wheel and thought of all that 'home' used to mean. Softly, she began to cry, but shoved the tears away and patted Brittany's arm. The young woman's eyes fluttered and opened, to the view of the garage door, and a rock and cedar Ranch-style house. She looked over at Tru, a sleepy question in her eyes.

"You're home, Brit."

Brittany massaged the back of her neck and looked around the place. None of it looked familiar to her. She distinguished the glow of the front porch light from beside the garage, its beam peppered with the light snowflakes that were beginning to fall. "You're the one who's home," she said.

10

TRU UNLOCKED THE FRONT DOOR AND MOTIONED Brittany inside ahead of her. "Have a seat, I'll start a fire." Tru set Brittany's backpack on the floor by the sofa, and greeted the calico cat that appeared from the kitchen to rub itself against her leg. "Hey, Dropsi-doodle. Have you been lounging on the countertops since mama's been gone?" The cat mewed a response, and continued to circle Tru's leg affectionately. "I'll feed you in a minute." The cat noticed Brittany, then, and her eyes widened in recognition. She meowed loudly and ran to Brit, stretching up to put her paws on Brit's leg.

"She missed you." Tru found that the cat's response made her misty-eyed.

Brit patted the cat's head, then picked her up and stroked her.

Tru took kindling from the cabinet beside the pit. Stacking it on the andiron, she set aflame the Fatwood Firestarter stick with a long match.

As Dropsi leaned against Brit, purring softly, she inspected her new milieu. The smoke-gray sectional was positioned in an "L" configuration. She seated herself on the one facing the fireplace and watched Tru place a log atop the flaring tinder, as Dropsi settled onto her lap, still purring. She noticed the framed photo on the mantel of she and Tru posing with their arms around each other in a wooded area. "Where was that picture taken?"

Tru glanced over and then up to the mantel. "That was in Nederland. One of our weekend camping trips last summer."

"Where's that?"

"It's West of Boulder, in the mountains. Really quaint."

Brit's stomach growled. "Got anything to eat around here?" She petted the cat absently.

Tru turned from her squatted position to peer back at her. "I think there's some roast left. I'll heat some up for us."

Her first need addressed, Brit recognized her second. "Where's the bathroom?"

Tru blinked away the aloof tone of Brittany's voice, and pointed toward the doorway. "Through there, second door on the left."

Brittany hauled herself out of the plush sofa and disappeared into the hall. Dropsi followed Brittany, knowing that a trip to the bathroom usually meant she could get some fresh water from the sink.

Tru took the poker from its wrought iron stand and jabbed at the logs until satisfied that the flames had caught. She drew the wire mesh screen closed in front of the pit and sat on the carpet, leaning back on her hands. Obviously locked out of the bathroom, the calico returned and stepped into

her lap, kneading her legs with her clawless paws, Tru stared into the pit and tried to concentrate only on the flames. They leaped blue, red, orange, and yellow, licking the wood and chewing it up, then spitting it out in small particles onto the stone of the fireplace ledge.

“I thought you were going to heat up the roast?” Brittany said behind her, indignant.

Dropsi jumped out of her lap and darted into the kitchen, as if startled by Brittany’s voice. Tru bit back the retort which leapt to her tongue like the flames of the fire she had been watching. Instead she pushed herself up with a grunt and headed for the kitchen mumbling, “Yes, My Queen...”

“What?”

Tru threw back over her shoulder, “I said, ‘those logs are green’—it may take them a while to catch.”

Brittany looked over at the fire and back toward the kitchen doorway, through which Tru had disappeared. Rubbing her neck, Brittany returned to her spot on the sofa and stared into the flames. As the fire crackled, she considered her predicament. It would not be long, she guessed, before this Tru-person began to make a move on her. Brittany almost hoped she would, so that she could put her in her place. *If she thinks she can bring me to this cozy little retreat, build a nice fire, provide a warm supper, and then get a little repayment for her trouble, she had another think coming. It wasn’t my idea to come all the way out to this God-forsaken mountain; I resisted strongly enough. Well, let her accept the situation on my terms, then, she decided emphatically.*

Brittany heard a beeping of the microwave, and a few minutes later, Tru appeared with two steaming bowls. “Here ya go.” Tru placed the dish of roast on the coffee table in front of Brittany.

Brittany looked up at her with a pithy smirk. “Thanks.”

Tru turned around with her own bowl quickly, so that Brittany’s expression would not make her feel like a serf at the foot of a master. She sat at the

opposite end of the sofa and began to eat; glancing every so often at Brittany, who ate her own meal in abstract silence.

They finished at precisely the same time, and Tru rose to retrieve the bowl from Brittany. “Feel better, now?”

“Does it matter?” Brittany responded caustically.

Tru stood over her, holding both empty bowls, and after a brief, pregnant silence, she turned and took the dishes back into the kitchen. When she returned, Brittany stood in front of the fireplace, her arms folded. Tru came to the fire and held her palms out to its warmth. “I’ll sleep in the guest room.”

Brittany snorted. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Tru could feel the hair on the back of her neck rise up, and had to concentrate all her energy on maintaining control of the raw temper that this new version of Brittany seemed to incite in her. The frustration she had felt when they first met sprang from sexual tension, and Brit’s aloofness, but she had never been mean. Tru bit her bottom lip hard and exhaled slowly.

“Oh,” Brittany turned to face her, sarcastically. “Did you expect me to bed down with you?”

Tru felt the restraints she had placed carefully around her temper stretch and break. “Hey!”— came the angry shout.

Brittany gawked at Tru, her eyebrows high on her forehead.

“Do I have green teeth?”

Brittany cleared her throat, mumbled something which Tru cut off.

“—am I seven feet tall, hairy like an ape, with swamp slime oozing off me?! Am I?!” she demanded.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s simple enough.” Tru counted off each item on her fingers, “Do I have green teeth? Am I seven feet tall? Am I hairy like an ape? Do I have swamp slime oozing off me? Well?”

Brittany stared at her, transfixed by the redness of Tru’s face, the way her dolphin-gray eyes turned to pewter. “I never said—”

“No! You never said it! But you sure as hell treat me that way! I’m not a monster! Get over yourself!” —and she stomped from the room, down the hall, and slammed the guest room door behind her.

Brittany stared at the doorway for a long moment, her eyes moving as if reading some invisible words in the air.

Slowly, she smiled.

A half hour later, as Brittany watched CNN, Tru appeared in the doorway. “I’m sorry for—losing my temper...”

Brittany smiled demurely. “No problem.”

Tru hesitated, then moved to the sofa to sit. She watched headline news for a moment, and

the anchor announced that Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and his son were injured in a

motorcycle accident.

“*Governor Schwarzenegger?*” Brittany said. “The actor?”

Tru smiled. “Yeah. I guess it sounds crazy if you don’t remember it.”

They continued to watch, until the ticker mentioned snowstorms in Colorado. Tru picked up

the remote and tuned to the Weather Channel, to find that it was headed in their direction. “It’s going to get pretty nasty outside tonight.”

The phone rang and Tru answered it, telling Brenda that Brittany was fine and still recovering from the accident. She hung up. "Brenda said to tell you hello and she's thinking about you."

"Who's Brenda?" Brittany said.

Tru blinked a few times. "Never mind."

The small talk disintegrated into no talk at all, and finally they were left with only the sound of the television.

As Brittany flipped through channels on cable, Tru pulled her laptop from the bag beside the sofa, and booted into Windows, opened Outlook Express and opened the mail in her eCig folder. She had new orders to fill.

Brittany watched her for a moment. "Do I have my own computer?"

Tru looked up. "Um...yeah...it's in the bedroom closet, in a black bag."

Brittany got up and fetched it, soon settling back down on the sofa next to Tru. Oddly, she found that she knew exactly how to boot up and use it. Those memories had been untouched. But she had no idea what she would find. She opened her own Outlook, and then watched her inbox start to fill up. "Holy crap," she murmured.

"What?"

"'You've got mail'..." she mimicked the infamous sound byte.

"I bet you do."

Brittany watched as they added: offers for penis enlargement, fake lottery winnings, and Canadian prescription offers; mail from Brenda, with subject lines growing progressively worried about where Brittany had disappeared to; funny pictures and joke forwards from Jan, Liz...and a mail from someone named Travis, letting her know he had a guest room if she needed it. *Odd*. She glanced at Tru and decided against mentioning it, but wasn't sure why. "I got a mail from Brenda." She said instead. "Should I write

back? I mean, I don't know what to say, because I don't really remember her..."

"Well, I contacted most people and let them know the situation. They understand."

"Oh." She looked up at the doorway to the hall. "Are you going to show me around the house?"

"Okay."

Brittany stood and followed as Tru started toward the hall. Tru indicated the first door on the right. "The master bedroom. You can sleep in here."

"Alone, right?"

Tru sighed. "I'll sleep in the guest room."

"You didn't think I was going to bunk with you, did you?"

"We've had this conversation. I think it's clear that's not an option."

"Just checking," she answered. Brittany looked at the Southwestern comforter on the bed, and the propped up pillows with beige and green cases. Then the walls caught her eyes. "Why are there all those faded places on the walls? Where's the pictures?"

Tru put her hands in her pockets. "I took them down after you left. They're packed in a box in the closet."

Brittany turned to look at her. "They were mine?"

"Yes." Tru knew she didn't understand. They were hers: paintings she'd created and photographs she had taken when things were still good between them. Tru took them down only a few days before she found her again; fearful that looking at them everyday would add to her suffering.

"Is it okay if I put them back up?"

“Sure. We can do that later. Let me show you the rest of the house.” Tru led her across the hall to the other bedroom. “This is the guestroom.”

Brittany took in the guitars and speakers and recording equipment. “Looks more like a studio.”

“Well, it is, really. I use it for music.”

“So you got two rooms in the house?”

“We shared one, and I used this one for music. You did your creative stuff out in the workshop.”

“What creative stuff? What did I do?”

“Photography, painting, and sculpture.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’ll show you your stuff if you want.”

Brit nodded, and Tru headed for the kitchen door, with Brit in tow. “Where are we going?”

Tru took their jackets from the hook and handed Brit hers. “Out to the workshop.”

After making their way through the snow to the shed attached to the barn, Tru opened the door and switched on the light. In the center of the room, there was a pottery wheel, and scattered about were the tools and productions of a sculptor’s trade. Busts of famous figures, elongated, dancing women, pottery, and masks, all rendered in clay. “Wow. I did all this?”

“Yes. You were very talented. Are talented. Maybe if you played around with this stuff, it would come back to you.”

Brit moved to a bust that graced a pedestal in the corner. “This is you.”

“Yeah. You did that a few months ago. You’ve sold lots of stuff to galleries and collectors.” She pointed to the other side of the room. “That’s your darkroom. You developed pictures in there.”

Brit went to the small door and stepped inside. Switching on a light, the room flooded with a hue of indigo, and she quickly browsed the photos papering the walls, the those dangling from a string attached wall-to-wall. There were images of deer, rabbits, snow-covered trees, sunsets, the horses. “Wow. I was good.”

“Maybe you still are.”

Brit picked up a 35 millimeter camera. “I don’t know anything about this, now...”

Tru heard the sadness tingeing her voice. “It’ll come back to you. Don’t worry. It’s too much a part of who you are.”

Then she turned and saw on another wall, an infinite number of images of Tru; smiling, goofing around, laughing, playing her guitar. And quite a few more of them together. In those, Brittany thought, she looked like she was madly in love with Tru.

Brit switched off the light. “Can we go in, now?”

“Sure.”

Tru locked the shop door, and they trudged inside. Taking off their coats, they hung them up and Tru moved into the living room, picking up her eCig and drawing on it, releasing a cloud of apple vapor.

“Can I have one of those?” Brittany inquired.

“How do you know whether you’re a Vaporist or not?”

“I don’t. But I want one,” she remarked evenly.

Tru pointed. “You have a few of them in the bottom drawer of the desk.”

Brit got up and found the black case, pulled out the eCig and took a drag of it. “Nothing is happening.”

“Oh—” Tru went to the desk and got the bottle of eJuice, refilled the filter in the mouthpiece again. “Your core was dry.”

Brittany tried again and produced a cloud of vanilla vapor.

“How’s that?”

Brittany took another drag, blowing the cloud upward in a quick stream. “It’s good. I like it.”

“You haven’t had nicotine for a few weeks, it might kick you a little.”

“Ain’t that a hoot,” Brittany grinned.

Tru smiled to herself. “You used to say that all the time, too.”

“I did?”

Tru nodded, warming her tea in the microwave. “Wonder why you can say things that you used to say, but you can’t remember me?”

Brittany stared at her, wondering about it, too. “Some questions overpower some answers.”

“Now, you never said that,” Tru smiled.

Brittany found her own smile, as well, but carefully concealed it from Tru. “What kind of tea is that?”

“Ginseng and spice.”

“Do I like it?”

Tru laughed. “You used to.”

“It smells good.”

“Help yourself,” Tru indicated the microwave.

Brittany had put the cup of water in the microwave, set the time and started it before she even considered reading the buttons. She leaned down to look through the front glass. “Now how did I know how to work this thing?”

Tru stood behind her. “It’s yours.”

Brittany craned her neck to look up at her, then stood, her eyes wide. “Really? I wonder what else is mine?” She studied the living room. “You’d tell me if something was mine, wouldn’t you?”

Tru smirked. “Depends on how you treat me.”

“Careful, Truly, your teeth are showing.”

Tru’s face went soft. “You called me *Truly*.”

Brittany shook her head slightly, lifting a puzzled eyebrow.

“...it was your pet name for me.”

The microwave beeped and stopped, and the room dropped to silence. Brittany retrieved the cup of water and put a teabag in it, returning to the living room. She looked down at her fresh cup of tea, the steam rising in curlicues and vanishing in the air. She thought about the photos in the darkroom; so many of them, Tru. “I must have loved you,” she said suddenly.

Tru caught her breath, and concentrated on slowing the pounding of her heart. When she found the strength to look up, Brittany blew on the tea, the steam framing her face like in the dream she’d had last night. “You like it with a...teaspoon of cream and one lump,” she revealed.

Brittany looked at the teacup and back at Tru. Convinced, she got up and went to the kitchen to add the ingredients, knowing that her words had impacted on Tru, but unable to decide whether there was anything she could do about it, or if she wanted to. When she came back into the room, Tru lingered at the front window, watching the snowfall.

From behind her, Brittany said, “It’s pretty.”

Tru nodded on a sniffle, lifting a hand to her nose and away again.

Brittany stepped closer, leaning around so she could see the young woman’s face. “Hey— I’m... I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“I’m being maudlin.”

“Look... I know I’ve been a royal bitch to you. I’m... I’m sorry. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Tru removed a traveling tear with the back of her hand. “It’s okay. Forget it. I know it can’t be a barrel of monkeys for you, either.”

Brittany swallowed, frowning, while something indefinable fluttered inside her. “Tru... I’m trying to deal with this the only way I know how. It’s scary. I have a whole life history, and I can’t remember it... I have these dreams at night and I don’t know what they mean. I don’t know if I’m remembering something or going crazy. I mean, I don’t have any memories, and you have too many.”

I have dreams, too, Tru thought, watching Brit’s face intently as she spoke. The infinite blue of her eyes. They seemed even bluer than before the accident. She missed the way those eyes would catch hers and see all the way to her heart. How could she relate to this woman platonically when they had been lovers for so long? How could she stop wanting her—wanting to touch her again—wanting to show her the profound relief that she had not been killed in that

awful, nightmarish plunge into the icy river? How could she stop feeling like it was all her fault? *God! I want to put my arms around you, Brit—*

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

She averted her eyes, a fresh stab of remorse reminding her that things might never be the same. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I—how do you...feel about me?”

Now was her chance to say it. An open door. She met Brittany's gaze. "I love you." Tears welled up in her eyes. "I always have and I always will."

Brittany sighed. "I wish I could say that back to you and know I meant it. I can see that you need to hear it. But I don't know who I am or what I feel."

"I know." Tru pressed her eyes with her fingers, and watched the snow fall onto the window sill outside.

Brittany moved back to the sofa. She sipped her tea and regarded the other young woman. She was attractive, she had to admit that. *I may have been gay, she reflected, but at least I had good taste.* Tru's silky black hair, and somewhat cherubic face made her look younger than —"Tru, how old are you?"

At first, Tru turned to examine Brit's face, unsure of the question; maybe she would berate her for the emotions she fought to control. But Brittany seemed perfectly sincere. "Thirty-one."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Even though I don't look it."

"Now the big question: How old am I?"

Tru blinked, smiling slightly. "They didn't tell you that in the hospital?"

"They had no way of knowing."

"You're...twenty-three."

"Twenty-three!? Jesus Christ, I don't feel—" She looked at Tru carefully and caught the hint of mirth in her eyes. "Jerk. Tell me the truth."

Tru was smiling. "This is great. You have the amnesia, and I have all the information."

"Stop screwin' around. How old am I?"

“Twenty-nine.”

“No shit?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“Do I want to know anything else about myself?”

“Doesn’t matter. What could be more horrible than being gay?” *Hah!*

“Don’t be snotty.” Brittany gathered her hair behind her neck and pulled on it, then let it drop down to lie between her shoulder blades.

Tru watched her fuss with her hair, noticing that at least that hadn’t changed. She still had many of the same mannerisms. “I could tell you the good stuff.”

Brittany drank the last of her tea. “I think I’m over this tea jag. Got anything stronger?”

“Beer.”

Brittany nodded enthusiastically, and Tru went to get them two bottles.

Brittany twisted off the cap to the Bud Light. “Okay, the good stuff...but one thing: Would you lie about it?”

“Do you feel like you like being lied to?” Tru took a long drink.

“No. I think I’d hate it.”

“Well, we’ve been together for five years; if I were a liar, would you have stayed that long?”

“Good point.”

She crossed to the window again. “Then believe that what I tell you is real, okay? We’ll use the five-second rule.” Tru wiped some dust from the sill, and cleaned her hand on her jeans.

Brittany tuned the TV to an ambient music channel and lowered the volume. Tru noticed that Brittany had always done this right before she was about to become amorous.

“What’s the five-second rule?”

Too much to hope for. She knew Brit had no intention of getting fresh. “Oh yeah, I keep forgetting you keep forgetting...it’s a little agreement we had. We could be sarcastic or lie, but we had to admit it after five seconds, so there would be no misunderstandings.”

“Well you just broke your own rule. You held onto that lie about my age for a good 15 seconds.”

“I’m rusty. What do you want to know?”

Brittany muted the television and took a deep breath and released it. “Where did we meet?”

“In the Army.”

“Me? In the Army?”

“I was surprised to find you there, too.”

Brittany remembered the BDU jacket Tru wore out to the shed, and wondered why hers was nowhere to be seen. Had she been wearing it the night of the accident? Maybe it was in that river....

Tru spoke toward the window pane, still watching the snow fall like bleached confetti. “You were mad at the world the day you went to the recruiter. I guess you weren’t thinking clearly.”

Brittany puffed on the eCig and took a drink of beer. “Were you thinking clearly when you joined?”

“Yeah. I wanted the changes I was about to go through.”

“How did we end up together?”

“That’s a long story. But if it eases your mind any, you were straight when you met me. You had never been with a woman.”

Brittany pushed herself up and joined Tru at the window. “So you brought me over to the dark side.”

“Dark side? I wouldn’t call it that.”

“Whatever. So, I came back after training to live with you?”

“Not exactly. You signed on for two years. You spent a year in Germany, and started seeing this soldier-boy at the base.”

“That doesn’t make much sense, considering I’m supposed to be gay.”

One corner of Tru’s mouth shot upward in amusement. “You were confused.”

Brittany put both hands on the window sill and leaned her face close to the glass, fogging it with her breath. “So, how did I end up with you?”

“You stopped being confused.”

Brittany swatted her on the arm.

“You wrote me a letter saying how miserable things were. Two months later, you got yourself kicked out, and you showed up on my doorstep with all your worldly possessions and a severe case of jet lag.”

“And you took me in, and we lived happily ever after?” Brittany pressed the side of her fist into the fogged glass to form the imprint of a tiny foot, and began to add toes with the tip of her pinky.

“Not exactly. At first you insisted that our relationship be platonic.”

“When did it change?”

“When you stopped kidding yourself.”

Brittany fogged the window again, and made another imprint beside the first, adding toes. “Was I happy...I mean...being...with you?”

“You stayed five years before this accident.”

Brittany considered this as she made six toes, counted, and then erased the moist artwork with a sweep of her hand.

The phone rang and Tru went to the mounted console on the wall outside the kitchen. She covered the phone to catch Brittany’s attention. She mouthed silently, “It’s Max.”

Brittany pursed her lips thoughtfully, but made no move toward the phone, only wiped absently at the cold condensation on her hand.

Tru whispered, “Isn’t this the guy that took you to the hospital?” Brittany only nodded, breathing more fog onto the window pane to replace what she had wiped away. “Well?” Tru whispered urgently.

“Tell him I’m not here.”

Tru gave her a comical, disapproving look and uncovered the mouthpiece again. “She said she’s not here—”

Brittany slapped her own leg, flustered. “Tru! You are such a dork!” She rubbed her palm dry against her jeans on the way to the phone, snatching the receiver from Tru rudely and lifting it to her face, her expression changing abruptly to exaggerated courtesy. “Max? Oh, she was being silly. How are you?”

Tru snickered and dropped into the sofa to eavesdrop, audience to Brittany’s ghastly facial contortions while she spoke with Max in an utterly gracious tone. “Oh, I’m not sure. I’m still settling in, and getting to know my...my sister again.”

Tru cast a sardonic expression her direction and put a finger down her throat to demonstrate her opinion of the display.

“Well, really, I appreciate the offer, but I think I’ll have to take a rain check...okay...thanks for calling... b’-bye.” She replaced the receiver and turned purposefully toward Tru. “You—” she pointed a long-nailed finger. “—are in need of a swift kick.”

“How did he get our number?”

“He said Nurse Sturgis gave it to him.”

“Why didn’t you make a date with him?” Tru giggled.

Brittany came over and swiped a sofa pillow to swat Tru’s head, hitting her twice in succession for good measure. “I don’t have to answer that.”

“Why not?” Tru smoothed the damage to her hair.

Brittany sat down next to Tru, and drew a pensive breath. “I don’t know...I mean, really Tru, he’s such a geek. I don’t think I’m attracted to geeks.”

11

THE FIRST FEW BARS OF MUSIC SOUNDED, and Tru leaned over to grab her cell phone off the bed. She had found a way to upload part of one of her own songs as the ring tone. It wasn’t an ego-thing. She did it for marketing purposes. If her phone rang around other people, sometimes they asked about the ring tone, and she could tell them it was her, and move that directly into a CD sale.

She flipped the phone open. “Hello?”

“Hey, Chick. How’s the comfort level over there?”

Tru gave a half-laugh. “Hey Helki...um...well it could be worse I suppose.”

“That’s the spirit. Listen, chicklet, I think I have a kickin’ bass line for ‘Swallow’—“

“Stellar!”

“...you think I could come lay the track anytime soon? My recorder is busted, and I’m afraid I’m gonna lose it.

”Absolutely. Come on over.”

“Sure that’s cool with Brit?”

“It’ll have to be. We still have work to do. She can always go entertain herself if she doesn’t like it.”

Tru snapped her phone closed and headed down the hall. She recognized the music coming from the living room.

Brittany sat in front of the stereo. A swell of applause told her that the album had been recorded live, and as the applause died away, a voice warm with sincerity drifted through the speakers and encircled Brittany; a mellow alto, rich and soft. The CD case revealed that all the songs had been written by Raven. Brittany felt invaded, vulnerable, as the lyrics seemed to illuminate something inside her which she had not seen in such detail, yet welcomed the feeling as if it were a first kiss. She focused intently on those words...

‘What do you see in her?’ they ask,

*I saw through the frozen mask-And I knew someone else would
see through it, as well.*

I had a passion deep and wide,

I ached when she looked in my eyes,

She captured me, a mystery, a lover’s spell ...

And the ice maiden is melting...

“Tru...” she called, while the song continued.

Tru answered from the doorway where she had been watching Brit sit cross-legged on the floor in front of the stereo. “Yes?”

“Oh. I didn’t see you there. Hey, who is this ‘Raven’?” She looked at the CD, which gave no clue.

Tru grinned. “You like it?”

“I don’t know...it’s disarming. But sort of warm, ya know?”

“I hear that a lot...” She smiled.

Brittany continued to scrutinize the CD, and realized Tru had not said any more. She looked up. “What did you say?”

Tru put a hand to her lips to stifle a laugh. “I said I hear that a lot.”

Still oblivious, Brit looked back at the insert on the inside. “Do you know her?” she said, propping the case against the speaker.

“Quite well, actually.”

“What’s she like?”

“She’s an awful lot like me, except she has a different name.”

Sensing something odd in Tru’s tone, she peered up at her. “Why are you smiling at me like that?”

Tru laughed. “Brit, Raven is me.”

Brittany’s eyes went wide, and she watched the digital numbers change to the next track. She pushed stop. “This is you?”

“You saw the studio. It didn’t occur to you?”

“I—I guess I didn’t realize... I mean, I thought it was just a hobby. I didn’t think you had a CD.” She looked back at the case.

“I have two, actually. But they’re independent. I’m almost done with the third, which is geared more to the mainstream. Macy is trying to get me a major label. It’s what I’ve been doing with my life for the last six years, on and off. The last three, full-time.”

“I never even...ain’t that a hoot! Now why the hell can’t I remember that?”

Tru dropped to the floor beside her. “Maybe it’s not time for you to remember. Don’t force it.”

Brittany studied the CD again, opening it to view the insert. On the bottom, under acknowledgments were the words, *‘This album is dedicated to a Goddess, an angel, a fiery creature sent to vex and delight me... my love, my life: Brit... Yours, Raven.’*

Tru picked up the remote for the stereo. “Want to hear the rest of it?”

“No,” Brittany answered too suddenly. “I’m... no.” Getting to her feet, she disappeared into the kitchen.

Tru sighed and punched the power button. “So much for a trip down memory lane,” she murmured. Tru followed her. “Hey. Helki is on her way over. We need to lay down a bass track. So...”

She stood, holding the can of Dr. Pepper from the ‘fridge. “You want me get lost?”

“No. You did that recently, and I didn’t like it too much. I just wanted to give you a heads-up, because when we record, all the outside noise has to be gone—like the television. You could go out to the shop and play in the clay, maybe...”

“You don’t want me in the house at all?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. I just didn’t want you to feel like you had to—“

“Can’t I just watch?”

“Watch?” Tru frowned. “You mean the TV?”

“No, I mean, You. And Helki. Can’t I just be a spectator? I mean, if I’m quiet?”

Tru considered this. She hadn’t expected it, but certainly preferred Brit to be involved in her music. She always had been. “I...that’s fine. You used to sit in on most of our sessions.”

“Okay. Cool. If I get bored, I’ll just go read.” She held up the can of Dr. Pepper. “This is the last one,” she said, popping it open.

“Help yourself.”

“I did,” came the retort.

“Are we about to bicker again?”

“No.” Brittany swept past her and plopped on the sofa, while Tru put another log on the fire. Dropping to the floor, she watched the news, while waiting for Helki to arrive. She was leaning back on her hands, her legs stretched out and crossed in front of her.

“How much of your money do you make performing?”

“Almost all of it. Selling the eCigs is pretty lucrative, too.”

Brittany absorbed this new information and then grabbed the Discover magazine, leafing through it, then discarded it in favor of another. She thought about this Helki-person. She didn’t know thing-one about her, but it might be informative to meet one of Tru’s friends. She knew, memory or not, that you could often judge a person by who they called their friends.

Tru sat up and, spinning as if sitting on a lazy Susan, she regarded Brittany as she perused the contents of The Advocate. “Better be careful... that’s a gay publication.”

Brittany glanced up blandly. “I’m not that fragile.”

Tru sat with her elbows on her bent knees, rocking herself back and forth, humming the melody for ‘Swallow’, the song Helki was coming over to

record. The lyrics went through her head...

'I sustained another wound tonight, from a double-edged sword... so you handed me a big Band-Aid for the wound that you made before'...

She let her eyes travel across Brittany's face...the smooth brow, the oval of her jaw, the full, pink lips which were now puckered to one side as she chewed at the inside of her cheek while she read. Tru's eyes descended to her neck and shoulders, her mind's eye recalling what it felt like to drop kisses on the warm skin there...

'one wound heals while another gets deeper...'

...wishing for one opportunity to relive that experience.

I know you don't wanna be my keeper, anymore.

Her gaze dropped lower to the swell of her breasts, the gentle rise and fall of them as she breathed... the delicacy of her hands as she turned the page...

'If I can get it right tonight,

then maybe I can get it right tomorrow my heart puts up a hell of a fight,

it's a little bit more than I can swallow...'

...and laid the magazine on the arm of the sofa at her side, leaning, exposing the curve of her hips to Tru's perusal... the secret between them still vivid—

"What are you doing?" Brittany asked harshly.

Tru broke away from her reverie and looked up into those blue eyes, cold with disapproval. She had stopped humming without being aware of it, and had probably drawn attention to her intimate musing in doing so. "I was...just thinking."

"Looked more like fantasizing to me," Brittany concluded.

Tru felt the blood rush to her cheeks and looked away, unable to free herself from Brittany's probing, rebuking stare. She stretched out on her back and closed her eyes, attempting to draw the images back again, privately, as if they were nutrients she needed for survival.

She must have dozed off, because a soft rustling prompted her to open her eyes again, and she saw Brittany looming over her, her features strangely conflicted. Tru did not look away this time, and Brittany eased down to her knees beside her.

"You fell asleep. Isn't your friend about to be here?"

"Yeah." Tru made no effort to get up, but continued to stare at her.

"Your eyes are unnerving..." she said, grasping the material of the T-shirt at Tru's stomach and squeezing it into her fist. The jangle of the phone halted Brittany's movements, and she looked up at it, then got up quickly to answer. Tru closed her eyes as she heard Brittany say hello, and found her pulse hammering in her throat. *My eyes are unnerving*, Tru repeated the irony in her mind. *Did she—*

"Tru. It's the insurance guy. It's about my car. I think you'd better handle it."

Tru swallowed hard, rolled over, and got up. She took the phone and talked for a moment, then thanked the agent and hung up. "They won't replace your car because it wasn't in your name. We'll have to go lease you another one."

"With what? I don't have any money."

"Yes you do." Tru opened a drawer in a small desk by the kitchen and produced a checkbook from the box. "This is your account. And you have savings too."

She took the checkbook and looked at it. "I guess that's fortunate... I mean, I can't very well do the work I used to do, unless I... remember how..."

“You will.”

Brittany stared at Tru, as if considering, and then took a step toward her, but halted when the silence was broken by the horn outside. Helki was in the driveway.

“She’s here,” Tru said, spinning to go open the front door. Swinging it wide she called to her friend. “Need help?”

“No, I got it,” Helki said, lugging in her guitar case and shoulder bag. She dropped them both inside the door and gave Tru a warm hug and quick kiss. “I missed you, Chicklet!

“I missed you too,” Tru said, turning awkwardly to Brittany. “I feel like I need to introduce you two.”

“Well,” Helki said, moving toward Brittany. “You may not remember me, but I remember you.” She gathered her in a big hug, and also a quick kiss, which incited a blush to Brittany’s cheeks. “And I’m so glad you’re back. Tru was falling apart.” She grabbed her case and bag and started for the guest room studio.

Brittany met eyes with Tru and half-smiled. “She seems nice.”

Tru motioned for her to follow and they headed down the hall. Tru caught up to Helki and whispered in her ear. “No fair! You kissed her before I did.”

“Oops,” Helki snickered. “Sorry.” Then added in her own hushed tone, “Maybe you ought to be more aggressive. Don’t ask her permission.”

“I’d really like to do the bridge again. It wasn’t very tight.”

Tru pressed the buttons to send the Fostex recorder back a little. “Okay, just start playing, and I’ll punch you in at the end of that chorus going into the bridge.”

The Bridge, Brittany thought. That had only meant one thing to her, until now. That emotion she felt that day on the way home with Tru. That flash of memory about hitting the guard rail, and plunging into the river. From her

place beside Tru, she took a breath and moved the thought from her mind, focusing on the control panel of the recorder, and Tru's knowledgeable hands on the buttons and the jogging wheel.

"Okay, rolling..." Tru said.

Helki found her place in the music and began to play, and made it through the bridge flawlessly this time.

Tru stopped the recording and reset to the beginning, playing the tracks back with the new bass line in the mix. "That rocks, Helki."

"Cool," the woman said. "I like it."

"It's perfect. I love the way you used the harmonics on the middle part."

"Yeah, that was an accident at first, but then I liked it and it gave me the idea."

Tru looked at Brittany. "What did you think?"

"Me? I thought it was fabulous. I'm impressed with both of you."

"See?" Helki said to Tru. "You get to enjoy her rediscovery of your music all over again."

Tru blushed slightly, as Brittany smiled. "You are both very talented." She held Tru's eyes a beat longer than she intended.

Tru stood up. "I'm getting some more tea. Do you guys want anything?"

Helki handed her glass over, as did Brittany, and Tru went to the kitchen. Helki went back to thumbing her bass softly, and Brittany listened and watched. "How long have you known Tru?"

"Let's see... it's been a couple of years, now. She rescued me from another band of addicts."

"Another?"

“Well, yeah, it’s often hard to find musicians who aren’t using something. Even if it’s too much alcohol. I was so thrilled when Tru invited me to play with her. She’s the real deal.”

“How so?”

Helki stopped playing. “It’s odd to know that you feel like a stranger in a strange land...that must suck. But if you’re trying to find out whether or not you can trust Tru, let me just say that she’s aptly named.”

Tru then appeared with the tea glasses on a tray, and served them both. She sat down at the console, took a drink of hers, had a puff of her eCig, and then looked at both of them. “What did I miss?”

12

BRITTANY SLIPPED BEHIND THE WHEEL of the leased Nissan and closed the door, for a moment unsure of whether she remembered how to drive it. The dealership delivered it, and it was identical to the one she had owned before, but—she decided her doubt was ridiculous, and

started the engine, careful to keep Tru’s tail lights in view. She had to know what sort of “appointment” would draw Tru out at this hour. *After a solid week of almost complete isolation on this mountain, does she really expect me to wait at that big empty house while she runs off to get her jollies elsewhere? Never mind what Helki said. What else would her best friend say? She had an interest in keeping Tru happy.*

She had followed her for miles, from Castle Mountain, and Estes Park into the North edge of Boulder, through a jumble of obscure streets. After almost an hour of driving, Tru finally steered her Cherokee into a spacious parking area in front of a far-removed brick building behind a large warehouse. A sign at the landing by the front door read, *Finders-Keepers*. Brittany stopped her car, switched off her headlights, and watched Tru gather her things and go inside. She carried a guitar case. *Maybe it’s an open mic.*

Soon, more vehicles arrived, and more couples went inside, most of them female. “A damn gay-bar,” she grunted. She would have to go in, now. A shame to drive this far and then turn around and go home.

Traversing the lot to the door, she stepped inside, and was careful to keep her attention focused directly at the reception desk. She walked through the foyer quickly, for fear of being noticed by anyone she could not deal with. The man behind the desk recognized her. “Hey, darlin’, long time no-see.”

“Hi...” she said, off balance, then fumbled for the cash in her pocket.

“Don’t be silly, girl. You don’t have to pay, tonight. Have a good time.” He smiled impishly and stamped her hand with a little black silhouette of a bird.

“Thanks.” She touched the ink, and it came off on her finger, a transferable tattoo. She moved up the stairs from the foyer into a generous table-strewn room, vibrant with revelers. Ahead and below, she could see a larger room with even more tables. Candles glowed from netted bowls on each tiny table, and she was thankful for the darkness. She slithered through the clumps of bodies and chose a table in the corner by the stairs overlooking the stage beyond tables and chairs, behind which couples danced to the blaring pop music.

A waitress appeared to take her order, leaned down to look closely at her, and exclaimed, “Hey! How ya doin’ Brittany?”

“Uh—hi... fine...”

“You guys work it out?”

“I guess you could say that,” she answered evasively.

“That’s great. You two are such a perfect couple... we’ve got some of that white wine you like.”

“...sounds great.”

As she watched the waitress maneuver through the crowd toward the bar, she was struck with a sensation of vulnerability. A complete stranger knew what she drank, and she did not. Brittany's eyes darted around the room, wondering if there were others who would recognize her. She chastised herself for not wearing a disguise. She could get up and leave, but then she'd have to admit her guilt in bad judgment, and somehow she didn't like the way that felt.

Brittany scanned the area again, slowly. Two young women, short haircuts, but stylish and attractive, stood with their arms around each other watching two other women play pool. Leaning on the table nearby, a small, elegant woman with oriental features talked to another woman, gestured smoothly, tossing her hair away from her dainty shoulders and letting it sway where it fell to the back of her knees. She laughed, holding a glass of wine gracefully in one thin-fingered, long-nailed hand. Brittany thought the woman should be anywhere but here.

As she surveyed the other patrons, men and women, she noticed they all seemed diverse, yet bound in an elusive quality of family. Across the room she expected, somehow, to find wretched, desperate-looking souls hugging the bar, not confident-looking females totally ignoring the males...everyone seemed to blend in an odd, festive sort of way. It felt like a carnival, like a

jubilee. No one seemed to be alone. Some of the women were masculine, some of the men, feminine, but all were fused in an androgyny of harmonious revelry.

Brittany looked back at the dance floor behind the chairs and tables in front of her and knew that all these revelations must have taken place when she came back to Tru after whatever happened in Germany made her flee, and wondered why she still felt as if she were here for the first time. The waitress returned, interrupting her thoughts. "Here ya go." She placed the goblet on a napkin bearing the club logo. "Anything else?"

"No, I'm good."

"Okay. Enjoy the show."

As the waitress zipped through the crowd again, taking a few orders as she went, carrying the tray above her head, Brittany pulled the eCig from her pocket and began to puff it in earnest. *The show...*

The music was loud, but no one else seemed to mind. They shouted above it. Brittany looked back toward the front door and saw the other marquee. Even from a distance, she could see it was Tru, though the name below the picture was 'Raven.' *I'm stupid! Of course, the show...Tru wasn't part of the show. She WAS the show.* Brittany felt a surge of adrenaline assail her veins and tried to ignore it, as she turned back to the stage where Tru would undoubtedly be performing soon.

"Brittany? Brittany Jabot?"

She turned and met the dark eyes of the woman; mildly attractive and wearing no makeup.

"Girlfriend, aren't you a sight for sore eyes! I emailed you a few times. Never heard from you. You and Raven get back together?"

Brittany cringed. "Seems like everyone else knows more about it than I do."

The girl laughed and tapped Brittany's arm. "Girl, you know how the grapevine is...the rumor one, not the bar." She laughed openly at her own joke.

"The bar?"

"Haven't been there, yet? Well, you ought to go. It's about time they got us another choice besides this one and Menopause Manor, since all the older Lezzies took it over."

Brittany took a generous drink of wine, hoping to drown anything stupid before it came out of her mouth.

"Hey. Gotta go. Good to see you!" The girl gave Brittany's shoulder a meaningful squeeze and pushed through the crowd, having evidently spotted a target of some sort.

Brittany mocked a conversation. *"Hi, Brit."..."Hi. Who the hell are you?"* Then she looked around sheepishly, casting an accusing glance at the half-empty wine glass in her hand.

A young man slid into the empty chair at her table. "Long time no see."

"I'm sorry—"

"I know. I heard about your accident. I'm Travis—" He extended a hand and she shook it briefly. "I'm Macy's brother."

"Who?"

"Tru's manager?"

"Oh."

"Yeah." He slid the half-chewed drinking straw from his mouth. "So it's not just a rumor. You really do have amnesia?"

She sighed wearily. "I'm afraid so."

A show tune blasted through the video music accompanying the TV sets over the bar, and the din receded for a few seconds before the patrons began clapping and whistling, moving to tables near the stage and all around her in the upper level.

"Well, I didn't mean to bother you. I wanted to drop over and say hi. Take it easy."

She nodded as he got up and moved into the shadows by the bar.

She turned back to the stage and saw several young men milling about in the darkness. She noticed, now, as the lights came up a notch, the microphone stand in the center and a set of drums. Guitars were sitting on stands to either side.

A rather beefy looking girl touched the recently vacated chair at Brittany's table and leaned down. "Can I borrow this chair?"

Brittany determined that the woman could easily break it so that no one else could sit in it, and since she did not want to draw any more attention to herself, she nodded amiably. “Sure.” The big girl slid the chair back to another table and sat down, gathering her tiny date into her lap, clapping and whistling toward the stage.

Brittany enjoyed another long drink and focused on the platform. A sultry epicene voice came over the loudspeaker. “Testes one, testes two! IIIIIIt’s show time!” The crowd cheered wildly, obviously drunk out of their minds, already.

A tall woman came out onto the stage in a red sequined gown and took a theatrical bow, shouting, “No applause, just throw money!” Seconds later a wadded dollar bill sailed over the stage, landing at the emcee’s feet. The crowd laughed and she added, “Oh, you’re too kind!” Then Brittany realized she was a he. *Oh, dandy, a drag queen.*

“I hope all you wild women brought a change of underwear!” The crowd responded eagerly, the big girl in the chair near Brittany’s table whistling with two fingers in her mouth, her large black diver’s watch catching the lights. “Have we got a show for you! After a short vacation— seems like years—our special guest has returned to us. I saw her backstage, and let me tell you...the things that honey does for leather is lethal!!” The audience responded with applause and wolf-calls, mostly from the women. “Please put your sweet little hands together and welcome to the stage, Ms. Gay Colorado and Lady of the Year...the princess of Rock and Roll...Raven!” The sequined emcee exited, and the clamor prompted Brittany to cover her ears.

The stage lights went out, and the backup band began a rock intro with a driving bass. An amber light pierced the dark stage; a spotlight aimed at Tru’s back. She watched the drummer, and bobbed his eyebrows at her. Helki moved toward her, thrumming the bass, and grinned, and Raven smiled back.

Her black leather jacket was accentuated with silver chains, and she wore faded, ripped blue jeans. Tru rocked one knee to the beat and turned, microphone in hand, to begin the song she had written not long ago. The

background music boomed over the speakers, and Brittany froze in her seat as she watched Tru and listened to the crowd.

I don't know where I'm goin',

But I'm on my way right now,

Don't know where I been to,

But I'm stayin', anyhow.

I don't believe in liars,

but I do believe in love,

Baby, are ya thinkin'

you're the one I'm thinkin' of?

I got it bad, lover, Cause you're so good...

yeah, yeah

I got your number, Baby, I'll call you up tonight

And we'll wake up the neighborhood,

I got it bad, Cause you're so good...

The music played on, thrumming bass, cracking drums, and bold electric guitar, while Tru took the dollar bills from the line of girls who had approached the stage. She kissed each one briefly on the cheek.

The next verse took Tru to the edge of the stage closest to Brittany, and reflexively, Brittany leaned back into the shadows hoping Tru wouldn't see her.

...Ah, Baby you're a Goddess,

*you're an angel in disguise,
A saucy prima donna,
with the devil in your eyes.
Can't keep my heart from poundin',
I can't even catch my breath
I'll take you in my arms,
and you can put me to the test.
I got it bad, lover, cause you're so good...*

Tru milked the song for its full effect, clutching her heart, and pointing to women in the crowd, as she romped about the stage. Audience members bounced and clapped and cheered. By the end of the song, she held a fistful of dollar bills, and had numerous others pushed through the links of the chains that dangled from her leather jacket. The waistband of her leather pants also held tips. The song ended abruptly, and Tru relaxed, smiling at the audience.

The women screamed and whooped at her, applauding brazenly, some of them banging their beer bottles on the tables, in an insistent rhythm. Brittany saw that many women, young and old, were comically swooning, gesturing at their hearts and fanning themselves and others with the drink coasters.

These people act like they're locked in a cell five days a week, she thought, then amended, or in a big house on a mountain...

She noticed that her lips had glued themselves into a smile, and she quickly wet them, the smile disappearing. Dry-mouthed, she was about to have more wine, when she noticed her hands were otherwise engaged, applauding with everyone else. She pressed them together, then dropped them in her lap. She had merely been responding to the energy of the crowd, she told herself. Her hands began to tremble and the reaction spread

until she felt her whole body was one big shivering nerve. Her face felt hot, and she found it hard to breathe. Suddenly light-headed, she glanced around and noticed several women watching her reaction. Brittany looked away, unable to feel the seat beneath her.

Awkwardly, she started for the remaining wine and knocked it over. Jumping up, she tossed a few napkins on the spill. The same waitress appeared then. "It's okay, Hon'..." She freed a towel from the string on her apron and sopped it up, heading for the bar.

Brittany stood there, staring at the puddle and trying to regulate her breathing. "Shit," she said under her breath. The big woman who had borrowed the chair leaned back and said, "It's okay, girl. Raven has that affect on me, too." She smiled broadly, and turned back around.

The waitress returned with a fresh glass of wine. "On the house," she smiled.

Brittany sat down, leaned back and sighed heavily.

Raven led the band through another nine songs, keeping the enthusiasm high. Brittany thought the whole display was like a feeding frenzy, but couldn't help but be impressed by the way Tru commanded the stage and had the audience worshipping the floor she strutted on. At the big finish of the last song in the first set, Raven spoke over the drum roll. "Gonna take a short break, be back in 15. Thank you!" She put the microphone on the stand and left to applause, as the band slammed out the ending.

While the musicians headed for the bar for a drink and a mingle, a stage hand came out to retrieve the scattered collection of dollar bills Raven had not picked up. The emcee returned to center stage, and patted his feminine chest breathlessly. "Oh, my God! Call an ambulance! Let's get some oxygen in this room!" A delighted titter traveled through the crowd. "Whew! Boy! Makes me wish I was a lesbian!" A clamor erupted from the women all at once. "Did we miss

Raven, or what?" The crowd collectively answered yes and applauded. "Raven has a few CD's left up front. Better go buy one before they're all

gone.”

Backstage, Tru fastened the black polyester and spandex blouse, over the pushup bra, leaving the top two buttons open to reveal her cleavage. She allowed the shirt to fall loose over her black jeans. She began her breathing exercises. It was not a good idea to have a quickened pulse-rate before a slow song, it made vocalizing weak. She mopped the sweat from her face with a towel and freshened her makeup, fluffed her hair, still doing her exercises: in through the nose to the count of seven, then out through the mouth counting backward to one. It was good to be back on stage, but her nerves felt raw.

A middle-aged man in jeans and a Hawaiian shirt burst into the room. “Better than ever, Raven!” he spewed. “When can you do another show?”

“I’ve only done one set, Nathan...” she grinned. “Macy will be back from Seattle on Tuesday. Give her a call.”

“Seattle? Isn’t that a new gig?”

Raven smiled wanly. “Yeah. That place is a great connection. The music scene is hopping out there, again.”

“Let’s hope. All I know is, after you come off that stage, everyone is thirsty! You sound great tonight, Sweetie. Keep it up.”

“Thanks, Nathan. Listen, could you tell the light guy to give me an amber light on the softer tunes next set?”

“No problem. Anything else?”

“Water?”

“I’ll have it sent right in. Relax. You’ve got another ten minutes.”

“Thanks, Nathan.” She leaned over and pecked his cheek.

Nathan hooted and stepped out of the dressing room. A woman in her early thirties, decked out in a tiger-striped leotard and gold, sequined hose,

whizzed past her. “Great songs, Raven. All yours?”

“Yep.”

The woman positioned herself at the bottom of the steps leading onto the stage, waiting for her introduction. “I’d kill to have your voice. If I had it, you can bet I wouldn’t have to go out there and shake my ass, instead.”

Tru laughed. “If I had your ass, Connie, I wouldn’t have to sing.”

“Things have a way of evening out, then.” The woman winked at her and moved up the stairs as the emcee began her introduction and her music burst from the speakers. She took a calming breath, and then bounded on-stage.

Dropping in a chair, Tru picked up the teal green Ovation Adamas, checked the tuning, and played through the first few chords of the next song. The bartender came in with a bottle of artesian water, and left a five on the counter for her. “This is the only place where the bartender tips the customer,” Tru grinned.

“Honey, you’re not a customer. You’re the main attraction. And what a hot little pistol you are!” He mimicked her, singing with comical gyrations. ‘I got it bad, lover...’

“I don’t do a thing for you, Jason. I’m the wrong sex.”

He giggled, “Darlin’, you could talk me into jumpin’ that fence in a New York second!”

“Maybe, but unless you had a sex-change, I still wouldn’t be interested.”

He stabbed an imaginary dagger into his chest several times, and feigned a wound. “Slay me! Slay me!” he rasped, then waved at her and was gone.

She chuckled, shaking her head and taking a deep breath. She stacked the one hundred twenty-one dollars and placed the twenty on the top, wondering who gave it to her. It was one of the little mysteries in her life she had learned to live with; like whether Brit would ever love her again.

While the dancer sat on laps and worked the crowd, she took her guitar back out to the darkened stage and placed it on the stand.

Helki burst up the steps and threw her arms around Tru. “Girl! You are rockin’!”

“You are too, Helki. I am so glad you’re part of this. I feel like I can depend on you and that is such a great feeling.”

“Honey, I love your music!”

The two of them made their way back down the wing steps into the dressing room.

“So how are things at home?” Helki touched Tru’s arm.

“A little tense. Although in all fairness, I can’t imagine what it must be like to forget everything about your life... or that you’re even gay.”

“You just need to kiss her one good time,” she laughed. “It’ll come flooding back to her.”

“I’m afraid she’d claw my eyes out.”

Helki checked her hair in the mirror and found it acceptable. “That bad?”

“Pretty much. Although we did have a moment yesterday... I thought she was going to kiss me...”

“You’re a chick magnet, Tru. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Yeah. We’ll see.”

At the table in the corner, Brittany puffed the eCig and watched the woman who gyrated through the tables in a leopard costume to the tune of Melissa Etheridge’s ‘Your Little Secret.’ *Tru is better*, she decided.

“Hey, girlfrien’, how’s the show, huh?”

That girl again. “Great. Tr—Raven is the best.” She wiped the same water ring off the table for the third time.

“You should know, right? So... you guys work it all out?”

Brittany had no idea what “it” was, any more than she had a clue about what this one was up to, but she didn’t trust her as far as she could throw her. “I don’t think Raven would want me to discuss our personal lives without her here.”

The girl lifted both hands, one still clutching a beer bottle, as if she were under arrest. “Hey. That’s cool. Sorry. Can I buy you a drink?”

“Thanks, but I’m good.” She pointed to the full glass of wine.

When someone shouted, “Hey, Jan!” she shrugged and moved away.

Jan. One of the e-mails in her box.

Brittany flipped her golden hair off her shoulders with both hands and pulled out her cartridge, putting a few drops of vanilla on the core, refastening it and enjoying a large draw of flavored vapor.

Amid the tables, the dancer made a theatrical display of ripping the leotard away from its Velcro fastenings to expose a G-string and a lacy black camisole. The reception to this action was, as usual, raucous and wolfish, and the dancer finished her performance by crawling on tables and mauling the women; she ran off stage to the sound of delighted applause. Brittany clapped with everyone else. The dancer had left the stage with a G-string full of money and the taste of many meaningless kisses on her lips. She was strangely pleased that Tru had not kissed them with as much fervor as had the dancer. Tru had kissed cheeks only.

The emcee returned and joked with the audience for a few minutes, making eyes at the blond young man in the front, then finally came down the steps to sit in his lap, making a few references toward his suspected virility. Once back on stage, the emcee introduced Raven again.

After opening with a slower song, she delivered five more songs of rock and pop and blues, with a crowd that got drunker by the minute, then left the stage to prepare for her last song of the set. Her bandmates followed her, and they all shared some bottled water and discussion about the set. The last song would be a solo, with Raven and her guitar.

A few minutes later, the crowd began banging and clapping and shouting “Encore!” Tru stepped out to a warm reception and sat on the bar stool with her guitar. “I felt a need to sing this one tonight. It’s on one of the CD’s out front, if you don’t mind me saying so...” A female voice from the back stated loudly that she didn’t mind at all, and Tru smiled into the darkness and said, “Your check’s in the mail, Sweetheart.” The crowd laughed, and Tru settled on the stool and began to play.

The audience hushed; something Brittany felt was uncommon with this group, as Helki played a soft acoustic bass beside Tru. Brittany recognized the song as *The Ice Maiden*, the first one she had heard on the CD; the one she had played on the stereo that day when she found out how professional Tru’s alternate identity was.

...I had a passion deep and wide, I ached when she looked in my eyes, she captured me, a mystery, a lover’s spell. And the ice maiden is melting... melting at last...

Again, Brittany felt invaded. She sensed the song was about her. She watched women line up and drop tips on the stage at Tru’s feet, and understood that in this special, underground world, a dollar bill was like a rose...

On the last chorus, Brittany could almost feel the yielding energy of adoration flowing toward the singer who shared her heart with them... with strangers.

Raven held the last note, let the guitar ring and fade, and stood, holding the neck of the guitar and discreetly knuckling a tear away, basking in the warm applause.

Able to look up again, Tru saw the young woman coming down the aisle toward the stage. A parade of emotion swept through her, and she failed to focus on any of them. *Had she been here the whole time?* Her heart caught in her throat as she watched Brittany stop at the steps and hold out the ten dollar bill. Tru searched Brit's eyes for a sign...*did she remember? Was her memory coming back?* But Brittany seemed too uncomfortable. Tru looked down at the ten, clenched her lips together to will away the tears that threatened to come spilling out. They stared at each other a moment, each holding one end of the bill. Then Brittany winked.

Tru felt a tiny wound begin to heal, as the audience erupted in fresh applause.

13

RAVEN LEFT THE STAGE, ACCOMPANIED BY HELKI, who draped an arm around her, amid a new smattering of applause and cheers. She leaned her guitar against the block wall in a corner where someone had written, *Dykes on Bikes!*

Helki kissed her cheek. "You're a star!" she said, and dashed up the steps and across the stage toward the bar.

Tru plopped in a chair and put her eCig in her mouth, drawing on it deeply. It was great to know that she no longer had to worry about the things a tobacco cigarette would do to a performer's voice. Amid apple-flavored vapor, she thought about Brit. *She had followed me...She had followed me because—*Tru pressed the tears from her eyes and inhaled deeply on the eCig, exhaling the smoke in a deliberate stream. It was a step in the right direction, that was all. Just a step—

The stagehand dumped a handful of cash on the counter for the second time that night and smiled. "Easy money."

She swatted him on the behind and got up to stack the new tips. Another sixty-seven dollars was added to the take. Tru lifted her hand and looked at

the crumpled ten she had there, smiling to herself. *Seventy-seven...*

Gathering her accoutrements, she placed the guitar in its case, and the money in her pocket. *Gay women can be so generous*, she thought, adding, *Especially when they are drunk*. Nathan would give her the gig pay on the way out, along with the proceeds from the sale of her CD's, since Macy wasn't able to be there to play manager. Not bad for one night of doing what you love and loving what you do, she thought. And in time for the electricity and horse-feed bills.

She folded up a wad of bills as the dressing room door came open. It was Helki again.

"Tru, have you seen my gig bag?"

Tru nodded at her bassist. "Yeah, girl, I put it behind the drum set. I didn't want it to get stolen."

"Cool. The guys have to leave soon."

"Oh, didn't you ride with them?"

"Yeah, but I think I got another ride..."

A petite blond came up behind Helki and slipped her arms around her waist.

Tru nodded knowingly. "Are you going to party?"

"Not here," she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

The blond said, "A [www... let's](#)

stay for a few minutes. One drink..." she coaxed.

"Okay. Maybe for a one drink." She called to Tru over her shoulder. "We'll save you a seat in the back."

Tru nodded as they shuffled out. No sooner had the door closed, than it opened again. Turning, Tru saw the object of her desire, the woman who seemed a poor clone of her former self.

"I'm impressed," Brittany said.

Tru tried to smile. "Some things, thankfully, never change."

Brittany went over to the bar which served as a dressing table and hoisted herself up to it, dangling her legs. "Was I your biggest fan?"

Tru sniffed. "True blue. Why did you tip me?"

"It seemed the thing to do, I mean everyone was staring at me like I was supposed to."

"Is that really why you did it?"

"Not entirely, but that's how we'll call it."

Tru didn't want to push her on that one; they were too close to actual civility again. "You know what?" Tru liberated the ten from her jeans.

"What?"

"You always tip me ten dollars."

Brittany leaned back on her hands. "Ain't that a hoot."

"I thought for a minute you—"

"Got my memory back? Sorry. This place doesn't seem familiar to me at all. Totally foreign." Brittany watched Tru refilling her eCig cartridge. "I

don't know why I followed you. Curiosity."

"You know what that did to the cat," Tru warned, replacing the refilled cartridge and taking a drag, her emotions once more in check for fear of making a scene.

"I'll take my chances."

Tru pretended not to think too much of that statement, and bent toward the mirror behind Brittany. Then she felt Brit's hand cover hers there on the counter. A shock wave charged through her and she took a deep breath, closing her eyes.

"I can see why I loved you. You're a catch. Everyone out there knows it."

Tru opened her eyes, but closed them again, afraid to move for fear that Brit would take her hand away. "None of this came back to you, tonight?"

Brittany removed her hand. "No flashes of memory. Only flashes of...feelings."

Tru opened her eyes and looked at Brit's profile; her petal-soft complexion. "What kind of feelings?"

The door burst open then. The dancer began to change clothes, chatting with both of them about the wildness of the crowd, the exhilaration of performance. She pressed a soft towel carefully to the perspiration on her face, and repaired the damage to her hair, while she took frequent sips from a scotch and soda, and then reapplied her makeup.

Finally, she slipped out to dance the night away with the crowd on one of two dance-floors. Tru had been creating clouds of apple vapor in anticipation of the opportunity to get an answer to her question, afraid the spell—the one that had Brittany being kind, and touching her—would be broken. When the door closed behind the dancer, Tru went over and turned the lock.

Brittany straightened. "What are you doing that for?"

“So we won’t be interrupted.”

“And what are you afraid will get interrupted?” She folded her arms across her chest, the mask once more in place on her features.

Tru analyzed the firm line of her jaw, the subtle lift of her chin, and accepted the futility of her efforts. “Oh, I fully intended to throw you down and have my way with you, but I can see you’re not in the mood.”

Brittany liberated a mint from a tin in her purse and took out her own eCig. “Don’t be stupid. That’s not what I meant.”

“Right.”

Still seated on the counter, she offered the open tin. “Want a mint? They’re curiously strong.”

Tru smirked. “No thanks.”

“Do you want me to go?” She released puffs of vanilla, tried to blow smoke rings.

Tru cocked her head, and thought she saw a slight smile on her face. She moved closer, putting her hands on Brit’s knees. “Are you toying with me?”

Brittany greeted Tru’s eyes with an even expression. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She lifted the eCig her lips and took a short puff, blowing it in Tru’s face.

Tru blinked, but it didn’t sting like real smoke. It was an impotent insult. It even smelled good. “What is that? Vanilla subterfuge?”

“Smoke signals.” Brittany swung her legs back and forth on either side of Tru’s hips. “Maybe you can get Helki to interpret them for you.”

“That was suspiciously close to a racial slur.”

“Don’t tell her I said it, then.” Then she smiled. Tru’s hand drifted toward Brit’s face, and Brittany caught her arm at the wrist. “Don’t get any bright

ideas.”

Tru took her hand away and stepped back. “If you want to go, then go.”

“Why? So you can find a hot date for the night? I mean, I’m sure there are plenty of women who would jump at the chance to—”

“Stop.” Tru tossed her head back, blew out a lungful of vapor and rapped on the counter with her knuckles. “Are you going to sit there and be a bitch, or can we talk?”

Brittany began to swing her legs again, looking down at her loafers, and the floor beyond. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I want you to answer my question.” Tru found a chair and sat down in front of her.

“The one about whether I’m going to be a bitch?”

Tru rolled her eyes. “Brit—”

“Well, which question are you talking about?” she asked innocently.

“Forget it. You used to play this little game in the Army. Forget it. I won’t play this time.” Tru got up and took out her hairbrush.

“Now who’s being a bitch?” she countered.

Tru turned toward her, a retort on her lips, but stopped by Brittany’s sly smile. “You really have no intention of discussing this, do you?”

Brittany touched one finger to the tip of her nose and pointed to Tru with the other hand. “Suffice it to say, whatever I felt, you got ten dollars out of it.”

“And the hell scared out of me,” Tru laughed.

“So what’s the system, now? Do you stay and party?”

“Used to. Guess we should go home, though.” Tru tossed the brush toward her bag.

“I don’t want to ruin your night.”

“Do you want to go home?”

Brittany pursed her lips. “Do you?”

“You’re being evasive again...” Tru warned.

She smiled. “I’ll stay if you like, but you’ll have to protect me from all these wild women who talked about tearing your clothes off while you were on stage.”

“What?”

“I think it was that heaving cleavage in the last set. If you could have heard the things I heard—”

“What did they say?” Tru moved closer.

Brittany slid off the counter. “Never mind. It would go to your little lesbian head.”

Tru locked the dressing room on the way out with the key the club provided, and together they went back to the bar by the dance floor. Passersby complimented Tru as they inched their way through the crowd. At one point, Brittany yelped and whirled around, fire in her eyes, after someone pinched her ass and then escaped, unidentified. Tru came back, grabbed her hand and steered her toward the back bar.

The bartender greeted them warmly. “Hey, Raven. Caught some of your songs. You’re a smash all over again. What’ll it be?”

“Thanks, Benny. Two Chardonnays, pretty please.” Tru dug out several bills, but the bartender refused them. “You know how much business you pulled in?” He poured the wine. “Nathan says you and your sweetheart drink free tonight.”

“Thanks, Benny.” She took a sip of hers. “Mmmm. The good stuff,” she said to Benny. He winked at her. Tru put five dollars in his tip jar, handed Brit her wine. “C’mon, Sweetheart,” she chided.

Brittany made a smart face and trailed her to a table.

“What if someone we know asks you questions? How will you handle it?”

“Tell them I have laryngitis, and you talk to them.”

“Right. That should work,” Tru sneered.

“I’ll fake it. But you’ll have to tell me their names.”

Tru held her pen-style cig in her mouth as she inched around the table. “This should be good,” she muttered.

“What?” Brittany asked over the beat of retro-disco.

“I said the music is good.”

“The music is loud,” Brittany frowned back at her.

Prophetically, a butch girl, already beyond the legal limit of alcohol consumption, grabbed Tru’s hand between both of hers. “Oh Raven! My God! You are so hot!” She turned to Brittany. “And you! I don’t know which one of you is the luckiest!”

Brittany pointed to her own throat and shook her head.

The girl looked at Tru.

“Oh,” Tru offered. “Sorry. She has laryngitis.”

She slapped Tru on the shoulder. “Of course she does!! All that screaming in the bed!”—and she laughed uproariously.

An older girl, caught her at the elbow and apologized, while leading her into the flow of the crowd.

Brittany rolled her eyes. “Okay, so the laryngitis thing is a no-go.”

Tru laughed.

They sat at the table across from Helki and her newest conquest. Helki noticed Brit’s discomfort and got up, bent down and said, “Come on. Dance with me.” She pulled her up and before Brit could protest, had her guided onto the dance floor, to the melody of Sarah McLachlan’s *Angel*. Helki patted her stiff back. “Just relax,” she coached. Brittany managed to let go of her awkwardness at dancing with a woman; then as they circled slowly, her eyes snagged on the hovering fans around Tru at the table.

Helki noticed. “Does that bother you?”

Brit met her eyes. “Why would it bother me?”

“You don’t remember anything about how you loved her?”

Brittany seemed stunned by Helki’s directness. “I... I don’t know. I may never know. I mean, she could have any one of those girls...”

“Yeah. But she wants you. And none of that is going to touch her heart like you did.”

Brittany glanced back at Tru, as they swayed in a slow circle. “It’s got to be tempting. All that admiration.”

“Tru would never cheat on you. She’s got it bad. Just like the song.”

Brit remembered the blues rock number that opened the show. “That song was—“

“Yeah, it was about you. She’s wild about you.”

“Well, she was wild about the other me. That me might be gone.”

Helki gave her a comforting rub on her back. “You’re still who you are at your core. Tru knows that. I mean, you’re not a different person. You’ve

just temporarily forgotten part of yourself. I believe what you two had was strong enough to break through all that. If you just give it time.”

The song segued into a Madonna number, and they made their way back to the table. Girls moved away like Moses parting the Red Sea, to let Brittany take her seat by Tru.

The cute little blond climbed on Helki’s lap and was soon kissing her. Helki got up, holding the girl’s hand. “Okay, we’re outta here, Tru.”

“Aw, what’s the rush?”

Helki leaned back and pointed at the girl, with comic ferocity.

Tru laughed. “Ah. Okay. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Not too early,” she winked, and put an arm around the girl and headed for the exit.

“Did she just meet that girl?” Brit asked.

“Yeah.”

“And she’s going to hop in bed with her tonight?”

Tru laughed. “Probably repeatedly.”

Brittany made a face.

“What?” Tru said. “Have you become a prude?”

Brittany thought about it. “Was I a prude before?”

“No.”

Her consideration of this new information was interrupted by the female couple approaching them. Brittany pinched Tru’s leg under the table. “They’re waving at us! They’re coming over here! Who are they?”

Tru focused on the smiling twosome. “Oh, shit.”

“Who?” Brittany was getting antsy.

“Jan and Liz.”

“Hi, you guys,” the brunette smiled at Tru.

Brittany jumped right in. “Hi, Jan—” Tru punched her under the table. “Liz!” she corrected.

“Well, you’ve got reason to be all smiles, Tru. You sounded great tonight!” Liz cooed.

“Thanks, Liz.”

“Can we join you?”

Tru stifled a laugh as they seated themselves across from Brittany and her terrified smile. She leaned over to Brit’s ear to whisper, “Jan has the hots for you—”

Brittany frogged Tru under the table and she flinched, grunting at the pain. “How’s life?” she managed to ask.

“Good,” Liz smiled at Tru.

“Getting better all the time,” Jan leered at Brittany.

Brittany remembered Jan’s earlier visit to her table for an uninvited chat. “You’re a busy little bee, tonight, aren’t you?” Brittany put in, swirling the wine in her glass.

Jan cocked her head. “Being sociable. Did you guys get everything worked out?”

“Is it important that you know?” Brittany shot back.

The couple frowned over at her.

“Well,” Liz said. “I guess we know who didn’t get any last night—”

Brittany’s temper flared, but she kept her voice even. “Some of us don’t need it every night to feel good about ourselves.”

Jan cocked her arm back onto the chair and looked pointedly at Brittany. “That’s too bad...”

Tru leaned over to Brit again and said, “Chill out, Brit.”

“Well!” Jan stretched nonchalantly. “I’m up for a dance. Brittany?” Jan stood, waiting, while Brittany remained frozen in her chair, unable to assimilate the parade of emotions she felt.

Tru spoke up. “Hey, Jan! Trying to move in on my girl?” Tru put an arm around Brit and slammed her stiff body close.

“Now, I saw Helki dancing with Brittany a few minutes ago.”

“Helki gets special privileges.” Tru offered.

Jan pursed her lips, and bobbed her eyebrows. “Mmm. Kinky.”

Before Brittany could launch out of the chair, Tru said, “Here,” and tossed a five on the table. “You guys go get yourselves some beer. I’ll dance with my girl.”

The two women got up, happily, and took the money to the bar. Tru grabbed Brittany’s hand and hauled her, protesting, out of her chair and onto the dance floor.

“I don’t want to da—” Brit began.

“Shut up,” Tru ordered. “We’re going to make a quick getaway.” She did not let go of her hand as the two of them threaded their way through the throng of grinding bodies, then walked toward the door. Once over the threshold, Brit broke into a sprint down the long, dimly lit corridor, bumping those in her path and spilling several drinks on cursing victims. Tru hurried after her, watching her pause at the dressing room door, her

arms crossed, mumbling and blinking her eyes erratically. Tru laughed as she arrived. "Hold on let me find the key."

"Well, hurry up." Brittany leaned to look cautiously down the corridor. Tru ferreted around in her pocket and produced the key, unlocking the door.

Brittany shivered and made a guttural noise. What had possessed her to come here?

Tru came out with her gig bag and guitar case, taking in the expression on her companion's face. "Don't judge the lot of us by them, Brittany." She handed Brit the bag. "Two bad apples, doncha know. I don't even know them very well, they're sort of like gay groupies. They also have an open relationship. Liz sends me flowers before every show, and Jan has been trying to get you to go to bed with her for a year."

Brittany lifted her hands and waved. "Don't tell me that. I don't want to know."

"No harm done." Tru started toward the front.

"How can you stand that girl leering at you?" Brittany wanted to know as she followed Tru into the showroom.

"Jealous?"

"Don't flatter yourself," she retorted.

At the forward bar off the mezzanine, Tru waved at Nathan. He stopped arranging the bottles and waved back as if to flag her down, twirling toward the cash register to take out a bunch of bills.

"Hey Nathan, we're gonna cut out."

He came around the bar to hand the money to her discreetly, kissing her on the cheek as he did. "Thanks, Babe. We made a haul tonight. You sold about a grand in CD's. He produced an envelope from under the counter. "And this is your take from the door. Macy was smart to take the door tonight."

“She’s a risk-taker, that Macy.”

“No risk in that, Raven. You tell her to call me about rebooking you.”

“Will do.”

“Brittany—” he said, taking her hand. “Lovely as always.” He bent to kiss her too, and she did not succeed in appearing unabashed.

The two of them stepped toward the door, but were halted by a girl, holding out the insert for the CD. “Will you sign this for me, Raven?”

The girl was young. Maybe barely legal. “Sure.” Tru set her case down, took the Sharpie marker, and wrote a short message and her name.

“Thank you so much!” the girl enthused.

“Thank you for buying my CD and coming to the show.” Tru clasped the girl’s hand for a moment and Brittany thought the girl might faint.

The two of them stepped out into the crisp Colorado air, Brittany stopping with Tru at the Cherokee. “You made a thousand dollars on CD’s?”

“It adds up. That’s about 65 sales.”

Tru put her cases in the back and closed the door, sorting through her keys for the right one.

Inside the Cherokee, through the driver’s side window, Tru instructed Brit to follow her home.

“How do you put up with women like Jan and Liz?”

“Simple. They’ve never been a threat to us.”

Brittany considered the logic in this for a moment, and then allowed her defenses back up. “There’s no ‘us’ anymore.” She started toward her own car.

THINGS DETERIORATED AGAIN WHEN THEY REACHED CASTLE MOUNTAIN. Back in the house, Brittany went straight for the fireplace and put a new log on it. “How do you start this?”

“Did your attitude give you frostbite?” Tru remarked.

“Shut up.”

“Hey—you wanted to stay.”

Brittany tossed her coat on the chair. “I didn’t expect to be put on display like a slab of meat. I was trying to be nice.”

“Bullshit. You were curious as hell.”

Brittany plopped down on the sofa. “I didn’t feel comfortable.”

Tru tossed her coat atop the other. “That’s because you still feel straight.”

“You got any of that ginseng tea left?”

“Yep. I’ll make some.” Acutely, Tru realized that Brittany was learning the same lessons all over again. The gay community could be seedy and unpleasant, like any other community, but ultimately, the quality of life was up to the individual, by choosing friends wisely.

Minutes later, Tru handed Brittany the steamy, aromatic cup. “Yo! Jabot! Calling occupant.” Tru waved a hand in her face. Tru took a seat beside her. “What are you thinking about?”

“You. On stage.”

Tru smiled, cooling her tea with cautious streams of air.

“You are very talented.”

Tru warmed to that statement a little quicker than she liked. “You are, too.”

“Well, it looks like I was, but I don’t seem to be now.”

“It’s in your head somewhere...”

She tapped her temple. “Guess it’s kinda crowded with other questions.”

“Losing your memory can’t take that away. I believe our talents are innate abilities. We have to be willing to polish them. You’re a sculptor and a painter, and a photographer. I love that about you.”

“Really?” Her face turned comical. “Well, if you love me so much, why aren’t my sculptures around, and my pictures hanging all over the walls?”

Tru’s smile faded as she recalled. “I packed them up for you.”

“Why?” Brittany slouched back into the sofa, cradling her teacup.

Tru put her cup down on the coffee table. “I didn’t think you’d be back.”

“Did I say that before I left?” She sipped and seemed unaware of the developing tension in the room. Tru squirmed, picking up her cup again for a drink. “Tru—”

“Brittany, don’t. It’s been a long night. I’m tired. Let’s ...let’s not have this conversation—”

“What conversation are we having, exactly?”

“Stop.” She put her teacup back on the table and stood, moving to the fireplace to retrieve some kindling. She began to stack it erratically on the grate.

Brittany studied her, then set her cup down too hard on the table, some of the tea spilling over the rim. “Well, fine. I’m going to take a shower—” Brit didn’t miss the pain that swept across Tru’s face, as she turned at the sound of china on the table top. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. Go take your damn shower.” Tru spat the last word as if it were poison.

Brittany turned, perplexed, yet disinclined to prod this obviously fruitless discussion any further. If Tru was going to be unreasonable, she wouldn’t waste the time prying information out of her.

She ran the water hot, tested the temperature, and glanced at the bathroom door. Locking it securely, she was unsure of exactly why she felt the need to have it that way. She didn’t really think Tru would come in there. While she was...naked. She wasn’t that bold. *Helki might do it, though.*

As the water warmed her shoulders, she thought of Tru’s face. First, they had been talking about the night she left, then, when she had wanted to take a shower, Tru seemed hurt and angry. *What nerve did I touch?* Brittany felt a headache coming on and put her head under the spray.

Tru finished her tea and stared at the hall doorway. She had been sitting in this exact spot that night. She heard Brit drop the soap, and thought of the silly joy that fluttered in her chest at the familiar sound. All that domestic trivia that slips past the consciousness, without any value...none, until those things are suddenly gone. She missed the comfort of their rapport, the easy way they kissed and talked and played. Tru released the pent-up air in her lungs and pushed all the memories away. There was a phrase they had both picked up in the Army from drill sergeants who were either correcting themselves or giving a soldier permission to relax: “As you were.” She stopped herself from going further into the past by saying it out loud. Not until seconds later, did she recognize the ironic, wistful quality in that statement. ‘As you were’ was exactly how she wanted—needed—Brit to be.

Brittany plucked the soap from the coated wire rack, losing it several times as it zipped out of her hands, wondering if her amnesia had also made her forget how to hang onto a bar of soap. She thought of Tru, her sudden anger. *How will I ever remember things if she wants to pick and*

choose the memories for me? It wasn’t fair, and Brittany decided she’d pursue it again when she finished her shower.

Moments later, while rinsing the conditioner from her hair, she noticed a small shadow creeping along the ledge below the opaque shower door. Alarmed for a swift moment, thinking Tru had come in, somehow, she soon recognized Dropsi, the feline having slipped in unnoticed before she closed the door. An evil grin crept to her lips as her hand eased toward the shower door handle.

Tru heard the commotion coming from the master bath, heard the door come open, and watched a very drenched Dropsi race through the living room, her ears back and her eyes wide.

“I hope this is mine—” Brittany said, indicating the robe she had put on over her still-damp body.

Momentarily, Tru’s amusement took over as she watched the cat perch on the ledge of the fireplace, licking her paw and rubbing her sodden ears. Tru knew the cat had not fallen into the shower accidentally. Then Brit’s statement registered, and she looked at the robe. An agony from the past struck her as soundly as a wrecking ball. That’s the robe, the towel, and the place she had been standing...

“Tru...is this my robe or not?”

Entranced by the awful clarity of memory that Brittany constantly wished for, she whispered, “It’s yours...”

Brittany fluffed her hair, rubbing locks of it between folds of the towel, and took a seat on the sofa, watching Tru flip through channels on the television, without really engaging any of it. “Tru—”

“What?”

“I’m sorry if I said something wrong before.” *Maybe starting with an apology will disarm her.*

A smirk played on Tru’s mouth for a quick second, then evaporated. “I can run, but I can’t hide.”

“What’s that mean?” Brittany rubbed the towel over her hair and shook her head to loosen the long ripples of mane.

“Forget it.”

“Why did you clam up so fast before?”

“I said forget it.” She tossed the remote on the sofa beside her, pretended to watch a documentary about Egypt on the Discovery channel.

Brittany stopped drying her hair. “Maybe I don’t want to forget anymore. Maybe I want to remember, now.”

“I don’t.” She stood.

“Sit down, Tru. “ Brittany followed Tru to the fireplace and watched her fence with the logs, thrusting fiercely with the poker as if it were a rapier. “Let’s get this out in the open—”

Tru, like a badger, cornered in her own burrow: “No! I said no, and I mean no! Remember something else!” Tears sprang to her eyes and her face flooded beet red. “Remember how much you loved me!” A sob escaped unchecked and Tru covered her face awkwardly with one hand, dropping the poker on the hearth with a clatter, and bolting down the hall.

Startled, her heart aching, Brittany hurried after her, catching her by the arm in the hall and turning her around. “Hey! Stop...please. I’m not trying to hurt you—”

Tru sobbed again, moving away.

Brittany pulled her close, held her tight. “I’m sorry, Tru. I wish I could remember what horrible thing I did to hurt you...maybe I could make it right if I could remember but I can’t— please...don’t shut me out...not now —” Brit continued to hold her, stroking her hair, suddenly

very at ease with Tru’s trembling body next to hers. She leaned back, one arm still around her, and brushed the jet-black strands away from her red, swollen eyes. “Don’t cry, Truly...”

The endearment only brought fresh tears, and Tru felt helpless, overwhelmed by the tenderness Brit showed her. Yet, she'd rather be the one to spoil the moment before Brittany realized she held a lover she couldn't fathom ever having. "Aren't you getting a little too close for comfort?"

Brittany made a face. "Shut up," she said, holding her close again.

Tru buried her face in Brittany's neck and inhaled the fresh scent of her. It filled her veins like a drug and momentarily she forgot her pain. She could feel Brit's pulse—strong and quick.

Brittany leaned back to study her with soft eyes. "Will you feel better if I get you a stiff drink?"

Tru gave a half-laugh. "It better be stiff enough to hang a coat on."

Brittany laughed, a bubbly, alto sound that came from deep in her throat. The sound made Tru feel warm inside. "One coat-rack cocktail coming up." She stepped away and went into the kitchen while Tru headed to the bathroom to splash her face.

As they sat on the sofa taking shots of Peppermint Schnapps from German shot glasses, Tru let the thick, luxurious liquor warm her, and watched Brittany enjoy it a bit too fast.

"You'd better cool it with the Schnapps, Brit—you'll get hammered. And you're a royal bitch when you've got a hangover."

"Well..." she said dreamily, "You'll have to lock me in the bathroom and slide Alka-Seltzer under the door 'til I'm civil again..." Her speech had begun to slur, and she stared into her empty shot glass. "...or am I a royal bitch all the time?"—a giggle erupted in her throat.

"That's a loaded question from a loaded royal bitch."

Brittany found this tidbit uproariously funny, and laughed harder, leaning over to grab the bottle. "All aboard! We're loading up!" she gurgled. She

lost her balance and fell on Tru's knees, and almost into the floor before Tru caught her.

Still laughing, she twisted to face Tru, peering up at her with a silly grin. "Yur very preddy, Tru—why don' you like men?"

Tru looked down at her, smiling. "Because women look better in jeans."

Brittany cocked her head to the side, considering this. "Mags sense." She forgot her original desire for a refill and stared at Tru, who still held her across her lap. "Yuuur... lookin' at me funny— "

"Well," Tru tried to be glib. "You're funny-looking."

"I thought you thought... that women were good-lookin', not funny-lookin'... which am I, really?"

"You're a goddess, Brit."

Her eyes brightened. "Really? Which one?"

"Artemis. The Goddess of the moon and the hunt."

"Oooo! The moon AND the hunt?" She considered Tru for a long moment and then tested airily, "Do ya like to kiss Moon-Hunt-Goddesses?"

Tru cleared her throat. "Don't start anything you won't let me finish."

Brittany explored Tru's face, almost sleepily. "What if I said you could finish?"

Tru's pulse raced. Warnings popped up like red flags in her mind, but she ignored them. "I'd finish."

Brittany said nothing more, but ravished Tru with her eyes.

Tru bent slowly and touched her lips to Brittany's. When she leaned back, Brit's smile had faded into some smoldering recess inside her eyes. Brittany buried her fingers in Tru's hair, guiding her down to her again.

The kiss was timid at first, then Tru let go of her second thoughts and poured every ounce of emotion she had stored up into it.

Brittany moaned softly and pressed herself closer to Tru, urging her. Tru's hands explored Brit's body—familiar places made new from the passage of time. Tru ached to make love to her completely, and tugged on the belt of her robe, letting the cloth fall open at the front. She dropped kisses on Brittany's chest, trailing to her stomach and lay her hand there, lovingly. She closed a hand over a soft breast...soft like the rest of her, she remembered well. It was too much. Tru had to have her again. She sat up and looked at Brittany, whose eyes were closed, her breathing steady. "Brit?"

Her only answer was her breathing. She had fallen prey to Schnapps.

Tru sighed heavily, making a grand effort to still her pounding heart. Sadly, she looked at Brittany's silky body, exposed to her in that trust-place, sleep. Softly, she closed the robe, tied the belt, and slipped out from under her.

She covered Brittany with a blanket and turned out the light, the glow of fresh-fallen snow touching that lovely face. She'd go lie down, but sleep would not come easily.

15

TRU WOKE SUDDENLY AT 8:35, HAVING FALLEN ASLEEP sometime after four that morning. She blinked, last night's events coming back to her in strong fashion.

After a stop at the bathroom, she went to the living room to check on this morning's victim.

The sofa held only a rumpled blanket, but she found her at the kitchen table drinking coffee and staring out the bay window at another light snowfall. Approaching her from behind, she tossed a packet of Alka-Seltzer on the table by Brit's hand, waiting for her reaction.

“Cute,” Brit said.

“You remember the bit about the Alka-Seltzer, huh?” Tru took a mug off the mug tree and poured herself some coffee.

“I do.”

She sat to the right of the young woman, whose hair was still wild and sexy from sleep. “What else do you remember?”

“Don’t toy with me. I know what happened.”

Tru couldn’t tell by her even tone exactly what that meant. “Sorry.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Oh, jeez. You’re pissed. What did you expect me to do? You seduced me. You haven’t forgotten how to do that, you know.”

Brittany’s mouth fell open. Tru took notice of this reaction and pointed at her face. “Put some coffee in that hole, Artemis.”

“Tru Morgan, I did not seduce you.”

“Is selective memory part of amnesia?”

“You are—” Brittany huffed. “You’re so damn smug. You took advantage of me.”

“Who took advantage of whom?”

“You could have stopped.”

“At which point? When I said ‘Don’t start what you won’t let me finish’? Or when you grabbed my head and pulled my face down to kiss you? When?”

“No... I mean... after that...” She rearranged the salt and pepper shakers evasively.

Tru turned the mug around so that she could grasp the handle. “What?”

“After... you know... after that...”

“Oh, great. Cryptograms. My favorite.”

“Smartass.” Brit drank her coffee, making a face at how cold it had become. She stood and freshened her cup. “Look. I don’t remember much after a certain point.”

“Which point was that?”

“After you...” she struggled, first setting her mug down, then picking it back up, and adding more coffee to it.

“Brittany. My God. Say it.” Tru secretly delighted in Brit’s rare embarrassment.

“After you opened my robe.”

“You don’t remember anything after that?”

“Didn’t you notice that I passed out? Or do you like your women like that?”

“Kidney punch,” Tru reminded Brittany of her slipping civility. “No. I don’t ‘like my women like that’ as you put it.” Tru sipped again. “What makes you think I did anything after that?”

Brit sat down again. “Didn’t you?”

Tru sighed laboriously. “Brit... you’re not some one night stand. I could never ravish you while you’re unconscious... unless of course you told me to, before you became unconscious.” This seemed to smooth Brittany’s ruffled feathers a bit. “Besides,” Tru couldn’t help but add, “I’d miss out on hearing you moan.”

Brit’s eyes flared like a Roman candle, and she slapped Tru fiercely on the arm.

Tru laughed and rubbed the place where she'd been struck. "You're so worried about it. Nothing happened. Not that I didn't want it to, doncha know—"

"I can't believe I acted that way." She pouted, recalling the way she had responded to Tru's kiss.

"Vintage Brittany Jabot."

"Was I really like that...before?"

Tru flashed back in her memory to the picnics when they would ride out to the clearing and make love on a blanket in the grass. "We had some great times."

Brittany remained quiet for a long moment. She drank her coffee and watched the birds knock snow from the limbs outside. "I do want to remember us, Tru."

Tru looked up, surprised. "Even if it makes you uncomfortable?"

"It's better than pretending I'm someone I'm not."

Tru glanced out the window to her right, her eyes catching some movement at the tree line near the barn. She leaned closer to the glass and squinted.

"What are you looking at?"

Tru got up and took the few steps to the bay window, peering out at the tree line. "I could swear I saw something—"

"What?" Brittany got up and studied the area Tru focused on. "What was it?"

"Looked like a person...I don't know. Maybe it was a hunter."

"Can people hunt this close to the house?"

“No. We own this land. It’s posted. But that doesn’t mean some hunters won’t ignore the signs.”

Brittany wandered into the living room and plopped in the sofa, seizing the remote from the coffee table, clicking the television on. She flipped through cable channels, and landed on a documentary about Madagascar. Amid the hooting of Lemurs and the various nocturnal movements of the Fossa, she could see Tru in the kitchen, still peering out the bay window into the trees. “What are you going to do about it?”

Tru sighed, “Nothing, unless I hear shots. I’m toasting a bagel, you want one?” Tru called.

“Not right now, thanks,” she called, without taking her eyes off the colorful Chameleon, perched on a limb. “You could hand me my coffee, though.”

A few moments later, Tru carried the bagel out and handed Brittany a fresh cup. As she was about to sit, the phone rang, and she grunted her disapproval and got back up to answer. “Hello? ...hi ya Mace’... hey, let me go into the bedroom, Brit is watching something on TV...” She

glanced at Brittany, as she responded into the portable receiver, “Well, we haven’t killed each other yet...”

Brittany tossed a half-serious glare at her and then propped her feet on the coffee table to continue her viewing, taking a sip of Hazelnut cream.

Tru moved her guitar to the other side of the bed and sat down with her bagel on her leg as she sipped coffee.

“Are you saying you got me a gig in Denver, then?”

Macy’s voice pierced her ear, as Tru held the receiver with one shoulder to take a bite of the cream cheese on whole wheat.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. Next Week. I’ll call you back when I get the details worked out, but be ready to pack and go by then, okay?”

“Okay,” she garbled through the bread in her mouth.

“Is everything all right there, really?”

“It goes up and down, but it’s getting a bit more bearable. I think it would do her good to be here alone, so this gig might be right on time.” Tru swallowed a bite and choked slightly.

“Are you eating too fast again?”

“Yes, mother, I believe I am.” Tru addressed her hunger by devouring all but a portion of the bagel.

At length, Macy asked carefully, *“Has she remembered anything?”*

Tru understood the real question, and didn’t care to dredge up that night, or what had happened. “Not really. She keeps prodding about it, though.”

“Why don’t you tell her?”

Tru sighed, her appetite gone. She dropped the remaining bread on the nightstand. “Macy, I want her to remember it on her own, and—”

“And what?”

“And I’m not exactly without guilt.” *There.* She had said it. To someone other than herself.

“What are you guilty of? I thought—”

“Macy, I didn’t want to tell you this, because Travis is your own flesh and blood...”

She could hear Macy’s measured breathing, and then, *“Flesh and blood and innocence are mutually exclusive, in this case. I know how my brother is.”*

“Well, I did something awful myself, it’s that it wasn’t really my fault...and I didn’t see any reason to bring it up after I came home and—”

“Wait, wait. You’ve lost me. What’s this awful thing you did?”

Tru leaned to look at the open door of the bedroom, and got up with the portable phone to close it softly. Returning to the bed, she released a long breath. “You remember when we met at Lost & Found last December, before the accident?”

“*Yeah?*”

“Travis was with you.”

“*And?*”

“Well, after you left, I got a little hammered, and he drove me to a hotel, because I was too lit to drive.”

“*Okay...*”

“Long story short: I woke up the next morning in bed with him. We were both naked, and he got a real kick out of telling me how great it was.”

Silence for a moment, then Macy asked softly, “*What do you remember about it?*”

“Nothing. Getting to the hotel and then waking up with him.”

A chuckle came across the line, and then the chuckle turned to derisive laughter.

“What the hell is so funny, Macy?”

“*I’m sorry, Tru, but... let me ask you this: are you sure you don’t remember anything about the dirty deed?*”

“I said no. I was passed-out-drunk.”

Laughter again.

“Why do you keep laughing?” Tru glanced at the door quickly, and lowered her voice. “This isn’t funny, Macy.”

“Honey, let me clear a few things up for you...”

“Please.”

“You remember that Travis had been released from County jail, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, they give them salt peter while they’re there, and it takes sometimes a few weeks to wear off.”

“Salt peter—” The genesis of truth emerged in Tru’s head, but not quite fully evolved.

“He was telling me about how he couldn’t get it up at all.”

Tru’s turn to be silent for a long moment, then, “So, if—”

“Honey, if he couldn’t get it up, he couldn’t have done a thing to you, drunk or sober.”

“Oh my God.” A lie. A lie Travis let her believe.

“Don’t bother putting your shit-kickers on, Tru. I’m gonna kick his ass myself. That little prick. So now, you may want to tell her the whole story.”

Tru stared at the remnants of the bagel on the nightstand. *It didn’t happen...it didn’t happen...* Relief washed over her. “I’m not going to open that can of worms unless I have to. It would make things more complicated.”

“But if you tell—”

“There’s nothing to tell, Macy. If nothing happened, then there’s nothing to tell. I don’t want this to be any more complicated than it already is.” She glanced at the door again. “Keep this under your hat.”

“Ooookay.” Macy said doubtfully. *“It’s none of my business. And my lips are sealed.”*

Tru said goodbye, and clicked the phone off. She sat on the bed for a long while, staring at the floor. Finally, she got up and returned to the living room.

“Who was that?” Brittany asked.

“Macy.” She saw Brittany’s expectant expression and added, “I have a concert in Denver next week.”

“Denver? That’s not very far.”

“Yeah. It’s not quite as big as the Seattle gig was in December, but it’s a great fan-base.”

“Great.” Brittany went to refill her cup. “How long will you be gone?”

Tru gave her a sidelong glance. “I didn’t know you cared.”

“It’s not that. I don’t relish the idea of being stuck in Bumfuck Egypt while you’re crooning goopy love songs to a room full of baby dykes.”

“Jeez, did you rehearse that?” A commercial came on, and Brit muted the television and went to the kitchen window, wordless. “You’ve got your own car again. Feel free to go for a drive or something.”

“Yeah, that should break the monotony,” she said without emotion.

“You could take some photos. Paint a picture. Sculpt something...” Tru moved to the coffeemaker and refilled her own mug. “Time alone might be what you need.”

Brittany studied the woods again. “Maybe.”

“At least you’d be alone with your favorite person.” Tru winced, realizing she should have edited that remark before it came out, but Brittany did not seem to hear her.

“Don’t you ever cook anything around here?” Brittany turned in mid-sentence to scrutinize the young woman.

“Help yourself. There’s bacon in the deep freeze outside the kitchen door. Eggs in the fridge.”

Brittany turned back to the view in the back yard. Everything looked cold and hard and inhospitable. The thought of thawing a slab of bacon seemed distasteful. She started for the pantry. “I’m having a bagel.”

O lyric Love, half-angel and half-bird

And all a wonder and a wild desire’

- Robert Browning

16

Fort Lee, Virginia, 2000

THE DREAM AWAKENED TRU TO THE SIGHT OF BED SPRINGS. The empty bunk above her own served as a stark reminder of this temporary home. The lonely home. But the dream had allowed her escape for a time; a pulsing amnesia which she struggled to retain, but lost as her eyes focused in the dim room and she caught the scent of the green wool blankets, boot polish, and paste wax.

She lay there, trying to regulate her breathing; erotic, residual images from the dream were still passing through her mind’s eye. Tru considered the light coming under the door from the hallway a wedge of hope in an otherwise hopeless night.

She had to be close to Brittany now. Dreaming of her made the desire all the more acute, all the more reckless. Dreaming be damned!

She slid herself out of the regulation tight sheet and blanket and slipped into the barracks hall. The corridor gleamed as a well buffed floor should, and she slid in her socks a few times, spitefully reminding herself that they’d never identify the culprit who desecrated its perfection.

She paused at the end of the hall, quietly opening her door. Last week's graduating class had left one female soldier to wait for orders, and she snored from the top bunk on the other side of the room. Tru moved to kneel beside the only other occupied bunk. Brittany breathed, slow and regular, and Tru did not want to wake her abruptly, so she touched Brittany's shoulder, brushed a strand of flaxen hair from her temple and watched her sleep for a long moment, feeling a great welling of something which she could only identify as desire mixed with love.

Brittany stirred, almost aware of Tru's presence, and Tru kissed her brow softly, prepared for the possible rejection when she awakened enough to realize the intentions of this almost-lover in her room late at night. But Private Jabot did not reject her; she moaned and sighed at Tru's touch, and it only made Tru want her more. *I may never get another chance*, Tru thought, knowing that sleep was a trusting state, free of the barricades which were fortified during waking moments. She hated to resort to such tactics, but she knew her passion would overwhelm her if she could not touch her, kiss her, feel the passion returned.

Tru lowered her lips to that silken neck and lingered there, seduced by the texture of her skin and the fragrance of her soap mixed with the natural scent of her. Brittany stirred, not retreating, but responding. Tru dropped more kisses on her face and neck, caressing the delicate inside of her elbow.

As Tru continued, Brittany slid her fingers into Tru's hair, like talons, clenching, urging.

Tru's lips went up to Brit's, hungry for the taste of her mouth and tongue, and Brit surprised Tru with her fervor. Her nails raked Tru's shoulders, piercing the fabric of her olive-drab T-shirt, and Tru shuddered, wanting the blood and scars if it would bring the passion. Tru lay her cheek on her warm belly, kissing, licking, caressing—her hands searching for each intimate place, agonized at their inability to tear the fabric away and explore her every peak and valley.

The danger of this rendezvous pressed at the back of her mind, but somehow it was easily forgotten, pulsed away, fainter and fainter, with each crescendoing heartbeat.

Brittany's breaths were heavy, and Tru heard a soft bumping which grew louder. Seconds later, Tru lifted her head and listened. The bumping did not originate in Brittany's chest, but from the corridor.

She identified the sound of a latch being released, and heard a door close back again, seconds later. The only person who would wear boots on this floor after lights out was the Sergeant in charge of quarters. "Shit! The C.Q.!" Tru whispered.

The door opened abruptly, and a circular beam of light paused on the top bunk at the far end of the room, swept over the other bunks, and finally came to rest on the gentle rise and fall of Brittany's chest, and up to her closed eyes. The sergeant darted the light quickly over the padlocks on the lockers next to Brittany's bed, and then clicked off.

The door latched behind him quietly, and Brittany's eyes sprang open. "Tru?" she murmured.

Tru slid out from under the bunk like a mechanic from under a car. Brittany leaned over the edge of the bed to face her, lying there on her back with a Cheshire grin, her heart hammering in a new exhilaration, one not born of passion. "Yes?"

Brittany captured a lock of her hair as it fell within an inch of Tru's cheeks. "You little shit!" she whispered.

Tru barely contained her laughter. "That was close."

"How did he keep from seeing you under there?"

"Magic dust," she explained, wiggling her eyebrows.

"Get out of here before we both end up with an Article Fifteen."

"Actually, Leavenworth would be more like it. Look at that! I was willing to go to jail for you!" Tru heaved herself up and kissed Brittany quickly.

Brittany's eyes grew in the darkness. "Get the fuck out of my room, Morgan!" she squeaked in a muffled tone.

“Have your agent call my agent, we’ll do lunch,” Tru retorted, slipping to the door and out.

17

TRU PUSHED THE DVD INTO THE PLAYER. She carried the remote control back to the sofa where Brittany waited with a large bowl of popcorn. “You’re sure you want to see this?”

“You said it used to be one of my favorites, maybe it’ll help spur my memory. What is it called again?”

“Desert Hearts,” Tru answered, fast-forwarding through the FBI warning. When a knock sounded at the door, she cursed and pressed the pause button.

“Hey, company!” Brittany enthused.

“I’ll get rid of them,” Tru grumbled, going to the front door.

“Hi. I’m Max. Thought I’d drop by to see how Brittany is doing—” Brit heard him say. Tru made some sort of sound and then prattled something about how being grateful to him, and that he had saved her life. She invited him in, and followed along behind him with a disturbed expression as he entered the living room.

“Hi, Brittany,” he said, smiling at her as she sat there.

“How did you know where we lived?” Tru asked.

“Well, the hospital, of course.”

Brittany sensed great discomfort in Tru. “So, Max—What brings you out to the frozen tundra?”

Tru interjected, “A tundra doesn’t have trees—”

“Whatever,” Brittany dismissed her remark, waiting on Max to answer.

“Well, I thought I should see for myself whether or not you’re recuperating.”

Tru released the pause button to reset it again. Max noticed her action and glanced at the frozen image of a train on the TV screen. “Oh, I guess I interrupted a movie.”

Brittany waved his concern away. “It’s okay. Would you like to j—”

“Uh, Max—” Tru interjected. “It’s a therapy thing that the psychiatrist wants us to watch together. It’s supposed to help her with her memory. You understand.”

Brittany looked at Tru, wide-eyed, while Max squirmed. “Oh, I’m sorry... I guess I’ll go. I wanted to check on you, that’s all.”

“Thanks for stopping by.” Tru said. “It’s a bad time, that’s all.”

“I tried to call—”

“Really? We check the machine regularly. No messages.”

“Oh, I didn’t leave one.”

Tru started for the front door. “I’ll walk you out.”

He shifted and smiled at Brittany, clenching and unclenching his fingers. “I’m sorry for intruding. Please accept my apologies. Good to see you... I... hope the therapy-thing helps.” He backed away and followed Tru to the door, where she said goodbye abruptly and locked the door behind him, watching through the front window to see that he got into his old Ford Econoline and made it out of the driveway.

When Tru returned, Brittany had her arms folded as she leaned back, the bowl of popcorn in her lap. Tru settled on the couch and grabbed a handful of popcorn, cramming it in her mouth and picking up the remote control, pausing.

“That was about the rudest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Tru put the popcorn bowl between them on the sofa. “I’ll tell you what’s rude. The fact that he dropped by, unannounced. Besides, no one drops by up here. It’s too far out of the way. And I’ll tell you something else: the hospital did not give out our address.” She grabbed a handful of popcorn.

“Have you forgotten that he saved my life?”

She grimaced through the popcorn in her mouth. “I thanked him. You thanked him. How do you repay that? He’s taking advantage. He’s weird. He wants you to feel obligated. I think he feels like you owe him something in return. You don’t save someone’s life to get something in return.”

Brittany thought about this. “What’s your problem with him?”

Tru swallowed. “I’ve dealt with a lot of freaks because of the music. Let’s say I don’t want you to get chummy with him. He creeps me out.”

“Why?”

“Well, for one thing, the fact that he thought it was okay to show up at our house, way out here, without an invitation. I mean, you two have no relationship.”

“Okay, that is a little creepy. He said he was trying to be nice, but—”

“But nothing. That was way out of line.”

Brittany gave it a quick second of thought. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Tru pointed at the screen. “Can we watch this movie, please?”

“Whatever,” she surrendered.

Tru pressed the play button and sat back with their drinks, handed one to Brittany, and leaned back beside her. As the names flashed on the screen to the music of Patsy Cline, Brittany asked, “What is this about, anyway?”

“It’s about a professor who goes to Reno to get a divorce.” Tru pointed at the train chugging into the station on the film. “Just watch.”

As the film credits rolled, Tru pressed the stop button on the remote. “So...what did you think?”

“I think the professor lady looked a lot like me.”

“And?”

“And I think the cowgirl looked a lot like you.”

“And?”

“And I think you made me watch this because you hoped it would make me want to go to bed with you.”

Stunned, Tru stared at her. “Is that the only thing you got out of the movie?”

Brittany put her empty Coke can on the table. “You didn’t tell me it was going to be about a lesbian seducing a straight woman.”

“Brit—” Tru snorted. “That’s not what happened. Vivian was there to free herself from a loveless marriage, and Cay simply fell in love with her. Cay didn’t force her into anything. She had to decide whether being with Cay was what she really wanted.”

“Still,” Brittany defended. “That scenario was a little convenient for you, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t believe you! Can’t you admit that it was a good movie? I mean, it was one of your favorites, before.”

“It was a good movie. But don’t expect me to suddenly remember everything and fall into your arms.”

“That’s not why I showed it to you.”

“Then why did you?”

Tru took a drink of her Coke and shook her head. “Right now, I haven’t the foggiest idea.”

Brittany stood. “I think I’ll go to bed and read for awhile. Goodnight.” She headed for the master bedroom without another word.

Tru stared at the blue screen of the TV and thought about what had just happened. “Brittany Jabot, you are the most—” she swallowed the rest of the description and looked toward the doorway where she had gone. “Bitch.”

Screaming—who screamed? Tru woke suddenly, sitting up. *Was I dreaming—?* She looked at the clock... 2 a.m.

The scream came again... anguished, frightened, almost child-like. She looked toward the doorway, suddenly aware that the sound came from the master bedroom. Tru threw the blankets back and sprinted into the hall. When she swung the door open, a shard of moonlight split the darkness across Brittany’s bed, illuminating the woman’s tortured face. She screamed again, the shrillness of it coming off the walls and piercing Tru’s eardrums. Tru moved to the bed and sat down beside her, shaking her. “Brit! Brit, wake up!” Tears streamed over Brittany’s cheeks and pooled on the pillow as she writhed beneath the coverings, gasping for air and sobbing, “No! No... please—”

Tru hoisted her up and held her tightly. “Shhh!” she soothed in the woman’s ear. “It’s okay, Baby... shhh... it’s okay. You’re dreaming, Brit... it’s only a dream, wake up!” Tru leaned back to look at her and saw her eyes snap open as though an electrical charge had gone through her. Brittany’s lungs tried to catch up to her sudden ability to breathe, as if she were coming to the surface from a deep ocean dive. A moment later she became aware that Tru held her. Brittany swallowed dryly and nudged Tru away from her.

“Are you okay?” Tru’s eyes were soft, searching.

“I’m... fine...” She dried her face with a pink flannel sleeve. “I guess I woke you up. I’m sorry.”

Tru touched the woman's leg. "You must have been having a horrible nightmare. It scared me to death. Are you okay, now?"

Brittany nodded, glancing at the clock, and running her fingers through her hair.

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"No. I want to forget it."

"Do you think that's a good idea? I mean, you've been trying to get your memory back, maybe you shouldn't shut out anything."

Brittany kicked the covers off her legs and went to the window. She opened it, and inhaled the cold air.

"Brit, close the window. You'll catch cold."

"Don't mother me, Tru." Brittany continued to inhale the air, unable to quench the odd need for it in her lungs.

"I'm not mothering you. You could have a set-back."

Brittany bulldozed the armchair over to the window and sat down. "That's not how it works, Tru. Go back to bed," she ordered.

Tru retied the string at the front of her sweat pants, and watched Brittany shiver by the window. Brittany did not answer, but began to rock back and forth, taking deep breaths. Tru left her alone, there, in front of the window, and returned to bed.

TRU CAME INTO THE LIVING ROOM, ZIPPING HER CAMOUFLAGE Army coat and donning gloves.

“Going on recon?” Brit asked, lowering the volume on CNN, which she continually watched of late.

“Gotta make sure Juts and Wheezie are okay.”

“Elderly neighbors?”

Tru laughed out loud. “Jeez, I keep forgetting that you keep forgetting. No, they’re our horses out back in the barn. The automatic feeder broke yesterday, I’ve got to feed them the old fashioned way—manually.” She waited for some flicker of recognition in Brit’s face but was not rewarded. “Never mind. I’ll be back in a bit.” Tru braced herself against the cold that came through the back door, and secured it behind her. On the screened back porch, she shoved on the cold rubber boots and stepped out into the crunchy snow.

The two Morgans were waiting for her, pawing the ground and snorting blasts of fog from their nostrils. Tru stroked their noses, and gave them each a generous scoop of oats. The small heating coil she had rigged beneath their water barrel had come unplugged again, probably due to a pawing hoof. She plugged it back in, and secured the plug onto the outlet with duct tape. That done, she began to chip away at the layer of ice over the water barrel.

“Why didn’t you bring me out here before, when we looked at the workshop?” Brittany was in the doorway. She sniffed, holding the neck of her coat closed.

“Oh—hey. I don’t know. I guess I thought you weren’t interested.” Tru went back to chipping the ice.

“I saw the barn from the kitchen window many times, but—I don’t know, I never quite made the trip.” Brittany stepped over and patted one of them on the neck. “What kind are they?”

“Morgans. Very strong and gentle.”

“Did you get them because they’re strong and gentle, or because their name was the same as yours?”

“Did you come out here to start something?” Tru wanted to know.

“What did you say their names were?”

“Juts and Wheezie.”

“Where’d you come up with that?”

“Actually it was your idea. After you started reading the old Rita Mae Brown books, you had to name them that.” Tru broke through the ice, lifted the sheet of it out of the barrel and tossed it into an empty feed bin.

“Who’s Rita Mae Brown?”

Tru chuckled. “Lord, if the sisters could hear you say such a thing! They’d ask for your N.O.W. card back.”

Brittany shook her head, as if to clear it. “What?”

Tru leaned against the wall. “You don’t remember ‘Six of One’, or ‘Bingo’?”

Brittany shook her head.

“They’re novels...” Brittany still looked puzzled. “What about ‘Rubyfruit Jungle’?”

“Rubyfruit Jungle? Sounds like a cookbook to me.”

Tru unfolded her arms to pet Wheezie. “Actually it refers to...never mind. Rita Mae appreciates the enthusiasm, I’m sure.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Let’s say that all new lesbians have to read Rubyfruit Jungle. It’s like an unwritten law.”

“Oh.” Brit zipped her jacket up higher and shivered. “So now you think I’m a new lesbian.”

Tru watched her, and merely chuckled. “So, what do you think?”

Brittany raised a brow. “About what?”

“The barn. The horses. Rita Mae.”

Brittany frowned. “You’re making fun of me. Stop it.”

“You’re being overly sensitive.”

Brittany looked down at Tru’s name on the BDU jacket’s green label. “Are there really that many gays in the military?”

Tru was too late to stop the laugh, and Brit glared at her again. “Put it this way: if Uncle Sam pissed them all off at the same time, and they quit, China would own apple pie, the flag and McDonald’s.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“A little.” Tru gave Juts a pat on her formidable jaw.

“I keep forgetting I was one of them.”

Tru shot her a look. “Still are. Just a non-practicing one.”

Brittany shivered. “That remains to be seen.”

“It remains to be seen whether you’re a non-practicing lesbian?”

“I’m going back in, now.”

Tru watched her leave the barn, then turned back to the horses. “I think I’ll give her another twenty-four hours, and then if she isn’t herself again, I’ll toss her out on her snotty little ear, whataya think, Wheezie?” The Morgan snorted.

Tru closed up the barn, and trudged to the house. Brit had chosen a spot on the sofa facing the fireplace, and she was staring into the cold remnants of last night's fire. Tru collapsed on the other "L" of the two sofas. The television volume was down, so she watched the crawler at the bottom of CNN. They sat in silence for some minutes before Brit asked, "Why don't you make a fire?"

"I could, but it's best after a horseback ride."

"I don't know," she began with forced concern. "I could have a set-back."

Tru sighed, caught in her own faulty rationale. "Okay, I was mothering you last night. I admit it. Do you want to go for a ride, or not?"

"Was I a good rider?"

Tru sat up. "Yes. Not as good as me, though."

Brittany snorted. "Sure. Lie about it, I don't remember it anyway, right?"

"We were about even."

"That's what I thought." She toyed with a small pillow and stared at the empty grates, charred wood pieces nestled below. "Is there enough wood to have a fire?"

Tru grinned to herself. "Only if you go riding with me."

"I don't know if I'm in the mood—"

"Chicken."

Brit lifted the pillow she held and bounced it atop Tru's head. "Saddle up, cowgirl. I'll show you who's chicken."

Tru checked the horse's girth one more time before she handed the loose rein to Brittany. "Hop on. We'll see how much comes naturally, and how much you used to fake."

Brit scowled at her, studied the stirrup, decided on her left foot, and placed it correctly, grasping the saddle horn and swinging astride. Settling into the leather, she smirked down at Tru.

Tru only smiled. “That’s the easy part, chick.”

Brit swallowed her sudden fear and patted the animal on the neck. “Be nice, today, Wheezie —”

Tru overheard. “That’s Juts,” she said, swinging easily into the saddle. “This is Wheezie.”

Brittany gathered the reins roughly. “Do you think we can go now?”

Tru took her down the trails she knew were more treacherous than most; that prima donna attitude would have to go, and there was no other way to do it, but take her on a ride that would likely knock her from her throne. Low limbs would serve well.

“Hey,” Brittany complained. “Is this your idea of fun? If I’d known I would need a machete, I wouldn’t have come with you on this stupid little excursion.” She pushed a small limb away which came toward her face.

“You love this. Trust me.” Tru was thankful for being in the lead, otherwise her smile would have given her away.

“I do?” As Tru maneuvered around a tree, a green limb released itself from the rump of the mount, striking her on the knee. “Ow! Why don’t you watch what you’re doing, Morgan?”

“You talking to me or the horse?” Tru shot over her shoulder.

Brittany looked at the back of the animal. “Doesn’t matter. The view is the same.”

Tru shifted in the saddle to look back at her. “How’d you like me to take off and leave you here to freeze, smart girl?”

Brit’s nose went into the air defiantly. “I don’t need your help, wise-ass.”

Tru nudged her heels into the mount and loped down the remaining incline and disappeared into the woods beyond.

Brittany tugged on the reins to stop Juts. “What a royal bitch...” she growled. “She thinks I’m helpless without her. What an ego,” she told the horse. “I ought to turn around and go back. I could be sitting by that nice warm fireplace, enjoying a cup of coffee, while she’s out here playing hide and seek with herself.” She turned to examine the trail behind her. “I’ll follow our tracks right back to the barn. That little fat-headed know it all—” Brit reined the horse around in the opposite direction, mildly surprised that she remembered how. “She’ll probably be out here for hours looking for poor little ol’ helpless Brittany, while I’m getting toasty and sleepy by the fire.” She chuckled. “Two can play this game, Tru.” She urged the Morgan forward, satisfied that she had beaten Tru at her own sport.

Suddenly, the horse stopped—its ears perked—turned around and began walking in the other direction again. “What are you doing?” she asked the horse. Brit reined the beast back, but the Morgan continued to turn back and walk in the direction Tru had disappeared. The harder she tried to turn the animal around, the more vehemently the mare resisted. The Morgan’s ears moved forward and back at odd intervals, and Brittany could do nothing but sit there and be carried wherever the horse wanted to go. “Just peachy! My own horse doesn’t obey me.” Fighting low limbs and high bushes, Brittany cursed the animal soundly for the next fifteen minutes until the mare stopped in a small clearing and stared into the trees at something Brit could not find. “What the hell are you doing, now, you stupid—”

A crackling of dry branches took Brit’s attention to the edge of the clearing. Tru ambled out of the trees, with a crafty grin. She reined the horse to a halt beside Brit’s. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Oh, stuff it. Did you know that my horse is retarded? She’s not very obedient. She came here without my permission.”

“Actually she’s very obedient. I trained her myself.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. I tried to go back to the barn and she refused.”

“I trained my horse to come when I blow this—” Tru produced a small oblong whistle. “It’s too high-pitched for us to hear, but horses hear it.”

“Well, my horse isn’t trained to that whistle, is she?”

Tru patted her mount’s neck. “Nope. Just mine.”

“But—” Brit looked down at her horse, then back up at Tru. “Are you telling me—”

“You’re on Wheezie, not Juts.”

“What happened to that five-second rule?”

“Oh I’m sorry, I forgot. Maybe your amnesia is contagious.”

Brittany huffed a cloud of fog. “You are insufferable, you know that?”

“I enjoy a good laugh,” she admitted shamelessly.

“Oh, ha, ha.” Brit sneered. “That’s very entertaining, Tru. Let’s do play another game!”

“Where’s your sense of humor?” Tru teased.

“I forgot it!” she shot back.

“Okay. I’m sorry. I was trying to lighten things up a little. You want to talk about something else?”

“Please.”

“How do you like my trained horse?”

Brit scowled at her. “Not that.”

“Okay, let’s talk about your boyfriend.”

“What?”

“Max.”

“He’s not my boyfriend. He wants to be, maybe.” Brittany loosed her feet from the stirrups and stretched her legs.

“Well, at least he’s got good taste.” Tru crooked a leg over the pommel.

“Don’t start getting fresh, Morgan. It will get you exactly nowhere.”

“How’re you going to get rid of him?”

“I don’t know. Any suggestions?”

Tru dug out a package of sunflower seeds, and plunged her fingers in the bag. “Tell him you’re gay.”

Brittany huffed. “No way.”

“Why not? If he thinks you are, he might give up.”

Brittany shook her head and held out her hand for some seeds. Tru gave her some. “It wouldn’t work. Besides, you have an ulterior motive for suggesting that.”

“Right. I’m such a lusty wench. All I’m after is your body.”

“Well aren’t you?”

She bit a shell and dug out the seed with her teeth, chewing the tiny morsel. “I thought you didn’t like this subject.”

“I don’t. But sooner or later, you’re going to get impatient and want some payback for all this time you’ve been without a bed-partner.”

“Sadly, sexual favors are not considered currency in Colorado.”

Brittany made a face. “Oh, like I’d hop into bed with you, anyway, because you’re frustrated.”

“You’ve done it for less than that.”

Brittany’s jaw went slack as she stared at Tru. “I’m liking this conversation less and less.”

“Me too. About Max. You’re right, you can’t pay some debts equally. Your thanks should be payment enough. And maybe your friendship later, if he proves to be a decent guy. But don’t let

him hold the guilt and obligation over your head like a big rock. You have to draw the line somewhere.” Tru dropped the barren shells she had been collecting into the snow.

Brittany put her feet back in the stirrups. “It’s not a question of whether to draw the line, it’s a question of how. I have no interest in him really. He does seem kinda creepy, now.”

“Then tell him you’re gay. What have you got to lose?” Tru saw her hesitancy. “Even if you don’t feel it, saying it might turn him off.”

Brittany reined Wheezie around. “Can we go back, now? I’m freezing.”

“Wait a second.” Tru guided Juts over beside Wheezie and reached into the saddle bag. “Here,” she held out the extra pair of leather gloves. “These will warm up your hands, at least.”

“Why didn’t you tell me those were in there?” Brittany tried to be amiable, but failed.

Tru reined the horse toward the trail. “You didn’t ask.”

“Bitch.”

Brittany followed Tru, and the two of them began the trip home, Tru taking the shorter and easier route this time, to save Brit any additional scratches and discomfort. One comeuppance per day should keep her in line, she thought.

Once the horses were brushed, put in their stalls and fed, the two of them trekked up the path to the house. Tru went directly to the fireplace and began stacking kindling on the grate. “Why don’t you get us something to drink, Brit?”

“As long as it’s not Peppermint Schnapps,” she retorted.

Tru smiled, remembering what had almost happened a few nights ago. “There’s tea, coffee, and...wine—”

Brittany stopped and turned around on her way to the kitchen to stand akimbo. “You want to get me drunk again.”

Tru forced herself to ignore this statement, for fear that a response would tarnish the progress they had made. “Yeah, busted. I’ve almost worn you down.” She lit a fireplace match and set flame to the starter log, fanning the small flame with the Denver Post until it caught the kindling on top. Stacking a few logs atop the kindling, she turned to look at Brittany, but found she had already gone into the hall.

The fire caught evenly as Tru settled on the sofa. A few moments later, Brittany appeared, dressed in sweats and thick socks, and went to the kitchen, returning with wine, handing Tru a goblet. Tru looked up at her curiously. “I thought you were swearing off the evil spirits, as it were.”

“Like I can’t handle a little wine?”

“Well, it’s a little less potent than Schnapps, lucky for you.”

“I don’t have to drink until I’m drunk this time.” Brit leaned back and stared into the fire. She remembered the way Tru looked on stage a few nights ago. She thought of the black shirt that barely hid her cleavage, and felt a slight twinge that confused her, but at the same time made her feel just a little happy. She wasn’t sure how to translate some of her feelings when they were always colliding with each other. “Tru...are you sorry you found me?”

Tru dropped her head back against the sofa and turned to look at her. “Why do you ask?”

Brit took a drink of wine. “Just curious. I know I haven’t exactly made your life easy since I came back here.”

Tru knew this was an understatement, but felt no need to make a comment about it.

“I saw the hospital bill on the desk.”

“Yeah. That’s a corker...you had some independent insurance, but it didn’t cover the deductible or some of the other things...”

“Are you...paying that?”

“In increments, yeah. That’s why I really needed that gig the other night. And the ones coming up.”

Brit looked into the jumping flames at the hearth. “I’m...sorry...”

She remembered all the days and nights she spent searching for her. “Few things worth having come cheap, I guess.”

“Was I worth having?” Brit had twisted on the cushion to face her.

Tru studied her and smiled faintly. “Still are.”

Brittany’s body swayed forward, then back again, and she felt her pulse quicken at the involuntary movement toward Tru. “Shit,” she cursed softly.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I had this odd feeling...”

Tru let a crooked grin invade her face. “I know what it was—”

“What?”

“You wanted to kiss me.”

“No.” Brittany sat back again.

“Okay. You didn’t. Suit yourself.”

“I’m not...I can’t—”

Tru sat up suddenly, holding her wine with both hands. “Brit, do you have to remember those feelings in order to have them?”

“But I’m different, now—” she protested.

“Are you?”

“Tru... was I...” She took a drink, as if to gather strength. “...were you the only woman I ever slept with?”

Something pained traveled across Tru’s face, and she felt it there, and looked away carefully. “Yes.”

She leaned forward. “And we had this really great relationship that everyone else envied?”

Tru pressed her lips together and closed her eyes. “That’s...what I thought.”
There. I didn’t have to lie.

“What’s that mean?”

Now I have to lie.

“Tru—”

“We were very happy together. Everything was great.” Tru had a strange taste in her mouth, and wondered if she should blame the wine, or the lie. She decided to check the wine first, and took another swallow.

“Tru... I know I hurt you. Didn’t I?”

Tru sighed, silently hoping the phone would ring, or Dropsi would knock something loud on the floor, or a freak thunderstorm would drown out all ability to hear. “That’s all in the past.”

“Did it have something to do with the night I had the accident?”

Bull’s-eye. Tru felt the arrow strike and stay. “You can’t remember that night, and I’d like to forget. Can we not discuss it?”

Brittany sighed and watched Tru stare into the fire. The flames were reflecting in her eyes, and caused them to pirouette; but in a gloomy ballet. Brit decided against additional queries, for now. She had hurt her. She had done something to Tru that night, and Tru could not forgive yet, whatever it was.

19

HER HEAD STILL MUDDLED BY THE DREAM, Brittany carried the small bottle of liquor back to the table and sat down. She tried to focus on the trees through the bay window, yet the

glistening panes seemed only to reflect the images which had projected on the screen of her sleeping mind...

The horrible, tomb-like interior filled with water as she pushed on the windows and doors in a hideous dance of slow motion terror. Her mind groggy, escape an unattainable goal, her lungs ached for precious air. Then the face appeared outside the passenger window...a young man’s face, which she knew now to be Max’s. He tugged on the door handle, watching her, and she sobbed, the action drawing water into her lungs. Death was certain, now. It was going to happen. She wanted it to happen quickly...he would not get the door open in time...she relaxed, letting her lungs fill with the icy water as his face hovered over her through the glass, entreating her silently to hold on...but too late...

Brittany took a deep breath, as if to reassure herself that she remained among the living, and the panes on the bay window came back into focus. She took a careful sip of Schnapps and felt the sensation of death shivering on her skin again. A tear crept out of her eye and spilled onto the tabletop, as a cold hand pressed her shoulder, and she spasmed at the unexpected contact.

“Brit? Are you okay?”

She shook her head faintly. “I had a dream about the accident.”

Sleepy-eyed, Tru moved a chair out and sat facing her. She rubbed her eyes and blinked her vision into sharper focus. “You remembered it?”

“Just the part about... being inside the car... underwater... and the part about Max being there, trying to get the door open. And I remember... I remember drowning...”

Tru felt the bones in her chest give as if a weight had been placed on it. She slid from her chair and dropped to her knees beside Brittany, laying her head in her lap and circling her waist with her arms. “God, Brit... when you say that, it makes my heart flip over—I don’t know if I could have lived without you—” she squeezed her gently.

Brittany forgot the horrid images long enough to look down at the young woman who held her. She lifted her hand to touch the ebon hair, stroking it slowly.

Tru pushed the welling of grief away and felt the touch of Brittany’s hand in her hair; afraid to move, for fear that Brit would recognize an expression of real affection, and pull away again, put up a wall.

“Truly—” Brit whispered.

Tru lifted her head at the endearment, but saw that Brittany had not remembered what they had shared, but that the name was special to her. She waited.

Brittany cupped Tru's face in her hands and caressed her cheeks with her thumbs. "You've been very sweet to me, and I've been awful to you."

Tru's eyes welled with tears and she tried to blink them back but lost one down her cheek. Brittany wiped the tear away with a thumb and gathered Tru into her arms, letting Tru lay her cheek against her chest. She stroked her back and continued to hold her close, until Tru thought she would wither inside from the sweetness of it. Brit pushed her back, studying her gray eyes. "Are you okay?"

Tru grinned. "I was trying to comfort you and you're comforting me." She sniffed and pressed the back of her hand to her nose. "I think we've got this backward."

"I'm not sure about that," Brittany whispered. "You've missed me...I mean, who I was..."

Tru felt her own walls beginning to materialize and she stood. "Yeah, well..." She crossed to the bay window and watched the shadows from the moonlight play upon the snow-covered ground. The shadows moved like dark wraiths in a ballet, the wind their silent orchestra.

Tru felt Brittany step up behind her, and turned. "You'd better get back to bed."

Brittany measured the words. "Why?"

"Because if you keep standing there after this, I'm going to kiss you." *That ought to incite a swift exit.*

Brittany did not flinch. "I think I want you to."

Tru failed to control the upward leap of eyebrows, but she managed to remember to breathe, and knew it to be a big accomplishment by itself. Her heart battered her sternum, and she searched Brit's eyes for the game, but could not find it. Tru stepped forward and held Brit's face in her hands, watching her eyes for a signal that she would dart away. Finding no fear, Tru leaned in close and pressed her lips against Brittany's. Something like a

pilot light ignited in Tru's stomach, and she wondered if this was a dream, and knew if it was she wished to remain in this nocturnal fiction of bliss. She spun her slowly to the wall and pressed against her.

Brittany returned the kiss timidly, her hands finding Tru's waist. Tru broke the kiss and opened her eyes. Brittany's face had flushed red and she leaned against the wall, her head back. After a moment, she sighed and moved past Tru, squeezing her hand on the way by. "Goodnight, Tru," she whispered.

The best way to get the better of

temptation is just to yield to it.

~Clementia Stirling Graham

20

Fort Lee, Virginia, 2000

THEY WERE RELEASED FROM FRIDAY NIGHT FORMATION before dark. Captain Brown gave her obligatory speech to the gathered troops concerning a soldier's responsibility to represent the Army—and Whiskey Company in particular—in an honorable fashion. As she spoke, each soldier silently prayed that he or she would not be assigned to C.Q. duty and be forced to give up the weekend for the good of Uncle Sam.

Tru leaned forward from the line to look for Brittany, who was ten or so soldiers away. Brittany met her eyes for a quick second, and then she faced forward again. Finally, the unfortunate chosen soldiers were announced. Chosen, usually, according to their behavior during the previous week. Those selected broke rank with no less than reluctant chagrin and stood to the side of the Captain, and then she dismissed all the others. Each platoon raced for their respective barracks in a stampede to finish last minute preparations for the weekend.

Private Morgan detoured around the billets to call a cab from the pay phone at the corner and then hurried to her quarters for her overnight bag, anxious to begin the weekend of freedom that all soldiers cherished.

Private Jabot waited at the picnic table in the smoking area when Tru came out. They indulged in chit-chat with the other departing soldiers, relating common experiences and plans for the weekend, and Tru noticed that Brittany was more carefully aloof than usual. “You still want to share a cab with me, Brit?”

Brittany put the tiny Capri cigarette to her full lips and took a pull, the glow of it forming a hazy nimbus around her piercing blue eyes. She considered Tru. “I guess. Which hotel are you staying at this weekend?”

“Well, it seems like everyone in Whiskey Company is going to the Comfort Inn in Hopewell. Supposed to be a big party. So I’m going to the Ramada in Petersburg.”

“Me, too,” She said simply. “Sure. Let’s share the cab.”

Tru saw Captain Brown emerge from the billets and promptly dropped her cigarette, calling the other soldiers in the smoking area to attention. The Captain returned Private Morgan’s salute, responding, “As you were.” In synchronization, the soldiers bent to pick up the cigarettes they had dropped when Tru called them to attention. “I hate when that happens,” she told the others, smiling.

When the taxi arrived, the two of them collected their things and got in. The cabby, his face obscured by the darkness which had gathered quickly around them, was not the talkative sort, for which Tru was silently thankful.

Halfway into the trip, the glow of city lights on passing motels and buildings ushered in a sort of sluggish peace which seemed to descend on both of them. Brittany interrupted the peace with a yawn, and leaned over to lay her head in Tru’s lap. Endeared and excited by this, Tru toyed with her hair and stroked her back and neck tenderly, hoping for some reaction to tell her if Brittany’s thoughts were her own. Had that passionate, wee-hour

rendezvous at the barracks given Brittany ideas? If the C.Q. had not interrupted the liaison, would it have gone further?

Tru peered down at the supine young woman lying trustingly within arm's reach. *At least she can't run away in the back of a cab...and putting her head in my lap was an obvious invitation to move a boundary...* Tru let her hands convey those feelings which craved expression, and her touch met no protest. Brittany lay still and warm, yet silent, her cheek atop Tru's thigh.

When they arrived, Tru paid the cabby the full fare and tipped him a couple of dollars before they went inside to register. She turned to look at Brittany. "Want a room alone, or do you want to share the expense for that, too?"

Brittany pursed her lips and looked around in the wallet she held. "It can get expensive alone. I'll share, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind," Tru answered, almost too nonchalantly. *My heart doesn't seem to mind either. It's jumping up and down in my chest right now*, she thought.

The two women pooled their money on the desk and accepted the two keys. Brittany went to punch the elevator button and Tru joined her, telling Brittany she was going to leave her stuff at the desk while she ran over to the liquor store on the corner to get some wine, and then join her in the room. Brittany turned as she stepped in the elevator and said, "Chardonnay." Tru smiled as the doors closed between them.

When she returned, Brittany was puttering about, unpacking, and switching channels on the TV.

Finally alone together, they began to settle in, sipping the wine. To Tru, Brittany seemed no less elegant holding the plastic cup with the Ramada Inn logo on the side than if she had been holding a Waterford goblet.

She watched Brittany while leafing through a magazine that might as well have been upside down. Brittany—soft and inviting wearing that big pink shirt, her wavy, luscious blond hair falling free over her shoulders—knew that Tru watched her and was pleased without knowing why.

Brittany disappeared into the bathroom for long moments, and emerged with a plastic dish. “Want to help me frost my hair?”

Tru looked at her directly, happy for the opportunity to be near her for a justified reason. “Sure.” She tried not to seem overly enthused; birds tend to take wing when startled. And Brittany was like a bird. Freedom-loving, her flights controlled, but easily startled and fragile if handled roughly.

Brittany carried the mixture of gold highlights over to the bed and sat down, handing the dish to Tru. “Just use this brush and sort of paint in the highlights. Pretend you’re Picasso.”

“Picasso painted some pretty goofy-looking things in his day.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Brittany decided with a meaningful smile.

Tru refused to allow her hands to tremble as she held the dish with the mixture. Dabbing the brush, she held it aloft, studying Brittany’s hair for a starting place.

“Get the front first, then do it all over.”

Tru thought wistfully that this was how she wanted to make love to her, too. “I may not do this right—”

“It’s easy. Trust your instincts.”

Tru again found double meaning in those words—ironic, coming from Brittany. *Yeah, take your own advice, fraidy-cat.* She leaned down in front of Brit, aware of the soft scent of her perfume. *What was it?* If Tru were to give it a name, she would have called it, *Drive Me Crazy*. She tried not to inhale too often, but holding her breath was making her light-headed, so she had to rethink that action. Brushing the highlight mixture on gently, slowly, she purposefully prolonged the task. While Tru alternately studied her hair and stroked with the brush, Brittany watched her face, unmoving, but the awareness of Brit’s attention on her caused Tru’s heart to pump faster as those blue eyes flickered over her features. She took her time, leaning very

close every so often in order to dab the areas she thought needed a highlight.

Tru tried several times to stop, fearing the continual closeness would make her do something rash, like toss the bowl across the room, grab this temptress, and fall on top of her in a lip-lock. There was some wisdom in the evolutionary design of humans; it was a matter of utility that they could not normally see the thoughts of others. Certainly, the images in Tru's mind would have sent Brittany screaming down to the front desk to get another room.

The swift realization emerged that this opportunity to be near the object of her desire, was becoming personal torture on many levels. But Brittany coaxed Tru on, insisting that she needed more highlights, though Tru was sure if it went on, the task could have been handled more quickly with a full color job, rather than strokes from a brush. It was rather like mowing the lawn with scissors. But Brittany was still not bolting for the door, nor showing any signs of discomfort. The shoe was on the other foot now. Brittany was perfectly content to drive a person crazy. Tru knew that foreplay came dressed in many disguises, but wondered if Brit fully understood that was what she was doing.

The process continued for over an hour, with Brit insisting on Tru's meticulousness, and Tru getting closer and closer to hyperventilation. Each time Tru leaned close to paint a strand, an ache settled at the apex of her thighs; a maddening itch that lived internally and thus, could not be scratched, except in the same way. Tru had never felt such an intense, vehement desire. She leaned down to face Brittany, checking the frontal appearance of the frost, their faces inches apart. Brit whispered, "Talk to me, Tru..."

The words sliced through her like a hot velvet knife, a knife Tru wished would cut her again and again, while she lay spent in grateful pools of blood. "About what?"

"Whatever it is you're thinking."

Tru cleared her throat quickly and continued to paint. “You don’t want to know what I’m thinking.”

“Maybe I do.”

Tru met her eyes, seeking verification. “Okay. I was thinking that you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

“Thank you.”

“Welcome.”

“What else?” Brittany urged.

Tru feared she would not survive this conversation, much less the rest of the evening. “What do you want me to say?”

“Just talk to me, Tru. I like your voice.”

Tru’s mind looped into chaos. She considered telling a joke, but doubted she could remember one. It was so much easier to sing a song on stage to a room of strangers, than to speak intelligible words to this woman who vexed her so. She considered a story about her childhood but couldn’t decide which one. She considered the truth about what she had really been thinking, along the lines of ‘*why don’t you just lie down and let me do wonderful things to you?*’ but worried that her admission would result in the sudden flight of the Brittany-bird. Mysteriously, she wanted the torture to continue; she was the prisoner in love with her chains. At least by frosting her hair, she could be near this tantalizing creature who made her ache in places she had forgotten. “I have no idea what to say,” she admitted honestly.

“Do I make you nervous, Tru?”

Each time Tru heard her own name from that throat, she felt blood rise to the surface of her skin in sundry locations. Brittany might as well have taken a section of Tru’s soul and kissed it. “Why do you ask?”

“Your hands are trembling.”

“Too much coffee today, I guess.”

“Your face is red,” she pressed.

Tru blurted the first excuse that came to mind. “It’s hot in here.”

“No—” Brit tapped a finger on Tru’s chest. “It’s hot in here.”

The tiny circle where her finger had been began to burn as if a lit cigarette had been held to her skin, and Tru believed she’d have to stifle an oncoming scream. Instead, she huffed and relaxed her arms to raise up, put the color on the chest of drawers, and lit a cigarette.

“I think that’s enough,” Brit said, smiling at her hair in the mirror, and disappearing into the bathroom.

Tru slammed a hand against her chest and took a deep breath and blew it out shakily. “I think that’s too much,” she corrected softly.

With Brit in the bathroom, Tru used the time to regain an alarming degree of lost composure. *Brittany is straight, and is teasing me...But oh, how exciting is the game.* Tru stretched out on the bed to finish her cigarette, angry at the blood pounding between her thighs. Had there been anyone who had affected her this way? Her first lover had evolved into her best friend, and most of her other relationships had been short-lived. She always seemed to hook up with the “new meat”—the women who had never been with another woman. This scenario always ended in the same fashion: another woman would intrigue the newcomer, and Tru would see only the flying gravel from her pursuing heels.

Each of them had intrigued or fascinated her in some way. But an unfamiliar energy thrived between herself and Brittany, defined partially by Tru’s view of Brittany as the first woman she found stunning and classically beautiful. A lot could be said for physical attraction. Personality and inner beauty aside, the hormones respond best to visual stimulation, and they don’t give a flying rat’s ass whether or not the stimulation is spiritually profound or one dimensional. This is at the crux of all sexual impropriety. It feels good to be horny and it feels good to be close to beauty.

Tru heard bath water running and knew Brittany would be closed up in there for a while longer. She imagined Brittany getting undressed and stepping into the steamy water, easing herself down slowly into the warm bubbles...the expression of pleasure that would be on her face...Tru shook the image away and put out her cigarette, which had burned down to the filter. Instead, she recalled that silky Texas voice: *Talk to me, Tru...* and shivered violently. Tru wanted her fiercely—even knowing that Brit toyed with her and that her needs were more likely than not to remain unquenched.

“Tru—” came that voice beyond the door. “Would you bring me some wine?”

Tru sat up, aware that she’d have to walk in and pretend that Brittany was a friend—naked in the tub. She poured the wine, spilling some and cursing. She carried it to the door, and knocked. “Are you decent?” She tried to sound flippant.

“That’s debatable,” came the reply.

Tru took a steadying breath and opened the door.

The bubbles sheathed Brittany up to her underarms. Had there been no bubbles, Tru would have certainly lost her aplomb. *Thank God for bubbles...damn the bubbles...* She set the wine on the edge of the tub and turned to the mirror, trying to get away from the image of her. But there it was. Their eyes met in the glass.

“Thanks, Hon’,” she said, leaning forward to have a sip, the skin of her shoulders like polished ivory, inviting Tru to look further, to the way her breasts were now visible amid the bubbles.

Tru picked up the brush and ran it through her regulation short, black hair, knowing that if she left too abruptly, she’d give herself away.

“Something wrong?” Brit asked sweetly.

Tru sighed. “Not a thing. Enjoy your bath.” She escaped out of the room, seethingly angry that she had blown her cover.

Much later Brittany came out in a skimpy hotel towel...(was it a hand towel, for chrissakes?) and crossed in front of the bed where Tru lounged. Brittany turned her back on Tru and dropped the towel. Tru closed her eyes quickly, flatly denying herself the pleasure of watching her get dressed for bed.

Brittany sat at the foot of the bed and stared at the T V, apparently engrossed with an old episode of Dallas and rubbing her neck.

“Homesick?” Tru asked, pointing to the program.

“Aren’t we all.” She continued to massage her neck.

“What’s wrong with your neck? Is it stiff?”

“And my feet are cold...” she muttered.

“What?” Tru had heard her, and immediately checked to see if Brit was wearing socks. She was. Then she wondered if she had only wished for another meaning in her words; wished for Brittany to return her feelings.

“Nothing. Would you rub it for me, Tru?”

Put my hands on that beautiful neck in a platonic fashion?! Glad for a quick moment that Brit had not turned to look at her; Tru was certain that the exclamation which had darted through her mind was manifested on her face. “Sure.” She endured the shame of being easily lured into the abyss of subservience. First the frosting, then the wine in the bath, then this. Somewhere in Dante’s circles of hell, there had to be a level where vixens reside, and torture the hormones of their victims. Wasn’t that the Lust Circle?

“Tru—?” Brittany turned, then, questioning Tru’s hesitancy. “Are you going to do it?”

Tru’s mind groaned, *Dear God, I hope so!* and she made a valiant effort to ignore it. Brittany gathered her hair together in the back and lifted the

length of it up and around in front of her. Tru perched on her knees behind her and began to knead the muscles at her shoulders, rudely aware that they were very relaxed, as were the muscles in her neck. She knew for sure, then, that she was being baited—Brittany, the juicy, inviting worm, and Tru, the hungry, stupid fish. “Better?”

“Mmmm...” she moaned. “That feels great.”

You have no idea, Tru wanted to say, but kept it to herself.

Eventually, Brittany decided she wanted an entire back rub, and positioned herself on the bed, without any statement of acquiescence from Tru, assuming correctly that Tru would oblige.

Astonished by the intense pleasure she received from touching Brittany’s back, Tru knew she would have performed the massage for as long as Brittany wanted. Until her fingers fell off and rolled onto the floor...But moments later, Brittany thanked her, got up, and offered to respond in kind. Tru felt like a child who’d been offered sprinkles for her favorite ice cream. Was she testing herself to see what her reaction would be upon touching a woman with romance in mind? Whatever the reason, the sensation of Brittany’s hands on her body only made the flame burn a little higher, and tonight she would simply have to take the Big Chance. But only when the time felt right, or if Brittany gave her some sort of signal. Until then, Tru could only manufacture a mental fire hose to douse the flames.

Much later, after enjoying the delivered pizza, spending some time reading and talking about home and any other subject they could cover safely, Tru sat on the edge of Brittany’s bed to refill her wine. Awkwardly, Brittany studied Tru and seemed to want to say something, but finally gave up and turned out the lamp. They both sat there in the neon-pierced shadows, drinking wine, the only sounds an occasional vehicle outside, and their breathing.

Brittany set her cup aside, and snuggled down into the blankets. Tru poured herself more wine, hoping it would help calm her wildly bouncing pulse, her mind a jumble of scenarios, each

one more steamy than the last, while Brittany watched her in the cover of darkness. She heard Brit sigh.

“Can’t you sleep?” she asked softly.

“No... I think I need...”

Tru twisted to face her. “What do you need, Brit?”

Brittany remained quiet so long that Tru thought she might never answer; that perhaps she had even fallen asleep. But then, “I need you to hold me.”—and she turned her back to Tru.

Tru swallowed the heartbeat that vaulted into her throat, and peeled back the covers. Sliding in behind Brit, she put her arms around her and waited. Tru could almost hear their heartbeats in the silence of the room, and could not, would not ignore her ache this time. She touched Brittany’s hair, unable to resist the scintillating locks, captured in the shard of neon dancing through the slightly parted curtains; she brushed the pale, saffron strands away from her cheek as Brit lay facing the wall away from Tru. Tru moved closer, to kiss her temple softly. Brittany made a slight, indecipherable sound, but did not pull away. Tru pressed closer, feeling the silent energy passing between their bodies, aware that Brit’s pounding heart marched in cadence with her own.

Tru swept her hand slowly along Brit’s thigh, coming to rest at her hip. Brit moaned softly and moved against her, as Tru kissed her hair, temple, cheek, and moved to her neck as Brittany offered it to her. Tru pushed Brit’s shoulder down so that they faced each other. In her eyes, Tru saw fear and longing. “I care for you so much,” Tru whispered. A quick breath escaped Brittany’s lips, and she said nothing. Tru kept her eyes open as she bent slowly to touch her lips to that soft cheek. She bent back and watched as Brittany took a breath and moistened her lips, closing her eyes.

Tru dropped kisses from Brit’s cheek to the corner of her mouth, pausing a moment before she pressed her lips against Brittany’s. Tru withdrew, waiting for a signal. Brittany sighed and whispered Tru’s name almost inaudibly, and Tru kissed her again, deeper, gradually exploring her mouth

as Brittany met the kiss and her arms came around Tru's shoulders. Tru teased Brit's mouth with her tongue, pulling back slightly when Brit tried to deepen the kiss. Tru felt fingernails press into her back, and cringed in pleasure. Releasing a bit more of her ascending passion, Tru explored the young woman's body; first with her hands, then with her mouth.

Freeing the buttons of Brit's nightshirt, Tru caressed the swell of Brittany's breasts and let her lips do the same. To Tru it felt like a ceremony—a ritualistic lovemaking as homage to a goddess. Brittany breathed faster, and Tru allowed her kisses to travel down to the pink areola, drawing the nipple into her mouth and suckling gently. A line from Shakespeare appeared in her mind: *Where the bee sucks, there suck I...* Brittany moaned suddenly, digging her nails deeper into Tru's shoulders. Tru continued, moving to the other breast for more of the same, and then eased her way down to Brit's stomach, leaving small wet circles with her tongue. *How far will she let me go?* Tru wondered, her own breathing inconsistent, her heart frantic, bruising, against her chest. She decided to find out.

Sitting up, she grasped the sides of Brit's bikini-briefs and waited. Brittany lay there, eyes closed, her breasts undulating with her breathing, the fabric of the pink nightshirt haloing the round fullness of her breasts, where it lay scrunched above them, the nipples erect and serving as a barrier the shirt could not pass to cover her skin; they were fresh cherries, ripe and inviting. Brittany lifted her hips, allowing Tru to remove the fabric between Tru's passion, and Brit's need.

Tru absorbed the sight of her, trembling and vulnerable, eyes still shut tight, and traced her fingers, feather-like, from Brittany's neck, over her breasts, sides, hips, and down both legs. She placed her knees between the young woman's thighs, and stroked the sensitive inside of them with the backs of her hands. A shiver tickled Brit's body and Tru wanted badly for her to open her eyes, or speak. But she did neither.

She parted Brittany's thighs without an objection, and settled between them. Opening her gently, Tru tasted the sweetness of her, gleaning a new and different moan from her throat. Gently, lovingly, she explored her most intimate place, taking her time with the ceremony. She

slaked Brittany's thirst steadily; eager, yet restrained, but certainly with no thought of ceasing. Tru was overjoyed long, excruciating minutes later, when Brittany caught her breath and called out her name, her body arching off the bed, rigid in the fist of searing sweetness. She dug her nails into Tru's skin, and shuddered...

Tru lay her cheek on Brit's thigh, swallowing on a sigh, and then gazed up at her. "Look at me, Brit."

Brittany pressed her lips together and shook her head, whispering, "I can't."

Tru captured her hand and squeezed it. "Look at me."

Brittany opened her arms in an inviting gesture, her eyes still closed, exposed by a passion she could not understand. "Come here."

Tru crawled up to her, wiping away the wetness from her chin with the corner of the sheet. She held her, kissed her. "Are you sorry?"

"No."

"Why can't you look at me?"

"I can't." She pulled Tru closer. "Just hold me."

Tru held Brittany, settling in close, knowing she was hooked, and wondering if that was good or bad.

21

TRU ROLLED OVER AND OPENED HER EYES, the dream of blissful moments in Virginia still vivid in her mind. She understood why she'd dreamed about it. It had been stirred up by the kiss. The memory of last night came back to her, fully, the current vexation very nearly as potent as the first. *Brit kissed me...*

The fact made her smile, but she knew that Brit would probably be waiting in the kitchen again, ready to rake her over the coals as if the kiss had been magically induced by some sorcery on Tru's part. Tru stretched and sighed, allowing herself the enjoyment of a few private moments inside that image...the sensation of Brittany's body pressed against hers...those sweet, full lips against her own.

The fire in Tru would burn steady, now, and there would be no turning back. It was no different than that time in the Petersburg hotel, when Brittany teased her mercilessly before giving herself over. Tru would either have to learn to live with this searing ache, or convince Brittany that it was okay to do what she had done last night. The amnesia, for whatever mystical or medical reason, had sent Brit's mind backward, as if through a wormhole, and made her straight again, as she was before they had met.

Tru got up and started for the kitchen, bracing herself for the attack. When she came through the doorway, she saw the red light on the coffee maker, and the full pot waiting for her. She turned and retraced her steps into the hall, past the guest room to the master bedroom door. She knocked softly and pushed the door open. The bed was made and Brittany was gone. Feeling a sliver of alarm, Tru went back to the kitchen and looked out the bay window. There were fresh footprints in the snow from the back step leading to the barn. Tru hurried back to her room and got dressed.

When Tru squeezed through the half-open barn doors, she saw Brittany standing there, petting Juts and Wheezie on their noses, and she could hear her humming some mindless tune. She crept up behind her and goosed her on the sides; Brittany yelped, and lurched forward, startling both horses.

"Oh—my God, Tru. You scared the hell out of me—" She touched her palm to the bulky fabric at the front of her Army jacket and released a breath.

Tru giggled and tickled Wheezie's nodding nose as the animal insisted on her attention. "G'mornin', Wheez'" She looked over at Brittany, who had wandered over to the nearby shelf to wipe off the feed she had spilled.

"You fed them all by yourself?"

Brittany lowered a brow in her direction. "I'm not stupid, just forgetful."

Tru couldn't tell if her response was caustic or not. "I'm fully aware of your intelligence, Brit...so, how'd you sleep last night?"

"Like a rock." Brittany dusted her hands off and came back over to pet Juts.

"And how do rocks sleep?"

Brittany eyed her smartly. "Solid."

"You ready for coffee?"

Brittany turned her head to look directly at Tru, her eyes darting over Tru's face, as if she'd noticed a feature she hadn't before. "Yeah."

Inside the house again, Brittany poured them coffee and placed the two mugs on the table as she slid into a chair. Tru joined her, and wondered what could be going on inside Brit's head. She waited for the argument to ensue, but Brittany merely unfolded the day's newspaper and began to read and sip coffee. Tru noticed there were still wet patches on the newsprint. No doubt the memory of drying the paper by the fireplace had not come back to Brittany. She watched the blond siren, her chin resting on one propped fist. "Okay...let me have it."

Brittany's eyebrows lifted in response but she seemed too involved in her reading to look up.

"Brit—"

The woman broke away from the page and met her eyes. "What?"

"Aren't you going to blast me?"

"Why would I blast you?"

"Because of... you know... last night..."

"Oh, good. Cryptograms. My favorite," she mocked.

Tru allowed herself to smile. “Okay, touché, and all that. Are you mad at me or not?”

“Not,” she answered, turning her attention back to the paper.

“What’s changed?”

“Nothing.” She turned the page, examining the entertainment section. “It happened, and obviously it’s what I needed to do at the time, let’s not make a big thing of it.”

Tru knew if she pushed, there would be an argument after all. “Fair enough. I was thinking about putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Would you like to join me?”

“Sure,” Brit continued to read as Tru got up to get the puzzle from the hall closet.

When the pieces were all spread out on the table, Brittany began to commandeer all the border pieces, even boldly snatching a few from under Tru’s nose. Tru smacked at her hand, as if it was a traveling bug. “Don’t steal my pieces.”

“Community property, I believe,” Brittany pointed out, snatching another. “I might even own this puzzle.”

Tru leaned forward quickly, grasping Brittany’s wrist and trying to pry her fingers away from the piece. “Gimmee!”

“No!” Brit wrenched her arm away and held the piece to her chest, challenging Tru with her eyes.

Tru screeched her chair back to get up and Brittany swiftly captured another piece from Tru’s side of the table. Tru jumped up and started around the table, but Brittany was already zipping into the living room, placing the coffee table strategically between herself and a pursuing Tru. At a standoff, Tru crouched. “Gimme that,” she ordered.

Brittany wiggled her head in cocky defiance. “Take it.”

Tru rushed around the table, and Brittany escaped to the other side. “Gimme.”

Brittany’s mouth curled into an evil grin. “Nanee, nanee, boo-boo, stick your head in doo-doo,” she sang, and tried to bolt down the hallway, when Tru leaped over the table between them. Brittany never made it to the door; Tru had a handful of her shirt, and tried to pull her to the floor, but Brittany clutched the puzzle pieces and resisted, laughing. The two of them kept pulling against each other until Tru was reduced to spinning Brittany in a circle, her hands stretching Brit’s T-shirt at the back. Suddenly, Tru let go, and Brittany stumbled to the floor.

Tru leaped into the air, shouting like a banshee, and pretended to try to put both feet in Brit’s stomach, but instead landed astride the shrieking woman. She sat down over Brittany’s hips and pinned her arms. Tru growled like a predatory beast, and Brit snickered. When the moment faded back into reason, they were face to face, their eyes locked as they regained control of their breathing. Tru saw something akin to fear flutter over Brittany’s face, and rolled off her, slapping her palm on the carpet, saying, “One... two... three!” Then she jumped up and began to bounce on the balls of her feet like a boxer, while she hummed the theme from ‘Rocky.’

Brittany giggled, forced herself off the floor, lifting her chin up and walking snobbishly past Tru, who still bounced and waved to an imaginary stadium of fans. “I still have the pieces,” Brittany boasted, strutting back to the kitchen table.

Tru trailed along behind her with a melodramatic whine in her voice, “Does that mean I have to forfeit the championship?”

Brittany dropped into the kitchen chair. “Yes.”

Tru sat down in her own chair and smiled; Brittany looked up at her and smiled back. *Well, she hasn’t forgotten how to have fun*, Tru decided. She picked up a puzzle piece and held it out to her across the table. “Steal this one, and I’ll do better this time.”

“Not a chance, Morgan, you sick... lesbian,” she accused half-heartedly.

Tru took a drink of her coffee and decided things were improving. “You know what your problem is, Jabot?”

She did not look up. “No, but I’m sure you’re going to clue me in.”

“Right. Your problem is, you don’t have any sense of adventure. You’re a stick-in-the-mud. You’re a spineless chicken-shit.” Tru waited for Brittany to look up from the puzzle, and was not disappointed.

“A spineless chicken-shit?” she repeated roughly.

“That’s right. You’re afraid of things that aren’t fearful at all.”

“Like?” Brittany had put the pieces in her hand down on the table to confront this new challenge.

“Like your feelings. Your reactions. You’re so afraid that you might feel a little spark for me, that you run full-throttle in the opposite direction instead of admitting it.” Tru looked down at the puzzle and began to gather the pieces she wanted, as if she had said nothing more enticing than, ‘Nice day, isn’t it?’.

Brittany put both palms on the table, and levered herself up. She stood there for a long moment, staring at the puzzle, and then came over to Tru’s chair. She seized Tru’s shirt, hauling her out of the chair and thrusting her face close, almost nose-to-nose. “Chicken-shit is exactly what you’re full of.” She leaned forward to plant a very determined kiss fully on Tru’s mouth.

Tru’s eyes went wide, and she tried to laugh, but only managed short gasps from her throat, staring at Brittany as if she were a stranger. “What’s got into you?”

“Don’t play hardball with me, Tru Morgan. You’ll lose.” With that, she turned and went into the living room to stoke the fire. *The other fire*, Tru thought.

Tru swallowed her surprise and grinned, following Brittany to the fireplace. Methodically, she took the poker from her hands and replaced it in its rack.

She took Brittany by her arms, spun her away from the hearth, and placing a foot behind the woman's heels, she pushed her off balance and lowered her roughly to the carpet, falling on top of her. "Batter up," Tru challenged evenly.

Brittany's breathing deepened as Tru lay on her, and Tru could feel Brittany's heart thumping in her chest. *Or is that my heart?* Swiftly, Brittany pushed Tru over onto her back, exchanging their positions. She seized Tru's wrists and pinned them to the floor; lowering her face, she slowly pressed her lips to Tru's and inflicted a passionate kiss, which Tru could only accept passively in her sudden sensation of weakness. When Brit got off her, Tru could only lie there and endure the pulsing that surged throughout her entire body, her face sunburn-red, her breathing ragged.

Brittany wiped her hands together as if she had completed a chore quite successfully. "Grand Slam," she taunted, stepping over Tru on her way to the bedroom.

Tru allowed herself to lie there, basking in the feelings that paraded through her. *How long have I wanted Brit to kiss me like that?* Tru smiled and wished she had the guts to follow Brittany into the master bedroom and throw her on the bed and make love to her. But perhaps guts did not enter into it. Perhaps she knew to leave well enough alone.

Aware that she could not stay in the house until she gained control of her hormones again, Tru decided she would make a trip into town for the lumber needed to fix the barn. A snow storm threatened within the next few days, and the weak spot in the barn roof would not hold out under a few more pounds of snow. Getting out of the house, now, might not only be wise, but advisable.

She rolled over and got up. The closed bedroom door tempted her to go in, but she didn't trust herself. "Brit—" she called through it. "I'm going into town for some lumber to fix the barn. I'll be back in a few hours, okay?"

Tru waited until Brittany finally answered, 'okay' and then went to gather her things for the ride.

Their sense is with their senses all mixed in,

Destroyed by subtleties these women are!

~George Meredith

22

Seattle

Two Months Earlier

THE GIG AT THE CROCODILE CAFÉ HAD BEEN A SMASH. Macy and Tru had celebrated there afterward. Over Hummus and Babanouj they discussed the ramifications of a fan base in one of the most important hubs in the music industry, Seattle. After a few drinks, they took a cab to catch a flight back home.

Tru bought candy and flowers at the Montrose airport, and took a tram to the parking lot. Once in her Cherokee, she lost no time in navigating highway 36 to Castle Mountain.

A light mist fell as she switched off the lights at the driveway, and parked in front of the garage. She crunched carefully across the snow on the front lawn and crept in through the front door, mindful not to jingle her keys as she unlocked it, and moved silently into the living room. The hall light was on, the rest of the house, dark.

Smiling to herself, Tru stepped into the hallway, pausing when she heard the shower from the master bath. Her smile grew wider, and she turned back to put the flowers and chocolates on the occasional table in the hall outside the bedroom. It had always been passionate for them, and jet lag, or no jet lag, Tru would make love to Brit all night if that's what she wanted.

Quietly, she turned the knob of the bathroom door and opened it. She heard Brit moan; *the water must be hot like she likes it... She probably worked too hard today*, Tru thought. Lifting large hunks of clay for her sculptures,

perhaps. Brittany moaned again, but it was different this time. Puzzled, she stepped in far enough to make out Brit's shadow on the opaque Plexiglas door.

The image there expanded and shrank, and it was not Brittany's moan, but a different one, deeper...the moan from a male throat—

She froze, the force of her shock making her listen a moment longer. *It can't be real—*

Tru took an involuntary step back, her hand leaping to her chest to stop her heart from pulsating through it. *Brittany's voice*. The shadows were clearer now...there were two—Tru's heart dropped to her stomach.

“Brittany, baby, you are... so hot—” he said, his lust-filled voice rising from the shower stall with the steam. *Travis—*

“I need to lie down... no, stop... wait—” Brittany was saying.

The acidic clump in her gut changed directions then, carrying with it the bile that was building in her throat like a geyser about to erupt. She swallowed hard to keep it down.

Backing out, she closed the door again, walking numbly back to the living room. She sat, found the lamp switch, and spilled an aurora of light on the sofa and coffee table, both of which had been shoved close to the fireplace where embers were still glowing. The glow revealed a barren wine bottle, and two half-empty goblets. Her jaw a firm line, she poured the contents of one goblet into the other, spilling some on the table. A copious swallow followed by a trip to the kitchen window, revealed the familiar Dodge Ram Travis drove parked by the back door. She had a quick fantasy of tying a strong rope around his stupid boots, and dragging him through the snow like a human plow, behind his own truck.

Tru returned to the living room and settled back in the sofa, waiting. She thought about that night at the hotel with Travis. Travis, the one who had committed an unforgivable sin: taking advantage of her as she lay unconscious and vulnerable...and now he rubbed salt in the wound.

Soon, the shower stopped, and she heard them get out. They were talking, but Tru could not discern the subject, and knew it did not matter. Brittany came through the doorway in her robe, one hand on the wall as if to steady herself, awkwardly patting her wet hair with a towel, a disturbed expression on her face. Tru merely sat there, glass in hand, her own face blank, the numbness crawling through her body like a disease.

Travis came up behind Brit, a plea in his voice, and said, “Wait, come back —” then saw Tru. He froze for an instant, and Brit stopped drying her hair to look in the direction of his frown.

“Tru—” Brittany whispered, horrified.

Travis’ demeanor changed instantly to arrogance as he tightened the towel around his waist, and leaned against the door jamb, lingering.

“Surprise,” Tru said softly, her tone flat.

Brittany searched in vain for an explanation but could only murmur, “Oh...God...”

Travis spoke up, “I’m going to get dressed while you two have a cat fight,”—and thankfully, disappeared into the bedroom. Tru wanted to tear his eyes out and make him eat them.

Brittany fussed with the robe, tightened the belt, still mute, still searching for the right words. “Travis told me about you and Liz...”

Brittany had obviously had way too much to drink. Tru squinted at her in confusion. “There is no me and Liz. Travis has an agenda. I thought you were smart enough not to fall for it.”

“What agenda?” Brittany placed a hand on the door jamb again, to steady herself.

“To break us up, Brittany. Whatever he told you about Liz was a total lie.”

Brittany stared at her. The possibility of truth in Tru’s statement niggled her chest like a sharp stick. She couldn’t think clearly...Tru had never lied to

her, and had always been faithful... *What if it was a lie? What if—*

“I want you out of this house, Brittany. Right now. Don’t pack. Don’t talk. You can send for your things later. Get the hell out.”

Brittany blanched in sudden understanding, and stepped forward, one hand extended. “Tru— let me—“

“Out!” Tru shouted, sending the wine glass spiraling into the wall next to Brittany, where it shattered and fell, the liquid making dark lines as it ran to the floor.

Brittany staggered back into the bedroom and moments later appeared in the doorway, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. Her heavy BDU jacket in hand, she fumbled for her keys and stared at Tru, who sat with elbows on her knees at the edge of the sofa, her mouth pressed to her propped fists. Travis emerged, dressed, sucking on a newly-lit cigarette. He moved past Brittany, almost too close to her on the way by, and paused in front of the fireplace. His eyes told her everything she wanted to know. Nothing she wanted to think about. *Smug bastard*. She glared up at him, wordless. He dredged his keys from his jeans pocket and sighed. “You know, I can’t decide which one of you I like the best...”

Tru closed her eyes and tried to breathe normally, but forgot to master her body. Before she could check herself, she had launched from the sofa and popped him in the mouth with her fist. He pushed her away roughly, and she fell to the hearth, scattering the fireplace tools, her fingers soon closing around the shovel. He had started for the kitchen door, and she rushed him, smacking him soundly with the implement. He fell to one knee and held the back of his head; his hand away bloody. “You’ll answer for that,” he growled.

Brittany’s hands went over her mouth in shock, but she didn’t move to help him.

“You devious little fuck! Get out of my goddamn house,” Tru screamed.

The satisfied smile returned to his lips, though tinged with the pain the shovel must have inflicted, and he straightened and headed for the kitchen, placing his palm on the wall and leaving a smear of blood to remember him by as he stepped out and slammed the door behind him.

Brittany's timid voice came from behind her. "Tru, we need—" Her hand went to her head.

"No." Tru retraced her steps, dropping the fireplace shovel on the rocks of the hearth, and sat down heavily on the sofa.

The image of Tru sitting dazed there, rubbing her sore knuckles, hung unabridged in her mind as she drifted to the front door, a queasiness taking root in her stomach.

When Tru heard the door click shut, she looked over at the shards of glass on the carpet against the fireplace wall. Dropsi was there, sniffing the area cautiously. Tru saw the scene again in her head: opening the door... hearing them...seeing their writhing shadows against the Plexiglas. "Goddamn it!" she said to the photo of them atop the mantle. "How could you do this to us?"

She slid back against the cushions and let the tears come, holding a sofa pillow and ignoring Dropsi's confused attempts to comfort her.

Brittany gripped the wheel firmly, aware of the treacherous condition of the wintry roadway. Tears blurred her vision, giving her another reason to drive slowly. *What am I going to do, now? Where can I go? How could I ever have done something that stupid?* The stark reality was clear to her: she had been that anxious to punish Tru for a transgression reported to her by some half-assed friend. *And why was I so quick to believe what Travis had told me about Tru and Liz? He had obviously told me the lie, so I'd have sex with him, in a fit of vengeance. But the wine... the wine had gone to her head so quickly, and...* The damage was done. Her silly spitefulness and drunken reasoning had cost her everything this time. She had lost her world. She had lost Tru.

Brit drove like an automation toward Boulder, her thoughts swirling in a chronological myriad of images. She saw herself and Tru in the Army training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina...she saw them passing titillating notes in classes at Quartermaster school at Fort Lee, Virginia...she saw their first kiss...the first time she had let Tru make love to her in that hotel in Petersburg...the strained goodbye before Tru left for Colorado to pursue a career in music and live in the mountains. She had believed that her two year tour in Germany would mean she might not see Tru again, but she had returned to the States...to Tru.

Brittany recalled the way she fell in love with Tru, *in spite of her ideas about how it couldn't happen...* their new life together on Castle Mountain... the day Tru returned after a successful tour, and brought with her a horse trailer and the two Morgans...

The throng of scenarios reeled through her mind, harsh and vivid. *How did I manage to ruin it all in one night?* Brit wiped at the tears streaming her cheeks and continued to drive, continued to clear her muddled mind, fighting the images, continued to sob.

She drove in a timeless haze, unaware of anything except the regret and sorrow she felt— through Boulder, Broomfield, Westminster, Arvada, and onto I-25 toward Denver—*where am I going?* She glanced at the clock on the dashboard... 2:10 on the green digital display. She blinked at the ache in her eyes. Coffee... sleep... another drink... which did she need more? She kept her eyes on the road as her hand rifled in her purse for the eCig. A hit of nicotine would help. She had left it at home, and didn't have one in the glove box. She had left too quickly to think of everything. Rather, she had been *thrown out* too quickly. Banished from their home. *Home...*

She kept traveling, wanting a cigarette more than ever now that she knew she didn't have one, wanting a cup of coffee, thinking that the caffeine would form resolutions in her mind, that options would evolve if she could just get her brain to function properly.

When the road sign signaled Castle Rock, she took the exit, unable to stand the nagging little addict inside her head that insisted on caffeine and nicotine. She navigated to the Seven-Eleven, and shrugged into her BDU jacket before stepping out into the cutting wind.

Her tremulous legs took her immediately to the coffee machine, and she filled a 16 ounce Styrofoam cup from the dispenser, with the most recently made pot of brew, and began tearing the creamer packages, dumping their contents into her cup. She didn't notice the young man who had moved from a table in the snack bar to watch her, until he came over and pulled a small cup from the dispenser. She glanced at him briefly, loathe to meet anyone's eyes directly; daunted by the intimacy of it, now.

As the young man poured, he looked over at her face, and smiled. Brittany caught his expression, the shock of hair festooning his forehead, and turned away, catching a glimpse of herself in the chrome panel of the ice machine—bedraggled, wild blond hair, puffy eyes, and a red nose. She could not imagine why anyone would smile at someone who looked as rough as she did. But he smiled again as she glanced over at him while securing a lid to her oversized cup. “Hi,” he said softly.

Brittany ran her hand through her hair and frowned at him. *Great. All I need now is another man who fancies himself champion of any maiden in distress.*

“Do you need some help?”

Her eyebrows knotted together. “Just leave me alone, okay?”

He shifted uneasily, almost shyly. “I... you seem... you're upset—do you need a ride somewhere, or—”

“No, I don't need a ride,” she snapped. “—and I don't need your help.”

He held up his hands in a non-threatening way. “Okay, okay...trying to be a gentleman—”

“No such animal,” she spat. She turned and went to the register, asking the clerk for three packs of Capri menthols. She used to smoke them when she met Tru, she recalled. *No more Tru.* She might as well embrace the past where she had jettisoned herself. When she paid and turned to leave, the young man was gone.

Brittany took off her jacket and tossed it into the front seat before she got back into the Nissan and tore into the cigarettes. *So much for my hard-won non-smoker status. No electronic cigarettes to be had at convenience stores,* she told herself glibly, striking a match from the book she had picked up at the register inside. Brittany inhaled the smoke from the sucker-stick thin cigarette, released it slowly, coughed a little, and sighed. She buckled the seat belt, and made her way out of the lot onto I-25 again, toward Colorado Springs.

Brittany chain-smoked, drank coffee, and tried to push the depression away. She could not stop thinking about Tru, or what she had done to her. She had been naked with Travis in the

shower, intending to share his body in the most intimate fashion, and redemption ridiculed her on behalf of the young woman who sat, inconsolable, in their living room. Even if Tru had allowed her to say something, it would have been feeble and pathetic. She didn’t understand how it happened herself, how could she explain it to Tru? It was like her brain went on vacation, and all she could think about at the time was what Travis told her to think about.

An indefinable time filled with remorse and tears brought her to Highway 50, and she eased right onto it, still unsure of where she was going. She was driving as if to escape her misdeeds, flee her stupidity, but she could not get away from herself.

Brittany leaned over carefully and moved the Visa card from the glove box to her purse. She had paid it off, intending to buy Tru something special...and now she had to use it to survive away from Tru...starting with a hotel room. She wanted to be far, far away from the portrait of Tru’s wounded expression painted in her memory, but distance had not released her from the guilt crawling up her throat at maddening intervals. An

opposite direction had seemed the best defense against such an overwhelming foe. She could find no sense in it, no way out.

It had seemed justified at the time. When Travis told her about Liz, she stopped thinking straight. Or rather, she started thinking “straight,” she mused with chagrin. Brittany, in a sudden attack of misjudgment, had let Travis convince her that bitterness was righteous. He had called after Tru left for her concert, and insisted he come over to talk to her about something urgent. When he had arrived, he had confessed that the night Tru didn’t come home, was the night she had been in that hotel shower with Liz. The next day, Tru had made an excuse about a flat tire, no jack, and a dead cell phone battery. She had at first suspected her of some sin, but the battery on the cell had, indeed, been dead, and the jack had, indeed, been in the garage. She defaulted to trust, as she always had with Tru.

After Travis told a different story of that night, Brittany found herself growing more and more confused, and more angry as he gave her sordid details. When he made sexual overtures to her she silently agreed that it would be a lesson Tru would never forget. But the moment she had stepped into that shower with him, the shame bubbled up; the fallacious verdict revealed itself. The few moments they were together had only made her feel horribly vulgar. She began to feel dizzy, sick.

Travis had tried to convince her to continue, even said he loved her. Travis knew little about love, and far too much about deception. So she elbowed him away, in favor of a pot of coffee. But her trip to the kitchen had been halted when she discovered that Tru had come home early.

Tru had always shown her tenderness and affection, yet Brittany had always been afraid of such openness. Open doors terrified her, made her feel vulnerable, and though she trusted Tru, she still felt inclined to slam doors. Only this time Tru had done the slamming. How was she to deal with that?

Her ill-conceived plan had backfired, and for the first time in a long time, she had to seriously consider life without Tru there to give it meaning. She thought of Travis and his hand in the whole mess, and shivered, alternately hating him and hating herself for being a pawn in his game. She should not

have had the wine. It was a crude sentencing that she had brought down upon herself.

Brittany turned the heat up a notch, and clicked on the radio, an effort she hoped would take the chill away and block her desolate thoughts. She glanced at the radio knobs with the Coke caps she had glued on them, and recalled the day she had done it when Tru remarked that the inside of her car needed a little personality. Brittany turned the volume Coke cap until the sound swelled the memory from her head. “What About Love” by Heart came on the classic rock station, and others like it after that. The lyrics of each song jeered her, ridiculed her act of betrayal, and she turned the radio off again, unable to bear the brutal reality.

The truth was, no man had ever made her feel the things that Tru had. No man had ever offered her tenderness, friendship, and loyalty. Brittany swept the back of her hand over her eyes, the tears coming fast and hard, though she had been sure she could cry no more. She had wanted

to punish Tru, but the punishment had not fit the crime. Indeed, perhaps, there had been no crime. Only a scheme by a man who professed to be their friend. The knowledge of Travis’ motives had come far too late.

Brittany’s moral churnings were siphoning her strength; she would have to stop at the first motel she saw.

The blacktop glistened with the freezing rain, and she stared at it. Brittany wanted to go back. She wanted to make it right, explain what had really happened, and what hadn’t. She would have to face Tru again, the hurt and betrayal in her eyes—try to explain—

Maudlin, she checked the rear view mirror as if she might see Tru in it, but saw only the dim eyes of another late-night traveler’s headlights some distance behind her. She focused ahead of her again, taking the curve carefully, and then she saw the deer bounding across the roadway, by the bridge. It was beautiful. It froze, its round dark eyes shining in her headlights. It was too close—

She stomped her brakes, afraid of hitting the animal, remembering all at once Tru's frequent warning: *Don't try to swerve or brake—hit it, or you'll*

The Nissan slid, fish-tailed, and struck the guard rail of the bridge. Aloft in a wingless metal projectile, the river rushed toward her. She saw Tru's face above a teacup, the steam framing the picture. *I love her*, she thought, before the car plunged into the icy river.

The deer watched, alarmed, steam coming in great puffs from his flaring nostrils, pawed the ground, and escaped into the woods beyond the bridge.

...Nor dare I question with my jealous thought

Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,

But like a sad slave, stay and think of naught

Save, where you are, how happy you make those...

~Shakespeare

23

Fort Lee, Virginia, 2001

THEY SAT IN THE BACK WITH THE BAY WINDOWS and the plants. After eight weeks of basic training, all soldiers made a beeline for Burger King for that elusive fix of fast food; and the obsession didn't seem to wear thin until several more weeks into Advanced Individual Training. Tru and Brittany were no exception, and after a hectic day of marching to and from Quartermaster School classes, endless cleaning and organization, it was a given that they would be filling their growling stomachs with cheeseburgers and fries. Some good old American junk food.

After they had finished, a light rain began to patter on the Plexiglas of the solarium, and Tru thought of the paradox of rain falling over but not on the

plants.

Brittany, ever vigilant, continued the line of questions she had begun in their last class of the day. “Is she in our class?”

“I never said that.” The game had worked. It was only a matter of time before the intriguing hints she had tossed casually in Brittany’s direction, would be confronted by curiosity. A slight, off-handed remark, and Brittany was immediately sucked into a jealousy she didn’t know she possessed.

“Is she in our company?” Brittany probed again.

“Yes.”

“Fifth Platoon?”

“Yes.”

“Which class?”

“Thirty-five.”

“That’s our class, Tru.” She jammed her straw into the lid of her cup. “You said she wasn’t in our class.”

“No. I said that I never said she was. But she is.” *It’s working like a charm. We’ll see how ‘unconcerned’ she really is about my sexual liaisons, the little rat...*

“You’re a royal bitch,” she decided emphatically.

“I know it.” Tru smiled, enjoying the upper-hand for once in this psychological warfare that had been exclusively Private Jabot’s domain. She now had knowledge in demand. *In demand*, Tru decided, *only because she truly couldn’t stand it if she were not the only woman I was hormonally hot for.*

“Is she white?”

“Yes.”

“Is it Stone?”

“She’s not my type. It’s someone who measures up to my standards. You know, someone with intelligence.”

Brittany thought this over for a while, then went through the class role, naming all the females she could recall.

After Tru sat there watching Brit’s cigarette burn down in the ashtray, puffing on her own and feeling quite smug; even helping her recall the names, Brittany said, “Did I name her?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

Tru shook her head. “Figure it out, yourself. You’re the one with the astronomical I.Q. I’m sure you’ll come up with the answer if you concentrate.”

She squinted at Tru, and a glimmer fluttered in her eyes which Tru could not discern: Anger? Frustration? Intrigue?

Private Jabot picked up the remaining half of her smoldering cigarette and inhaled severely, as if to force an answer from it.

Private Morgan’s lips thinned into a knowing grin. “This pisses you off, doesn’t it?”

She feigned apathetic ignorance, lifting her eyebrows. “What?”

“You can’t figure it out.”

“I wasn’t thinking about it. I was watching the rain.”

Tru nodded, not at all convinced of her apathy.

“I mean, I’m curious, but I’m not obsessed with it.” Brittany drummed her nails on the table, and reached for another cigarette as if to light it, then put it back into the pack, quickly.

Tru took a sip of Dr. Pepper and put out her cigarette while she opened the book of poetry she had brought along, letting herself become involved in it, as Brit acquiesced to the cigarette, smoked it quickly, then tapped it out like a miniature jackhammer in the flimsy tin ashtray.

“Okay. It can’t be Shore, considering you can’t stand her.”

“She’s a dumbass. Remember...” Tru put her finger to her temple as punctuation. “Intelligence.”

“Is it Bright?”

“Bright?”

“Well, the name, obviously, and I see you two talking at break, and she seems down on men.”

“Bright is a real sweetheart, but I’m sure she’s straight as an arrow.”

“That doesn’t seem to stop you,” she blurted.

Tru grinned into her book as Brittany got greener by the minute. “Besides, she’s black, I told you who we’re talking about is white.”

“So...she’s white, she’s intelligent—”

“Attractive—” Tru offered softly.

Brittany frowned at Tru, the choices becoming very limited now. She was, horror of horrors, baffled. “Tru. This is—okay! This is driving me crazy. You’re driving me crazy!”

“Brittany Jabot! You’re trying to make this hard, like I do in class with the P.E. forms. The answer is simple. It’s right under your nose...or behind it, anyway.”

She teethed a fingernail, thoughtfully, then Tru's last statement registered. Her eyes went wide and she stared at Tru—an expression, Tru noted, not unlike a walleyed pike. Tru laughed and waited, raising her brows expectantly.

“Is it me?!”

She laughed again, almost sorry the game was ending.

“It's me?!” Then she paused, puzzled.

Tru helped her out. “All I said was I may not be alone at the hotel. That doesn't necessarily mean that person would spend the weekend. It could only mean a few minutes of conversation— sort of like what you do when you get out of Jim's bed to come talk to me.”

Brit punched her hard on the arm. “You Harpy!”

Tru laughed harder, rubbing the bruise that had certainly begun to form there.

“What the hell—why—”

“Look. Here's the point—” Tru drew a conical figure on her open notebook with an arrow at the apex.

“That's not a point. This is.” She grabbed the hand Tru held the pencil with and poked the end of the lead into the paper.

“That's a dot, Brit.”

“Not on a map.” She seemed strangely pleased with this inane bit of Army map-reading information. Perhaps she had no interest in Tru's point by this time.

“Whatever. Anyway, the point is, I was exemplifying the way a person's imagination can blow things out of proportion, and completely miss the obvious.”

“You were not. You were trying to make me jealous.” Brit looked out the window, her knee bouncing up and down under the table in an agitated fashion. “You’re a royal bitch.”

Tru leaned over to look at her eyes. “You’re impressed. I stumped you.”

“I’m impressed,” she admitted.

“You’re also uncomfortable because for a few minutes Brittany Jabot did not know the answer.”

“You’re a bitch, Tru. You really are.”

Tru released a shrill giggle. “I’m basking in it. Basking, I tell you.”

“You’re a basking Harpy,” she reconfirmed. “Let’s go to the PX.”

Once outside, Tru matched strides with Brittany, adjusting her cap and, by rote, measuring the distance between the bridge of her nose and the bill with two fingers. “Are you upset about what’s been happening between us?”

Brit plunged her hand into the side pocket of her BDU jacket and came up with a hot apple pie she had hoarded from lunch. “Why should I be? It was no big deal. It didn’t mean anything.”

Tru broke stride and stopped. Brittany paused and looked back at her. “You coming, or not?”

Tru gasped, shaking her head, feeling a thousand little arrows go through her. Was this another example of Private Jabot’s ability to jerk the rug out from under a victorious opponent? Unable to find words, she caught up and they began walking again. Once the shock dissipated, she became angry.

Brittany glanced over at her, chewing the pie from its cardboard holder. “Okay. Spill it. What’s wrong?”

“You’re so proud of how fuckin’ smart you are, figure it out,” Tru said venomously.

“Ooo!” she heckled, delighted by the fire in Tru’s tone. “You’re hurt because I said that it was no big deal—that it didn’t mean anything.” Brittany slowed her pace and cleared her throat, her voice softer. “You don’t understand, Tru. I can’t let myself think any other way. Our time together has been very special to me, you know that.”

“It didn’t mean anything, but it was special. You’re a walking contradiction, Jabot.” Tru rammed her hands into the front pockets of her pants.

“Tru, if I admitted... certain things to myself, that would be like opening a door all the way that’s already half open.”

“What do you think is behind that door? A dank, dismal dungeon full of wicked little monsters? Look at me. Do I look like a monster?”

“No not a monster...” She studied her facetiously. “Well... maybe...” she offered. “Except for that cute little nose of yours.”

“Oh, lay off the nose, will ya? Damn.”

“A basking Harpy with a cute little nose...” she teased.

She displayed her middle finger. “Sit on it and swivel, Jabot,” Tru snapped.

“In your dreams, Morgan.”

“How’d you know?”

A captain was headed in their direction, and they performed the ritual hand salute. Brittany waited until the officer marched out of earshot and then asked, “Did you salute him with one finger, too?”

Tru walked faster. “Shut up, you.”

THE DISTINCT AROMA OF BACON AND COFFEE NUDGED BRITTANY from her slumber, and she raised up, the sunlight from the window warm on her face. The digital clock on the nightstand read eight forty-two, and she threw the covers back, rescuing her robe from the floor by the bed.

She found Tru in front of the stove, stirring a pan of gravy. “What a great way to wake up,” she observed, smiling at Tru.

“I thought you’d like that. We’re having eggs and bacon and biscuits and gravy.” Tru opened the oven door to slide in the pan of biscuits. “Did you sleep well?”

Brittany advanced on the coffeemaker, pouring herself a very full cup. “I fell asleep reading.” Dropsi wandered into the kitchen and found Brittany’s legs. The feline writhed in and out between them, her fur a soft tickle against Brit’s skin, exposed below the long flannel shirt and robe.

“I know. I turned out your light when I got back from town with the lumber, and tucked you in.” Tru turned the flame down low beneath the gravy, wiped her hands on a towel and filled her own cup, joining Brittany at the table.

The puzzle had been returned to its box, at the edge of the table near the wall. Awkwardly, Brit spooned cream into her coffee, stirring. “I feel like I should say something about yesterday —”

“Let’s don’t start that again,” Tru smiled. “You don’t have to explain.” She added cream into her own coffee, and stirred, turning to peer out the bay window, perusing the back yard, the barn, the feeding birds.

“Well, I mean, I don’t want you to think—”

“I don’t think that,” she said smoothly, looking at Brittany. “I underestimated the strength of your spine.”

Brittany thought back to the challenge the night before, tapped her dripping spoon on the edge of her cup and placed it on the table, glancing up at Tru.

“I’m not sorry I did what I did. I don’t think I can handle any more on top of that, you know? That’s why I had to go off and be alone.”

Tru nodded. “Don’t worry about it.” She took a sip of her coffee. “I thought we’d take the horses out for another ride after breakfast, if you’re game.”

Brittany’s uneasiness seemed to fade. “I don’t know about that,” she grinned. “I’m still suffering over the last time. You and your shenanigans.”

“Well, now you know which horse is which, what have you got to lose?”

Brittany took a long sip. “Well, if that damn whistle was the reason the horse had an attitude, then I guess I wouldn’t mind a ride...that is, as long as you leave the whistle in the house.”

Tru got up, smiling. “I think that can be arranged.” She stirred the thickening gravy, tasting it and adding more pepper. “Juts and Wheezie get lazy during the winter. They need some exercise.” She turned on the oven light to check the biscuits. “How do you want your eggs?”

“Since this is the first time you troubled yourself to make us breakfast, perhaps you should tell me, I don’t remember, remember?”

Tru chuckled. “Over easy...with a bunch of Tabasco.”

Brittany picked up the pot-holder on the table, and flung it at Tru like a Frisbee. “Don’t even try it, Morgan.”

When they had cleared the dishes, Tru went to get their coats and the two of them headed for the barn.

Tru leaned into the stall and whistled out the open back door for the Morgans. Moments later, the two animals trotted in, blasting clouds of fog from their nostrils, happy to see Tru with a couple of carrots. As the horses munched on the treats, Tru went to the tack room, asking Brittany to follow her. “You get to saddle your own mount today. Aren’t you excited?”

Brittany’s gaze took in the saddles on the sawhorse stands with their belts and straps, and shook her head. “Would you ride a horse that I put a saddle

on?”

Tru went over to the black one, and heaved it off its perch. “Normally, yes. Now, no. But I’ll help you, okay?”

Brittany followed her back into the main room, where she watched Tru drop the saddle on the floor and take down a bridle from the hook by the stalls. She opened the stall door and led Wheezie out, slipping the bit into the mare’s mouth easily, and poking her ears through the looped straps on top.

“See? That wasn’t difficult, was it?”

Brittany stepped over to rub the mare’s cheeks. “Looked easy enough.”

Tru took another bridle from a hook on a post and handed it to Brit. “Here ya go.”

Brit took hold of the strapped and stitched contraption and held it aloft. “You mean, I have to—”

“Yup.” Tru folded her arms and waited, holding the end of Wheezie’s reins.

Accepting the challenge with sudden courage, Brittany went to Juts, lifting the bridle awkwardly, the process taking on the quality of a flailing, as the mare tossed her head in confusion at Brittany’s unusual lack of finesse. Confused, the horse refused to take the bit. Frustrated, Brittany dropped her arms to her sides, and looked helplessly back at Tru, who squeezed her lips closed with one fist, mirth watering her eyes as a shrill sound of amusement came from her throat.

“Well don’t stand there laughing like a hyena, tell me what I’m doing wrong!”

Tru cackled and stepped forward, taking the bridle from Brittany’s hands and slipping the bit into Juts’ mouth in one smooth movement, shoving it over the ears, pulling them out, and buckling the strap. She turned back to Brit, expectantly.

Brittany put her hands on her hips. “Okay, laugh it up.” When Tru obeyed with a burst of giggles, Brittany added, “I don’t remember, remember?”

Tru hoisted the saddle from the barn floor. “Wait until you try this part.” She tossed the blanket onto the horse’s back with one hand, then heaved the saddle into place on top of it. She gave Brittany a look of sheer pomposity.

“Oh, my,” Brit crooned synthetically. “you’re so strong!”

“I told you Morgans were strong... and gentle...” Tru lifted the stirrup onto the horn and stooped to reach under the Morgan’s wide belly, caught the swinging girth, and cinched it under and up. Brittany stepped in for a closer look. “Now, see,” Tru pointed to the strap attached to the ring at the side of the saddle. “The strap goes through this girth ring, then over the ring on the saddle, and down, like so. Then over here on this side of the ring, under and through the loop. Then you tighten it...” Tru struggled the slack out of the girth, patting Wheezie’s side. “Exhale, Wheezie—” The mare snorted and Tru was able to tighten the girth again. “—like... this. And—ta da! You’re finished.”

Brittany frowned at the saddle, as Tru lowered the stirrup. “Maybe you should do that for me, Tru.”

Tru looked at the finished product, grabbed the horn and shook it to test its snugness, then looked back at the still doubtful expression on Brit’s face. “Maybe you’re right.”

They rode down the trail behind the barn, following the descending path leading to the creek bank. Once at the water’s edge, Tru reined up and shifted in the saddle to look at Brittany, whose face had turned ashen. Tru’s eyes went back to the creek in front of them as it rushed by, driven by the weight of melting snow, and then brought the heel of her hand up to smack her own forehead. “Jeez, I’m dense.” She reined Wheezie around to face Brittany on Juts. “I’m sorry, Brit... the water... I wasn’t thinking—”

Brittany swallowed dryly. “Can we go somewhere else?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tru answered quickly. “Turn Juts around and take that path to the right up there. I’m right behind you.”

Brittany cast one more uneasy glance at the rushing water and then reined the horse around.

Tru kept Wheezie closely behind Juts. “I’m sorry, Brit. Really—”

“It’s okay,” she said over her shoulder. “I’m... I’m sure you didn’t realize. Let’s ride. Show me the rest of the land.”

Tru obliged, and together they explored the woods on their corner of Castle Mountain.

A few hours later, they were both more than ready for something warm to drink, and a hot fire to drive the chill out of their bones. Tru led them back to the barn where they unsaddled, curried, and brushed down the Morgans.

Once inside, Tru built a fire and Brittany made them some Cinnamon Vienna tea. “You know,” Brittany said, handing Tru her cup and sitting down next to her by the hearth. “It’s not hard to see how much I must have loved living here.”

Tru held her tea between both hands and stared into the flames. “That’s a refreshing change.”

“It’s that I feel like it’s all familiar, but like it was a past life or something. I can even picture myself—”

The phone rang, and Brittany looked over at it on the wall outside the kitchen, but did not move.

“You gonna answer it? It’s probably Max, with an offer you can’t refuse.” Tru sipped her tea, singeing her tongue and breathing in and out frantically to cool the burn.

Brittany laughed. “Serves you right for that smart remark.” The phone continued to ring, and Brittany sighed, then scanned the room hastily as if in search of something. Her eyes landed on the microwave inside the

kitchen doorway and a wicked smile teased her lips. Hurrying to the kitchen, she pressed ten seconds on the oven and started it before she picked up the phone, carrying the portable receiver back with her to the front of the microwave. "Hello," she began

artificially into the receiver. "We're not in right now, but leave a message, and we'll get back to you." She kept her eye on the digital number digressing toward zero. "Wait for the tone." She held the receiver in front of the microwave and two seconds later, it beeped, and she pressed the stop button before it could beep again, then lifted the receiver to her ear, listening. Seconds later, she hung up.

Tru had been watching the whole performance and started laughing. "I can't believe you!"

Brittany came back and sat down on the hearth. "It worked, too."

"Who was it?"

"No one special," she said, cooling her tea. "I think a Max-somebody." She winked at Tru.

25

WHILE IT MISTED OUTSIDE, BRITTANY STACKED THE DISHES next to the sink as Tru brought them from the table, the strains of classical piano music wafting into the kitchen from the stereo.

"So, how did you enjoy Spaghetti-From-Hell?" Brittany asked, rinsing remnants of sauce from the plates into the garbage disposal.

Tru gathered the soiled napkins. "Oh, come on, it was really good. I should let you cook more often."

A gentle rumble of thunder traveled over the mountain, as Brittany opened the dishwasher to insert plates, and pulled the rack off-track and tried to adjust it with a good deal of banging around.

“Be careful with Brittany’s dishwasher!” Tru cracked.

“Oh, this is mine?”

“Yeah, you bought it because you refused to stand at a sink and do dishes by hand.”

“Good thinking on my part.”

Tru paused at the bay window with their empty tea glasses in her hands.

“I’m not sure where I got that recipe. Did the French bread have too much garlic?”

“It was great...” she murmured, studying the line of trees by the barn.

Brittany squirted the yellow detergent into the reservoir and looked over at Tru who leaned close enough to the window to fog the pane. “What are you looking at?” She closed the detergent receptacle, and joined Tru at the window, drying her hands on a towel.

“Do you see what I see?”

Brittany followed Tru’s line of vision to the edge of the trees. “What?”

“I know I saw someone out there—” She set the glasses back on the table, and moved back to the bay window, as Brittany picked the glasses up and went to add them to the dishwasher. “It looked like the same guy. The coat is the same...it’s sort of an off-white—there!” she pointed. “See him?”

Brittany leaned over Tru’s back and squinted into the dusky evening picture-postcard that was the barn and surrounding trees. A lump of snow moved sideways and stopped behind a spruce. “Hey—I do see him now... what the hell is he doing?”

Tru straightened and turned quickly, side-stepping to miss Brittany, and headed for the hall.

“Where are you going?” Brittany watched her disappear around the corner, and went to get the sponge to wipe off the table. When she had finished drying the table with the hand towel, Tru reappeared in the kitchen with a winter-camo jacket, mostly white, a matching hat, and gloves. She was holding a lever-action rifle.

“What the hell is that for?” she asked, indicating the thirty-thirty with her sponge.

Tru zipped up her jacket, and moved for the door. “It’s for whomever is out there prowling on our land.” She opened the kitchen door.

Brittany tossed the sponge and towel at the sink. “I thought you said he was probably a hunter?”

Tru grabbed the boots she’d discarded after their ride. “Hunters carry rifles and wear hunter-orange. This one is not a hunter.” She sat down on the steps of the patio to put on her boots, then paused at the back door, studying the tree-line until the right moment. Then she crept out and galloped through the snow to the right, until the barn blocked his view of her. Brittany closed the kitchen door securely behind Tru, and went back to the bay window.

Tru made a wide circle around the right side of the barn where the stalls opened into the corral, and peeked around the corner, squinting to focus through the sleet which coated the bill of her cap and dripped in front of her face. She saw him standing behind a tree, his attention on the bay window, careful not to show himself to Brittany, whose attention was trained in his direction. Tru leaned back around the corner against the red cedar of the barn wall. *Who is this guy?* She released the safety on the rifle and, holding it barrel-down to keep the sleet out of it, she moved closer to his position, careful to keep herself and him parallel to the house so that Brittany would not be in the line of fire, should she have to pull the trigger.

The blanket of snow muffled her steps and soon she peeked from behind her own tree at his back. He moved swiftly to the edge of the workshop and watched the bay window from around the corner. That’s when Tru saw his face. She shook her head in wonder and stepped away from the tree, raising

the rifle to him. “Well, now.” He jerked around, startled, and saw the rifle leveled at his chest. “The name is Max, isn’t it?”

Even through the sleet and distance between them, she could see his eyes darting about nervously. Then he smiled. “Oh. Hi. I thought I was alone.”

“Apparently.”

He laughed spasmodically, and made an almost casual move in her direction. His steps halted when he heard her chamber a shell with the lever.

“I think you’re close enough.”

He tried to be flippant again. “Oh, there’s no need to get all riled up. I’m not here to cause trouble, or anything.”

“What the hell are you here to do, then?” She held the rifle steady with both hands at waist-level.

He looked back toward the bay window and then at her and the gun she held. “It’s a little hard to uh... explain...”

Tru stepped closer. “Why don’t you head for the back door and I’ll let you explain inside?”

He seemed relieved, but uneasy. “Sure. No problem.”

Tru gestured with the barrel of the rifle for him to start walking.

At the back door, Brittany greeted them with trepidation. “Max? Was that you out there all those times?”

He looked back at Tru, careful not to move suddenly. “Uh, yeah. I’m really very embarrassed about all this—”

“Go on in,” Tru ordered.

Max took off his gloves and nestled them under his arm while he rubbed his red hands together.

Brittany folded her arms and regarded him with dismay. “Are you stalking me?”

Max swallowed, and released a long breath, eyeing Tru as she leaned against the wall by the door, the .30-30 supported in the crook of her arm. He turned back to Brittany, who stood with one hand on the counter. “Um... I’m really embarrassed, as I said.” He threw a quick glance Tru’s way and continued. “The truth is, I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind. I’ve wanted to see you—I... tried to call, but got your answering machine.”

Brittany smiled immediately and looked at Tru, who no longer found the whole thing amusing. Tru took off her jacket, hanging it on the hook by the door. “Yes. I got that hang-up. You didn’t leave a message.”

Max moistened his chapped lips and smiled with one corner of his mouth. “You probably think I’m some sort of lunatic—but, well, you remind me so much of my late wife... I miss her, and when I look at you, it’s like...like she’s here again... I like you, Brittany, and I wondered... wanted to ask you to go out with me, but I didn’t know quite how... how to do that—”

“So you thought that skulking around in the woods would be the solution?” Brittany folded her arms, and chewed her bottom lip. “I understand... I guess, Max, but—”

Tru spoke up. “Why don’t you... tell him.”

Brittany seemed puzzled. “What?”

“Tell him why you can’t go out with him, Brit.”

Brittany recalled the conversation the first day they rode horses, and looked at Max. “I... I think it’s better if we don’t see each other—” she fumbled.

Tru thought she might say something like, *and you remind me of my dead husband*, but instead she just fidgeted. Tru cleared her throat and moved over next to her. “Go ahead, tell him why.”

Max was looking from one woman to the other, completely lost. “I know about your—your amnesia, and, really, I—”

Brittany rose to full stature and looked him directly in the eyes. “Max. I can’t go out with you because—” She sought help from Tru, but it was clear there was no hope of it. “—because Tru isn’t really my sister... she’s... she and I... well, because I’m... gay.”

Max’s eyebrows shot up, and he looked them both over. “You and—?”

Brittany grabbed Tru’s hand and stroked it awkwardly. “We’re a couple, we’re...” She swallowed. “We’re... lovers.” Then she sighed, nodding, as if to confirm this tidbit.

Tru pressed her lips together and looked at her shoes, suppressing the mirth bubbling in her throat.

Max continued to stare at them, then a light of something like understanding went over his features. “Oh, I get it. This is a big brush off, isn’t it?” He smiled broadly. “Gay,” he snorted. “Right. You? Give me a break.” He folded his arms and became smug.

Brittany dropped Tru’s hand like a yo-yo, and put her hands on her hips. “I am a lesbian, dammit!”

Max laughed aloud and moved toward the door. “No problem. Damn! The things women tell you to get rid of you!” He put his gloves on and opened the door. “Don’t worry,” he said to a red-faced Brittany. “I get the picture. I’m out of here.” He stepped outside and closed the door.

Brittany rushed to the bay window and watched him trudge around the house toward the road. Tru’s laugh began to slip out in an obnoxious fashion, as Brittany turned around. “Don’t you dare laugh, Tru Morgan!”

“I’M HUNGRY.” BRITTANY APPROACHED TRU, who sat on the bed gazing out the bedroom

window, her guitar next to her. The snow fell hard and fast, and she had stopped her composing to consider it.

“Me, too. Why don’t you go pick something out of the freezer?”

Brittany shuffled out of the room and returned moments later, interrupting the song Tru

tinkered with, “It’s empty.”

She looked up at her in disbelief. “Are you sure?”

“What do you mean ‘am I sure’? I can see the bottom. It’s empty.”

“That’s impossible. I would have noticed it the last time I was digging around in there.”

“I’d hate to think you’re calling me a liar.” Brittany stood with her hands on her hips.

Tru huffed, and put the guitar down on the bed and got up.

“I’d also hate to think you’re going to go look after I already told you—“

Tru halted, thinking.

Brittany dragged the nail of her index finger over the strings of the Ovation, absently. “So now what?”

Tru hovered by the doorway, frowning, and pushed her hands into her pockets. “I don’t understand it. Are you pulling a fast one? Remember, that five-second rule.”

Brittany strummed once, loudly, and glared at her. “I’m hungry. Why would I hide the food?”

“So you could eat it later?” Tru could see by her expression that the empty freezer was not Brittany’s doing. “Okay, I believe you... I still don’t understand how I could have overlooked it—”

“So let’s go to the store.”

Tru cocked an eyebrow at her. “Right. You speak to God. I’m sure he’ll stop the snow and fix that low bridge for us.”

She glanced outside. “It’s not even snowing very hard.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, there’s already snow on the ground, and sleet on top of that, and the temperature has dropped below freezing and it’s going to sleet and snow all night.” Tru crossed to plop on the bed next to her. She gathered the notebook and pen, and tossed them aside, picking up the guitar and strumming through a newly devised progression.

Brittany got up, then perched back on the edge of the bed. “Your Jeep won’t make it?”

“It probably could, but it’s too dangerous.” She plucked a string and adjusted the tuning. “We’re on top of a mountain. When that bridge gets covered by the water from the tributary, and then it freezes, it’s too dangerous to cross. I’ve seen all kinds of Jeeps and trucks end up in the river—” Tru realized the insensitivity of the image she had provided, quickly confirmed by a sudden shudder and grimace from the other woman. “Sorry.”

“When’s it supposed to clear?” Brittany got up and moved to the window, examining the overwhelming whiteness that covered everything. The trees had almost disappeared under the blankets held by straining limbs.

Tru had a drink of her iced tea from the night stand, and looked beyond Brittany’s shoulder to the snow outside, still mesmerized by its beauty after five years of living with it for most of the year. “The weather channel has been predicting another storm right after this one. I could call the mayor and ask when he’ll get started on fulfilling his campaign promise to fix

these things, but I doubt it'll happen very quickly. It will be the end of the week before we can drive anywhere."

Alarmed, Brit turned. "How are we going to survive without food?"

"Usually, we have stock in the pantry, but as I say, that's been let go lately, since I found you and brought you home."

"So it's my fault now?"

Tru stilled the strings abruptly. "That's not what I said. That's how it is. I knew better. I let it go. I was blinded by your beauty."

Brittany made a noise of derision, and stood again, came around to sit on the other side of Tru. She took Tru's glass of tea away from her and helped herself to a sip. "What about the horses?"

Tru feigned alarm. "You want to eat the horses?"

"No, dumb-dumb. Can't we ride them down to—wherever?"

"Sure, we'd get there tomorrow sometime, and be frozen to the saddles." Tru took her tea back, and replaced it on the coaster, leaning on one elbow to check a chord written on the paper behind her.

Brittany put a hand over her stomach as it grumbled. "I don't think I can wait 'til the end of the week."

"We've got crackers and old moldy lettuce—"

"Yummy," Brittany crinkled her nose.

"Well, there's still some Ramen noodles and some canned goods in the pantry...but no main course." Tru set the guitar down on the comforter and pushed off the bed. When she revealed a .22 rifle from the closet, Brittany folded her arms and smirked, "You're going to shoot me, aren't you?"

"Should I?" Tru lifted an eyebrow. "I think you're safe for now, but don't tempt me." She headed for the kitchen, Brittany following close behind. Tru

took her coat from the hook and shrugged into it, along with gloves and a garrison cap. “A hunting I will go!” she sang.

“You mean, shoot an animal?” Brittany’s face contorted in disgust.

“We’ve done it before.” Tru slid the bolt back on the weapon and placed a long-rifle shell in the chamber, replacing the bolt, and switching it to safety.

Brittany looked down at the gun. “I shot something?”

“Well, no. You came along. I shot it.” She took a box of shells from the shelf in the closet and tapped a few into her pocket.

“Happy to hear it.” She turned. “See you when you get back.”

“Oh uh-uh. Wrong answer,” Tru informed her. “ I’m not the man of the house. We do things like this as a team. Get your coat.”

Brittany groaned.

“You were ready to ride the horses down the mountain a few minutes ago,” she pointed out.

Brit put her coat on.

At the back door, Tru stepped out onto the patio to retrieve their boots. Unable to resist, she opened the freezer and looked inside. Brittany peeked out the kitchen door and said, “You had to look, didn’t you?”

Tru closed the lid. “Put on your boots.”

Brittany put them on reluctantly, her garrison cap Velcro’d across her chin. Tru secured her own cap, leaving the tongues unfastened, and they stepped outside.

“How many guns do you have, anyway?” Brittany almost growled.

“Enough,” she answered. “There’s one in almost every room of the house. Haven’t you snooped?”

When the wind and snow hit them, Brittany muttered something inaudible to Tru. “I was really in the Army, huh?”

Tru settled the rifle into the crook of her arm and started trudging. “Yep. Don’t worry. It’ll be like old times. Stomping through the snow, freezing our asses off wanting to kill something.”

Brittany recalled the dream she’d had in the hospital of marching boots in the snow and that presence of someone she felt something very strong for —“Was it really like that?”

“Actually, yes.” They started around the barn near the tree line. “The cadre used to take us on field trips out past the firing ranges. They’d make us dig foxholes and then we’d defend our sector when they invaded.” Tru moved a low limb out of their path. “Sometimes they’d even get into full camo and hide in the woods and have us try to find and capture them. Sometimes we shot them in the head.”

“We did what?”

Tru laughed. “Not really. We used a BFA—a blank firing attachment on the flash deflector.”

“That sounds like loads of fun.”

“That’s the only part you liked.” Tru caught Brittany’s arm as she started to slide on an incline. “You and I found Drill Sergeant Sharp once, and you made him do P.T. He had to play along, because that was one of the rules of the game. It was so funny: him down there doing push-ups and you saying, *come on, you wimp! Faster! Faster!*”

Brittany smiled to herself. “I must have enjoyed myself more than I thought.”

“Sometimes,” Tru blew a cloud of fog from her mouth. “You hated the cold then, too.”

“Then why did I end up moving out here to the top of a cold mountain?”

“Me,” she answered simply.

Together they tramped into the woods, thankful that the snow-packed trees blocked most of the icy wind. Brittany grumbled frequently about the terrain, the cold, the wind, her protesting stomach, and the fact that Tru walked too fast. “How are you going to see them, walking so fast?”

“I know where they live.”

“So we’re going to Thumper’s house, and you’re just going to knock on the door?”

Tru grinned. “Sort of. They hide out in certain ground cover. I know where all of *those* spots are.”

After a few more minutes of trudging, Tru tried to sing cadence like they did in their enlisted days: “*I gotta pee... like a Russian race horse... I married the Army... now I want a divorce...*” but Brittany kept criticizing the lyrics, even though Tru was proud of the little ditty she’d made up at the time. “Look for Thumper,” Tru told her, receiving an expressive response from Brittany’s eyes.

“I can’t believe you’re going to kill a precious little bunny.”

Tru cast her a taunting look. “Tomorrow I’ll kill a deer. The rabbit is for tonight.” She turned into a copse of low limbs and brush. “You know, the rabbit was a sacred animal.”

Brittany lifted her eyebrows expectantly. “Oh?”

“To Artemis. You remember her...the Goddess of the moon AND the Hunt.”

She didn’t miss a reciprocal rolling of the eyes from Brittany. “Yeah, yeah. You’re cute.”

Tru began to survey the area around them. She enjoyed the crisp mountain air. Before her family moved to Colorado, she had spent her younger years in Arizona, and had learned to hate that perpetual sticky feeling in her underarms. Here, in this temperature, she couldn’t even feel her underarms.

Unfortunate though that thought was to her, the snow still made her feel clean and new.

After several false alarms caused by birds and falling snow, Tru's stomach began to growl as audibly as Brit's. But hunger always made one a better hunter, she knew. This fact made her certain they'd go home with at least one fat, white cottontail.

They came to a slope covered with a thick film of glassy-looking ice and paused. Tru studied the area for a way around.

Boldly, Brittany began to sing, "Over the river and through the woods, to grandmother's house we go...the horse knows the way—hey!"

"You skipped a part."

Brittany shook her head frantically. "No. I have an idea. Let's go get the horses."

"They aren't good shots."

Brittany swept an arm at Tru, striking her shoulder and knocking her off balance. She lost footing on the icy ground and fell backward, her head cracking a small round place on the ice. She groaned, pressing a hand to the back of her head. "Dammit, Brit!"

"I'm sorry!" She knelt beside her. "Are you okay?"

The garrison cap had helped cushion the blow, and Tru sat up, rescuing the rifle from the snow and wiping the melting flakes away from the bolt. "I'm fine. But I'm the one with the headache, now."

Brittany smiled wickedly. "Good. Maybe you'll get my memory back."

Tru's lip went back in a sarcastic snarl. "Oh, ha. Ten thousand comedians out of work, and you're trying to be funny."

Brittany giggled and offered to help Tru to her feet. "Give me your hand."

“Get away from me.” Tru snapped.

Brit laughed. “Let me help you up—”

“No. You’re a lethal weapon.”

“C’mon—” Brit continued her amusement at Tru’s expense. Tru pushed her away, and Brittany then lost her balance, grasping Tru’s arm as Tru half-stood. Brittany began to slide perilously close to the edge of the icy slope, dragging Tru with her. They struggled against the Law of Inertia, and knew as bodies in motion, they would tend to stay in motion—doomed to have a swift ride down an unforgiving, rocky hillside.

Footing gone, they were on their way to the bottom. The trip was short and not very sweet. They gathered branches, rocks and sodden leaves like human rakes, thankfully missing an impact with tree trunks, and both were bruised and battered when they landed at the bottom in a heap. This time, though, the groans were mixed with laughter.

Tru tossed a handful of snow down Brit’s collar. Brit tried to retrieve the part that had oozed down her chest.

Tru watched her fish for it. “You want me to get that?” she teased.

“No!” Brittany giggled. “You horny homo—”

A moment later, they were helping each other up gingerly, knocking the debris and slush from their clothes.

“Okay,” Brittany clenched her arm. “Now I think I reinjured my arm.”

“Oh no...” Tru said. “Really? Maybe I should have let you stay inside.”

“No, you’re right. It should be a team effort.”

“Look. Why don’t you go back to the house and—”

“No, I don’t need my arm to walk. And it’s cold enough that it probably won’t swell.”

Tru looked at her arm and back up at her. “You sure?”

“Yeah, let’s just get this over with.”

“Okay...” Tru surveying their surroundings.

“So shoot some food and let’s go dry off.”

Tru opened her hands pointedly, indicating the absence of her rifle, and made a pistol-shape with her hand. “I’m afraid my finger is unloaded.”

“Where is it?”

She pointed to the top of the hill. “I tossed it aside up top, when we started to fall. Didn’t want any friendly fire incidents.”

“Shit. Well, go get it.” Brittany knocked a glob of snow from the knee of her jeans.

“Got rappelling gear on you?”

Brittany squinted up at the hill, then plopped down in the snow in phony despair. “We’re going to die here.”

Tru chuckled. “No. We’ll die down there—” she pointed farther below through the trees. “—because when our bodies thaw out, they’ll slip down to the bottom.”

“You’re a sicko, Tru.”

Tru sniffed, touching her freezing nose, as the snow began to fall again. “Follow me.” She led them around the hillside and through the trees until finally they made it back to the top of the slope. “You stay here—” Tru warned. “I’ll go get the rifle by myself.”

Brittany remembered the commercial she had seen. “*The Army: It’s not just a job, it’s an adventure,*” she mocked.

“Bite me,” Tru snapped, a stray smile playing tag with her face.

Tru cleaned off the rifle the best she could, and they continued. Fifteen minutes later, their mutual bruises were considerably more tender, and they were increasingly miserable. When Tru spotted a rabbit nestled under a tree, it was a welcomed sight. She stilled Brittany's groaning behind her and they watched it hop across the snow. Tru raised the .22 and drew a bead, while Brittany covered her eyes, and peeked through her gloved fingers. Tru took a slow breath and released it, holding it at the end and squeezing the trigger. The pop of the round leaving the barrel echoed briefly, before it was muffled in the blanketed trees. The shot met its mark.

They advanced on the furry creature, a red hole contrasting the fur of its side. Brittany looked down at the lifeless form, sadly. "Bunny killer," she accused.

"You wanna eat, doncha?"

Brit's hunger overcame her indignation. "Since you're the one who didn't stock the freezer, you'll have to fix it, not me."

"Duh. Why in the world would I let you ruin a perfectly good rabbit?" She picked up the rabbit by its ears, and they began the laborious trek home.

After Tru skinned and prepared the rabbit, she would bake it and add some canned vegetables on the side. Brittany would be surprised to find that it tasted delicious.

The next morning, Tru disappeared into the woods for quite some time, and eventually, Brittany heard the gunshot and knew that the bunny-killer had bagged a Bambi, too.

Tru dressed the deer from a hook outside the back porch, the snow sullied by crimson, steam from entrails creating clouds all around, and Brittany couldn't bear to watch, even though Tru offered to show her how it was done. After the evisceration was complete, Tru hung the antlers on the porch wall. Another coat hook.

The deer steak, Ramen noodles and corn Tru prepared for dinner, however, were enough to stop Brit from complaining. Tru said she kept it from

tasting “gamey” by adding lots of garlic, and cooking it slow in the crockpot. Brittany was just glad to have her stomach full again.

Tru put some seasoned slices in the dehydrator for jerky.

27

BRITTANY THOUGHT THE MOTOR WAS THE CHEROKEE, since Tru had driven it behind the barn several hours ago to fix the new storm damage to a section of roof over the stalls. When she looked out the living room window, though, a young man emerged from a black Dodge truck. She crossed the room to the front door and opened it before he rang the bell. She recognized him from the bar the other night. “Travis, right?” she asked him.

He chuckled. “Right.” He thrust his hands into the pockets of his down slicker-vest and considered her brashly.

“What’s up?” Brittany watched him look her over.

He chewed his gum thoughtfully. “Aren’t you gonna ask me in?”

Brittany felt foolish. She swung the door open wide. “I’m sorry. Come in.”

The young man sauntered to the fireplace and held his hands out to its warmth. “So—” he began, as Brittany joined him. “You two still together?”

Brittany eyed him suspiciously. “Why do you say that?”

“I guess she still hasn’t come clean.” He rubbed his hands together and pulled a Marlboro Light from his jacket pocket, putting the end of it on a coal in the fireplace to light it. “She’s not supplying me with electronic cigarettes anymore, either. Had to go back to these.”

“What do you mean, she hasn’t come clean?” Brittany felt a coldness edging into the room, and told herself it was probably from the front door she had held open when he arrived.

“I’m sorry, Brittany. I gave this a lot of thought, and I don’t think I can keep this secret anymore. I felt obligated to tell you. That’s why I’m here.” He flicked the ash from the cigarette into the flames and then pulled deeply on it, filling his lungs. “You wouldn’t happen to have some coffee made, would you?”

Brittany considered his words with measured interest and started for the kitchen. “Yeah.”

“Black is fine,” he called to her.

When she returned with a cup for him, he was sitting on the stone ledge in front of the pit, still enjoying the cigarette. “What secret are you referring to?”

He glanced up at her over the rim of the brown stoneware mug. “Well now, Tru has been a friend of mine for a long time. You know, we met through my sister, and I’ve gotten to know her pretty well... so I feel torn about this, but... I’m just so angry at her for what she did.”

“Tru has never mentioned you,” she said simply.

He nodded knowingly. “I’m not surprised.” He took a loud sip of coffee. “Did you make this? It’s good.”

She ignored the compliment. “Why aren’t you surprised?”

He took another sip, drew on the cigarette a last time and threw it into the fire. “Well, if I had done what she did, I don’t think I’d talk about it much, either. She’s probably too ashamed of herself.”

“Look, Travis...I have no idea what you’re talking about, so why don’t you just say it?” She folded her arms and shivered.

“Well,” He eased further into his best I’m-your-friend persona, leaning forward, holding the cup with both hands, his elbows on his knees. “Your little Tru got drunk back in December, a little while before you disappeared.” He dropped a hand down and wiped a bit of moisture from

the toe of his boot. “—and I gave her a ride to a Motel. A girl named Liz went along...”

Brittany felt the hair on the nape of her neck rise, and could not stop the shudder that went through her. *Liz. Of Jan and Liz.* It had been obvious the night Brittany followed Tru to the bar, that Liz wanted to bed Tru. Just as much as Jan seemed to want to bed Brittany. *Plausible.* She went over and picked up the poker to stoke the fire. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I went to get a Sprite from the machine at the Hotel lobby, and when I got back, they were...together.” He took another sip of the coffee. “Me and you and Tru have been friends a long time, and this really has been eating away at my conscience. I figure you have a right to know.” He looked up at her sheepishly, as if for permission to continue. She gave him an abbreviated nod, and he added, “They were in the shower.”

The shower...So that’s what all the stuff was about the shower! Brittany’s revelation was soon replaced by something kin to anger, bubbling like a tea kettle on a tall flame.

Travis stood up and turned around to face the fire again. “I hate to be the one to tell you all this, Brittany, but if she hasn’t told you about that night, with you having amnesia and all...then, you’re being led down the garden path. She doesn’t want you to remember.”

Brittany turned and sat where he had been sitting seconds before. “I can’t believe that all this time I—” she stopped herself from saying more. “Travis, what happened after that?”

“Well, I don’t know anything about the rest of the story except what goes along the grapevine, ya know. But I do know from my sister that it was the same night you had the accident.” He swallowed the rest of the coffee in a gulp and set the cup down next to her, using it as a way to lean his face close to hers. “I’m sorry, Brit. But you deserve to know the truth.”

She stared down at the hearth.

He took her hand and tugged her to her feet, as he straightened. “I’ve been worried about you. And now, I’ve just added more stress on you. If you need anyone to talk to—”

“Don’t worry about me, Travis. I’ll be fine.” Brittany sighed resolutely. *She won’t clam up next time I bring up that night, that’s for damn sure*, Brittany vowed silently.

“I’m sorry I upset you, Sugar...” Travis tried to pull her to him, as if to embrace her, but she resisted. “Sorry. I keep forgetting that you don’t really know me anymore. I have a world of respect for you, Brittany, it’s just that Tru did a really bad thing, and hasn’t told you, and it’s... it’s not fair to you, especially now.”

Confused, hurt and a little angry, she allowed him to hug her, then.

Tru opened the kitchen door and saw them through the expanse of the living room. They broke the embrace and turned toward the sound of the door. The three of them stood, trading charged looks for the slightest of moments, before Travis pulled away from Brittany and snapped his vest closed. “Well, it was nice to see you, Brittany.”

Seeing his face again was enough to make Tru seethe. She bent to plug in the cord of the high powered nail gun she had brought inside with her, taking aim at him. “You better get the hell out of my house, you fucker, before I fasten you to the wall!”

Brittany stepped between them, moving closer to Tru. “Shut up, Tru! Shut up.” She turned to him. “Go, Travis.”—and faced Tru again, keeping an eye on the nail gun that she held at her side.

“Yeah.” Travis said, moving closer to the door. “Good idea.” Then he offered with forced sincerity, meant to torture Tru, “Call me if you need a place to stay.”—and since Brittany was watching Tru, he sent the dark-haired woman a sarcastic wink.

Tru took only one step closer to the front door before she lifted the nail gun and pulled the trigger, and Brittany pushed the gun aside as the projectile

jettied out. Travis stared at the half-embedded nail in the wall next to him, cursing, his hand on the door knob.

“Tru, are you crazy?!” Brittany shrieked, pushing her back, holding her arms down.

Tru didn’t take her eyes off him. “Get the fuck outta my house!” She made another aggressive movement toward him, an additional profanity on her lips. Travis had no more room to back away, the wall had met him in the back.

Brittany pushed the nail gun back down as she raised it again. “Stop!” She heard the door slam, and soon, the rumble of the Dodge’s engine.

Tru studied Brittany. “What was he doing? Did he try something with you?” Tru looked her over as if she might have had an injury.

Brittany yanked the cord of the nail gun until it came out of the wall, and wrenched the tool from Tru’s hand, tossing the mechanism on the sofa. Her fear of witnessing a homicide could now be usurped by her anger. “The question is, what did you try with Liz?”

Tru frowned, and then the past flooded back to her. It was the same ruse, by the same culprit. “Oh, perfect.”

“He told me a few things that I needed to know. He helped to answer some of those questions you wouldn’t help me with.” Brittany crossed her arms and glared at Tru.

“I have no way of knowing what you’re talking about, considering.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. That night I had the accident. That thing about the shower.”

Tru whirled around and locked her eyes on Brit. *What story did he have about the shower?* “What did he say?”

“Everything that you didn’t.”

Obviously, he didn't tell her the truth about that, either, or she wouldn't be so self-righteous. Tru turned back around to stare at the flames. She began to shake, and didn't know whether she would cry or break something. Shakily, she said, "We've been through all this before, only you don't remember it. Brit." She swallowed a tightness in her throat that took her breath away. "He's been after you for a long time. He'd love to break us up."

Brittany grabbed her shoulder and spun her around. "Maybe so, but at least I know the truth, now."

"Ya think?" *Is it the story of my fictitious coupling in the hotel with Travis? Or some other lie? What's the name of this round of the debacle?* "What 'truth' did he tell you this time?"

"The truth about how he took you to a hotel last December, and left you alone with Liz, and you two ended up in the shower together!" Livid, she spun on her heel and picked up her eCig from the coffee table.

Tru was stunned. *Where did this story come from? He told her I slept with someone else... maybe Macy said something to him about the salt peter information she gave me, and maybe she even mentioned the real story about the shower... and then Travis had to alter it by blending the two.*

"What have you got to say now, Morgan?" Brittany wanted to know as she took a big draw of the eCig and blew the vanilla vapor toward Tru.

"He's lying, Brit—"

"That would be why you never wanted to talk about that night."

It was a statement, not a question. She had already voted guilty, without exploring the evidence. Tru kept shaking her head, and picked up the empty coffee cup, looking into the bottom of it as if she couldn't remember what it was for.

"It makes perfect sense, now. You'd rather I had amnesia forever, so that I wouldn't know that I had the wreck that night because I was upset over

finding out about you fucking Liz!” Her voice had escalated to a screech. A screech that belonged to a jealous girlfriend, not a retroactive straight woman with amnesia.

Tru threw the cup backward into the stones of the fireplace, where the shattered pieces scattered in all directions. “Damn it, Brit! He’s lying!”

“It’s too late, now, Tru. The cat is out of the bag. The game is over.”

Tru took a deep, calming breath, looked at the front door as if Travis were standing there, focusing on the nail that had narrowly missed him. “The game has just begun.” She went over to Brittany who smoked the eCig fiercely. “Brit, listen to me. If you’ve never heard a word I’ve ever said, listen to me right now. Look at me—” Brittany refused to turn around, so Tru grabbed her shoulders and turned her. “Look at me,” she ordered sternly.

Brittany locked eyes with Tru, clenching her jaw.

“Travis has been out to break us up since day one. He would stop at nothing to drive a wedge between us. You’ve got to understand that about him.”

“Are you saying you didn’t have sex with her in the shower?”

“No! I mean, yes. That’s what I’m saying.”

“How do you expect me to believe that?” Brittany stomped to the fireplace and jabbed at the logs with the poker. She turned back to Tru who fell silent, and raised her voice to ask again, with enunciation on each word, “How do you expect me to believe that?”

“Brit, please, you’ve got to—“

“Answer the question!” she shouted.

“Because YOU were the one who had sex in the shower. With Travis. Here. In our home. I caught you, Brittany!” Tru blurted. “When I came home from Seattle! You’re the one who cheated, not me!” She sighed heavily, an

odd sensation of relief washing over her. *No more secrets, now*, she told herself.

Brittany stood there, stunned, struggling with the need to trust Tru, and the possibility that it could all be a lie on Tru's part to fulfill some hidden agenda. *But would Tru do that?* After the time they had spent together over these last weeks, did she still believe that Tru was that sort of person? She finally swallowed and moistened her lips to speak. "I don't know what to believe, Tru. What Travis said...it all makes sense."

"Of course it does. He planned it that way. You don't know Travis anymore. I do." She swiped tears away angrily. "My mistake was trusting him. I learned that the hard way. He played a little game with me too. I don't know how he keeps all the lies straight in his fat fucking head."

"What are you talking about? Is there something else you're keeping from me?"

Tru moved to sit on the hearth in front of the fire. She tried to get her breathing under control again, and looked up at Brittany, who stared at the nail embedded in the wall by the front door, distress writhing on her brow. "There is something, but for a while I didn't know what really went on. Then I found out. So this crap tonight is icing on the cake."

"What?"

Tru moistened her lips, stood and pulled out her eCig, took a deep draw and blew out her pent-up frustration with the vapor. "That night he told you about. He said I was with Liz in the hotel room...she wasn't there at all. But he was. I was drunk off my ass, and he tucked me in, and the next thing I know, I woke up the next morning and he was in the bed with me and we were both naked."

Brittany's eyes darted back and forth. "Are you saying that you didn't have sex with Liz, but you did have sex with Travis?" her voice had risen a few decibels.

“No, I’m saying that’s what he wanted me to believe. But I had a conversation with Macy, and she told me it was impossible. He had been given salt-peter while he was in jail, and he couldn’t have...done anything to me. But he failed to tell me that. He wanted me to believe that, so he could run to you and make you want to break up with me.”

“Did he do anything else to you when you were passed out?”

Tru’s eyes shot open wide at the thought. “God, I hope not.”

Brit sat on the hearth and ran her finger between the cracks in the stones.

“I’m tired of holding things in.” Tru said, emphasizing her words with her clenched fists. “I’m tired of secrets.” Fresh tears appeared and slipped down her cheeks. She sobbed once, caught her breath, and rubbed the heels of her palms into her eyes.

“Tru, I don’t know what to think about all this.” She leaned forward with her forehead in her hands.

She sniffed. “I guess I can’t blame you for not knowing who to believe.” Tru said, moving to sit on the other side of the hearth again. “I thought—I thought after all this time we’ve spent together, I feel like you should know who you can trust.”

Brittany stood up and took the poker and pushed it against a burning log, holding it there thoughtfully. “You never would talk about that night... I knew it had something to do with the shower, and you did say we had had some sort of fight...”

Tru locked her fingers behind her neck and bent forward, her elbows on her knees.

“But what happened with me and Travis...I did it? Tru...I really did it? With him?” When Tru turned her head to meet Brittany’s inquiry with a wordless grimace, she found the answer in Tru’s weary eyes, and sat down on the ledge again. “Oh, Tru...” The ramifications of this fresh disclosure numbed her. She reflected on all of those times when Tru became upset about that

night...and about the shower, and about how Travis had moved smoothly into a physical embrace this evening, and she could see the truth clearly. She had been the one. And Tru may have even been violated. And by the same man.

“Brit—” Tru ran her hands through her dark hair. “I wanted to forget. I didn’t want you to remember, because then I’d have to remember it, too. I mean, I relived it a hundred times while you were gone. If I could have amnesia—”

Brittany went over to her. “I don’t know what to say, Tru. I’m... I can’t remember any of it, you know. It’s like it was another person we’re talking about.”

Tru brushed a tear away from her cheek. “The thing is, I still don’t know why you did it. It seemed out of character for you—for us. Usually, when something like that happens in a relationship, it’s not a total shock, like it’s been leading up to that for some time, but—” Tru rubbed her forehead as if to remove a stain.

“I guess I was mad about what he told me...” Brittany said. “If he told me this same story, then... that night you caught me and Travis in the shower...maybe he told me you were with Liz then, too.”

“That’s likely. It worked like a charm the first time. I guess he thought it would work again.”

“Who knows what the right story is?” Brittany stilled Tru’s hand as she rubbed her brow, and held it. “I wish I could remember, so we could sort through all this.”

Tru nodded. “Me, too. But that may never happen. You and I both know it.”

Brittany hauled Tru to her feet and held her as Tru began to cry. “So, Travis showed up here today to stir the coals, right?”

Tru spoke into Brittany’s shoulder, “That’s about the size of it.”

AFTER ONE LAST LOOK AROUND, TRU DECIDED she had everything she needed. Brittany sat at the table in the kitchen, staring at the day's newspaper, with her fingers laced around a fresh cup of coffee.

Tru set the last bag down on the kitchen floor. "Well, I guess I'm about ready to go..."

Brittany watched her secure the written instructions from Macy in the back pocket of her jeans. "Is the weather going to be okay to drive in?"

Tru rubbed at a smudge on the floor with the toe of her black leather boot. "Supposed to be. I'm not sure how it will be after I get there, though. Never am." *Why do I feel empty when I look at you?* Tru wondered, taking in the pink nightshirt and sweatpants that Brittany still wore.

Brittany swallowed the coffee slowly, feeling it warm her throat all the way down. "When did you say you'd be back?"

Tru came over to the table and picked up Brittany's cup and took a sip. "Should be the end of the week. Saturday. Maybe Saturday night."

Brittany nodded, and pushed away from the table to stand by the bay window. She spoke into the frosty panes. "I wish I could think of something appropriate to say—"

Tru took a deep breath, as if to clear her lungs of some heaviness. "I know. I went shopping yesterday so you'd have some time to yourself to absorb all this. The pantry and the freezer are stocked." She smiled. "So you won't have to kill any bunnies. There's still some deer meat in there, too. Recipes are in the pantry."

"Thanks."

"We'll talk more when I get back from Denver."

“Okay.”

“Don’t forget to feed the horses every day. That feeder isn’t working right. I ordered another one, but it won’t be here for a few more days or so.” Tru took her long black raincoat from the back of the chair and put it on, looking at her watch. It was difficult to take that first step out the door, the memory of the trip to Seattle still vivid in her mind. *But things have changed*, she assured herself. “Well,” she picked up her bag. “I don’t want to be late meeting Macy.”

Brittany turned around and studied Tru’s face and eyes. She stepped over and put her arms around her softly, saying into her ear, “I’m sorry, Tru...”

Tru hugged her back, squeezing Brittany’s shoulder, aware of her need to hold on tight, and not wanting to fall into a maudlin trap like that one, right before she had to give a couple of concerts. “I feel like I lost you again.”

Brittany clung to her a few seconds longer than she expected to. “I’ll be here, when you get back. Have a safe trip.” She absorbed Tru’s reminiscent expression and watched her step out across the patio and into the frigid Colorado air.

Perching on the bay window seat, Brittany observed as Tru trudged to the Jeep which she had parked near the back door, tossed her bag into the back along with the others, circled the Cherokee and got in. Tru paused once she settled into the front seat, leaning her head on the steering wheel for a moment before she started the engine and backed out to the driveway.

Brittany released a long breath, deciding she would have to use this time to herself as productively as possible. Enough time had passed now, and she would have to make some decisions about the rest of her life, and how she wanted to live it—memory or no memory.

She went to the cabinet beneath the sink and took out the basket of cleaning supplies. If her environment was clean and clutter-free, perhaps her brain would not be distracted from the task at hand; the house would sparkle if she had to clean it for the next three days.

Brittany had gathered all the laundry, taken out the trash, and vacuumed all but the master bedroom before she sat down for a fresh cup of tea and some banana vapor. She was really starting to become addicted to these electronic things. Dropsi felt it her duty to accompany her, and the feline took her place on the seat in the bay window. Brittany watched the cat lick her

paws and wash her face with them, idly wondering what sort of thoughts cats have when they alternately groom themselves and stare out the window, and she was vaguely aware of something—some thought—on the edge of her own consciousness. The thought was oddly disturbing, but it was important, yet she could not seem to give it form or meaning.

An image of drying her hair with a towel seemed to return to her, and she was not certain if this image had anything to do with the memory that seemed to be materializing in her mind's eye. She tried to relax into it, tried to concentrate on her eCig, and the cat, and what she still wanted to do around the house while Tru was gone, hoping the memory would present itself if there was little pressure mentally for it to do so.

While finishing her tea and smoke, she put away the dry dishes and donned a pair of fuzzy house-boots. She shuffled over the living room carpet back to the kitchen and deliberately touched Dropsi on the nose with her finger, igniting a spark of static electricity which sent the cat dashing through the house from the sting of it. The prank had been fun, but she was sure the feline would hate her from then on, and perhaps even seek vengeance one night while she slept. Dropsi was one of those cats with that knowing look in her eye.

Brittany decided not to pursue that possibility, preferring to believe the creature was too dumb to have feelings of vengeance. She rounded the corner into the living room and saw the calico sitting on the ledge in front of the fireplace, worrying at her nose with her front paws, stopping only to glare at her, and Brittany mumbled, "Sorry, cat, it was a joke," before she slipped into the hallway. She put a can of food in the dish for the feline, hoping it might make her feel less vengeful.

Brittany kicked the overflowing hamper out of the way and opened the French doors which concealed the washer and dryer. She turned the water

onto hot and sorted a load of whites into the machine, watching nonchalantly for the avenging feline. Grabbing a container of carpet deodorizer labeled 'Country Berry,' she then dragged the vacuum into the master bedroom.

She sprinkled the perfumed powder on the carpet and had swept most of it up, making a final few swipes around the bed, but had to turn off the vacuum when a stroke under the edge of the bed produced a loud clatter as something heavy flailed upon the beater-brush. She lifted the vacuum and shook it to dislodge the offending article, and the dark metal of an Army Specialist insignia fell to the carpet. Curiously, she picked it up and studied it for a moment before laying it on the night stand. Fearing other foreign objects would damage the machine, she dropped to her knees and bent to look under the bed. There were the obligatory dust-bunnies and old shoes, but near where she had vacuumed the pin, she saw a box nestled, and raked it out.

Once Brittany saw the postmarks and addresses on the top of the cardboard box, she went through the contents of what proved to be the military memorabilia of her erstwhile jousting-cum-housemate. She knew the box belonged to Tru, because Brittany's name was on the outside of it as a return address from Fort Lee, Virginia. The box had been mailed to Tru at this address. The postmark was July, 2001. From her conversations with Tru, she knew this must have been shortly after they graduated from AIT, while Brittany was waiting at Fort Lee to ship out for Germany.

Included in the trinkets and keepsakes, was a rifle badge with what looked like a wreath on it. When Brittany thumbed through the dog-eared soldier's manual also in the box, she discovered it was the badge of Hawkeye, which meant that Tru had achieved the highest skill in marksmanship. A flutter of silly pride went through her and she swiftly quelled the reaction. *What was so great about being able to kill a defenseless little bunny with one shot?* But then, she had tried to harpoon Travis with that nail gun, and Brittany had to smile in spite of the scenario that could have taken place.

The letters in the box were all held together with a rubber band, and Brittany began to read them, experiencing the odd sensation that she was reading the private thoughts and feelings of a stranger. The words painted a

vivid picture of her blooming affection for Tru, and though she was not surprised by this, the intensity she had felt from Tru since that first day at the shelter began

to take on a new meaning—one which she gradually began to understand, as her eyes swept over the lengthy missives from a restless and unhappy young woman named Brittany Jabot.

Well into the sixth letter, Brittany suddenly stopped reading, and looked over at Dropsi, who lay on the bed above her. The cat appeared to be only half-sleeping, apparently forgiving her for the shock earlier, her paws stroking the air rhythmically with each breath. Brittany smiled as she saw an image of herself placing headphones on the cat from her Walkman, and watching her eyes respond to the music. As the image faded, Brittany realized it had not been a daydream but a memory, and she could almost feel her blood pressure rising with the thought that she might be regaining her past, if only in small, insignificant pieces.

She looked back down at the box of keepsakes and at once felt guilty, more because of her betrayal of Tru with Travis, than because she seemed to be reading someone else's mail. The keepsakes represented a history with Tru—one she had not shared with Travis or anyone else—and it was a sad commentary on the ability of one human being to hurt another. She replaced the lid and slid the box back under the bed.

She stroked Dropsi once before heading instinctively for the stereo. Moments later, she had chosen a CD entitled *Empty Hands* and Brittany finished the housework while Tru's alternate identity serenaded her.

She paused by the bay window with a glass of Chardonnay, and focused through the foggy pane to the line of trees by the barn, almost certain she had seen movement. *No way*. When a second look revealed nothing but the sway of snow-laden limbs, she decided it was her paranoia, and nothing more. Max knew she had no romantic interest in him, even if he didn't believe the reason she tried to give him; if he was prowling around outside again, he'd pay some cold consequences according to the thermometer on the wall. *Serves him right*, she decided emphatically.

Brittany settled on the couch with an easily-found copy of Rita Mae's infamous Rubyfruit Jungle.

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MACY WAS PLEASED WITH TRU'S BACKUP BAND, along with Tru's selection of Helki as bassist. Tru had been pretty sure of that after their first gig. She was more sure of it now, after sound check. They were solid and as near flawless as any musician can be.

Musicians usually had nicknames for themselves, Tru noticed. The drummer, Randy "Rocko" Johnson, was in his mid-thirties and had played on the road with several well-known bands. He was bald and muscle-bound, and went barefoot when he played, always wearing tank tops and shorts. His smile covered half his face, and was visible, even around the straw he always had in his mouth. The energy of his beat kept Tru moving, her rhythm guitar solid.

Michael "MadCap" Madison got his name from the plethora of multicolored ball caps he wore onstage. No one knew what his hair really looked like. As lead guitarist, he seemed to feel every nuance in Tru's music. He always played a custom-made Les Paul, and the rich tones he invoked from it, made Tru feel undergirded by a trusted, musical footing. He had tired of the music he had been playing, and craved a change. When Macy had played Tru's demo CD for him, he clapped his hands together and said, "When do we rehearse?"

Helki didn't need a nickname. Her name was cool enough all by itself. Tru had for a long time felt a unique dependence on her that may have had something to do with gender, but Tru hoped she wasn't that much of a cliché. Helki had a different kind of energy that made Tru feel safe. It wasn't the way she danced about the stage with her bass as more appendage than instrument, but that Helki made eye contact a lot, and winked at Tru whenever she nailed a

particularly impressive note. Helki's humorous eye-signals about certain girls in the audience was always a source of entertainment, as well. They had become best friends within a month of meeting. And before that, Tru hadn't enjoyed a close friendship with someone in some time.

Now, in Denver, Macy offered a self-satisfied smile when Tru stepped off the stage after sound check. "So, what do you think?"

"Macy," Tru huffed, out of breath from the last run-through. "We couldn't have done any better. This group rocks."

Macy handed her a bottle of water. "The show tomorrow night is going to kick ass."

It wasn't that she discovered a dislike for the way the living room was arranged, but more that it wasn't the way it should be. Somehow, Brittany thought the couch would look better if both sections were facing the fireplace. The television stand and big screen TV was in the corner by the front door, so it could be viewed from the section of the sofa facing that direction, and one could still sit on the other section facing the fire. She was very pleased with her organizational skills when she had finished.

Brittany used a starter-log to get a fire going. She had watched Tru light many fires from scratch, but had never appreciated the skill involved in such a seemingly simple task. Soon, Brittany had built a roaring fire for herself, and a once-again-pouting Dropsi.

Satisfied, she picked up Rubyfruit Jungle and continued to read. She thought of how the main character never apologized for who she was, and lived life with total abandon. Brittany would have liked to feel that way, and found herself sucked in by the humor and the heartache of the character's life.

The Soiled Dove was located in Denver's Lower downtown area, affectionately known as "LoDo," an intimate setting featuring some of the best local and national musical acts.

The show had gone smoothly, except for the one instance when an inebriated female fan tried to climb not only on stage, but on Tru. Helki was stealthy and graceful enough to place herself between the young fan and Tru, keeping her at bay with one foot, and didn't miss a single note on bass while doing it. Tru thought she was going to lose it right there and just laugh through the rest of the song. Thankfully, Macy enlisted the help of a bouncer and the girl was removed, but not before she professed her undying love for Tru. The audience ate it up.

After the show, Tru hailed a taxi and rode the 10 minutes to Osage street where she would meet Macy at the Buckhorn Exchange. She was anxious to taste their buffalo steaks again. The restaurant had been around since 1893, and if you could get used to the 500 animal heads adorning the walls, it was well worth it. Among autographed photos of Fess Parker and Bill Clinton, one could also see John F. Kennedy's fishing license, correspondence from Theodore Roosevelt, and the visage of a two-headed calf. Tru skipped the appetizer menu of Alligator tail, Rattlesnake and Rocky Mountain Oysters, and ordered club soda.

By the time she had settled in with her soda and began puffing on a newly juiced eCig, her cell phone rang and she snatched it up quickly, thinking it might be Brittany.

"Guess where I am?" Helki was whispering.

Macy entered and joined her at the table, as she finished her abbreviated conversation with Helki.

"That was Helki. Guess where she is?"

"Where?"

"In her hotel room, waiting for this sweet young thang to come out of the bathroom and get back in bed."

"So what else is new?"

"You remember the girl who rushed the stage tonight?"

“No way.”

“Yep. She bagged her.”

Macy shook her head with mirth. “God love her.”

Tru turned her attention back to the big question. “So, Mega-Manager, what did they say?” Macy began to bang her head lightly on the table in front of her, as Tru drummed her fingers and tried to be patient. Her set for the evening had included her best songs, and she was anxious to hear about the management’s reaction.

Macy lifted her head suddenly, her long brown hair falling loosely around her shoulders. “They love you!”

Tru heaved a sigh of relief. “Oh, it’s so good to be loved,” she said, watching Macy fish her own eCig out of her purse.

A waitress appeared at table-side expectantly, and Tru looked over at Macy. “So, what shall I order? Champagne, or beer?”

Macy grinned at the waitress. “A bottle of your best, please.”

The waitress faked stupidity. “Coors?”

Tru broke into laughter, and the waitress winked at them, saying, “Be right back.”

Macy inhaled deeply, held the vapor, then released a banana cloud as if the action were a breathing exercise. “They thought you had a very well-rounded set, and appealed to a large demographic.”

“Sweet.” Tru leaned back and took a deep breath.

“They especially liked *Fictional Hearts*, *I Got it Bad*, and *Say the Word* because they think there’s a big market for them here, and nationally.” She took another drag, and continued, the vapor coming out of her mouth with her words. “The audiences here seem to enjoy the soft, pretty songs as much as the upbeat ones. But he did mention that he had some studio

connections and could get us some good prices. He thinks the band is great. He even knows Rocko from some gig he played here regularly with another group.”

Tru leaned back and pulled on her eCig, enjoying it in much the same way Macy had.

“Oh, and the manager wants to buy some eCig kits from you too. He thinks it’s quite stylish and he wants to quit tobacco.”

“Stellar.”

Macy smiled demurely. “This will open up a whole new series of venues. More money, you understand. We need to get you a website started in the next week or two. I’ve got someone I think who can do that for a good price. And a bus. Yeah. We’re going to need another bus. I wish we hadn’t had to sell the other one.” Macy laughed at Tru’s countenance. “God, you look like you just had sex.”

Tru made a raspberry sound with her mouth. “It’s the best afterglow I’ve had in a long time.”

Macy leaned up, her elbows on the table. “How’s that afterglow situation going, by the way?”

Tru’s face changed. “Oh, Macy—I don’t know. I’m beginning to think she’ll never get her memory back. Things were tense before I left, though, and I don’t know if things are better or worse.”

“Do you two always fight before you leave for an out of town gig?”

Tru didn’t miss the irony. “Apparently. It must be some kind of trigger.” She sucked on the eCig again, thinking about how she no longer had to worry about where she was, and whether it was okay to get her hit of nicotine.

The waitress brought the champagne, and Tru ordered a buffalo steak, and Macy, the broiled quail served in a prickly pear with apricot glaze. Tru poured them both some foam. “I am so hungry.”

“Well, you worked up an appetite tonight.”

Suddenly, Tru heard herself say, “It came out about that night when I found them together.”

Macy took a moment to absorb what she meant. “Oh, God.”

“Yeah. Travis came by while I was outside in the barn and it seems that he told her that I had been messing around in a hotel shower with Liz, instead of the truth: that I came home and found her in the shower with Travis.”

Macy gasped. “That boy. I swear, if he weren’t my own flesh and blood, I’d kill him.”

“I’m sure someone will do that sooner or later, if he keeps this up. I’m just not willing to go to prison for that momentary thrill. She sucked some foam from the goblet into her mouth, and Macy shook her head and stared at a bear head on the wall across the restaurant.

“I’m sure he was adopted...” Macy squirted ketchup into the ashtray. It had been her smoking ritual, before graduating to electronic cigarettes. She used to like the fizzle sound it made when she put her cigarette out in it. Since that was no longer an option with the fireless vapor-sticks. She did it only as a sort of ritual. One of several odd quirks that Tru found entertaining. She had baffled many a waitress and waiter when they found a blob of ketchup in the ashtray. Tru added her own touch, by placing one of her eCig sales card in the indentions on the rim of the ashtray, suspended over the thick red condiment, so that interested parties might call and order from her.

“How did you handle that, when you found him there?” Macy asked.

“Not very gracefully, I’m afraid. I tried to impale him with a nail gun.”

Macy gasped banana vapor. “Tru Morgan! Are you serious? He never said a word, of course.” Her imaginary manager hat went back on her head soon enough. “And that’s the kind of P.R. you can do without.”

“There’s a nice little eight-penny coat rack in the wall now, if you’d like to come see.”

“If it wasn’t your passion that sold CD’s, I’d smack you.” Macy shook her head, still amazed.

“Not because I tried to kill your brother?”

She made a derisive sound. “He’s like a little alien. I never really liked him much. When my mother and father brought him home from the hospital as a newborn, I told her she had to take him back.”

Tru chuckled. “Weird. Anyway, finally, I had to tell her the truth because she actually believed him. For the second time, apparently.”

“He simply cannot be my own flesh and blood. I mean, what the hell is his major malfunction?”

“He’s one of the lower demons, I guess. I have to admit, though, she seemed genuinely horrified that she had done something like that to me.” Tru sipped more champagne.

Macy took a pen from her purse and opened her Daytimer. “Have you remembered anything else about that night with Travis?”

Tru shifted in her seat and filled her cheeks with air, then blew it out. “My own moment of amnesia...Not really.”

She shook her head. “I’m always shocked by what he’s capable of.”

“I wish I could remember. Maybe I was so drunk, I let him do other things —”

Macy sat stunned, her eyes wide. “Tru Morgan allowing anything sexual with a man?! I’d eat my earrings before I’d believe that.”

Tru put her head in her hands, despondently. “I’ll have the waitress bring you a fork. Tru Morgan was passed-out-drunk.”

“Well, God, how many drinks did you have?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You’re not sure? Well how many do you recall before losing count?”

She thought about it. “I had that first one while you were there. Then he bought me another. And I vaguely remember starting a third...but don’t recall finishing it.”

“Two and half or three drinks, and you were passed out drunk? I didn’t know your system was that fragile.”

“Well, it’s not...I mean, it never has been...”

Macy frowned, shaking her head slowly. “Tru...no—it...it doesn’t sound right. You shouldn’t have been that incapacitated, and I know for a fact you’ve never ever wanted to go to bed with a man.”

“I know. I’m not sure what that’s about.” She thought about the relief she had felt when Macy told her Travis could not have actually had sex with her. “Macy, about that salt-peter thing...I know it eliminates one thing, but I really have no way of knowing if...I mean...he could have done other things.”

“God I hope not, Tru. Remind me to kill him later.”

Tru took an overly large drink of the champagne and choked on the bubbles. “I’ll let you borrow my nail gun.”

A while later, the waitress brought their eccentric cuisine, and the two of them dug in. For dessert, they shared a Dutch apple pie with cinnamon rum sauce and ice cream. Through a final bite of pie, Tru said, “I think I’ll give Brit a call and see how she’s getting along.”

SHE HAD STEPPED OUT OF THE SHOWER AND ENTERED the living room wearing the white robe, and while drying her hair with a towel, she was stilled by a flash of *déjà vu*. Brittany waited for the image to come full-blown into her mind...

She felt herself standing in a robe and drying her hair, one hand on the wall...feeling unsteady...and then saw Tru sitting on the couch, which now faced the fireplace as it had been in the image she was experiencing. It was becoming clear why she had felt the urge to rearrange the furniture. She knew, then, that not only had the furnishings been arranged like she had them now, but also what Tru's expression had looked like that night when she stepped out of the shower with Travis. Any lingering doubts she held of Tru's version of the story were now expunged.

Brittany held the robe together at the front as she leaned down to stoke the fire, remorse crawling up her throat. She sat on the stone ledge with the poker still in her hand, her back warmed by the revived flames. *There's something else*, her reanimated memory told her. *Something else about that night...and Travis...something he had told me outside the shower. He was wearing only a towel. He said...*

In a dizzying deluge, his words flashed through her brain. He had confessed love for her, but his attitude toward Tru afterward was derisive, condescending. She heard the callous, cocky way he spoke to Tru...

She recalled the altercation when Tru hit him, and then struck him with the fireplace shovel... another sensation swept over her, and she recognized it as the same sensation she had had the night he told her the lies, when she had stepped out of the shower. She felt again, the total degradation and sorrow... the sense that she had sought revenge for a crime that had never been committed... neither with Travis, nor with Liz.

She recalled the way she felt that night... dizzy... muddled... too much wine?

Brittany's anger grew as she let her mind continue to work through this puzzle that had mystified her and tortured Tru. Travis had been the catalyst. Travis had been the one to drive a wedge between them. Only days ago, he had returned to stir the coals he had brought to life himself. A cloned lie. He

knew Brittany did not remember, so he added another round to the game by telling her again that Tru had been with Liz, and that was why she and Brittany parted ways. She recalled again his demeanor, how he tortured Tru with sarcastic comments intended to wound her as deeply as possible.

Brittany turned around and stared into the blue-hot embers for long moments, then she drove the poker into a log on the grate. “You prick! I should have let her nail you to the wall while she had the chance!”

Brittany got dressed and went to the kitchen to refill her wine, considering the revelations that her mind had finally divulged to her. It had been Travis all along. He had played the game like a master, and won. *And we lost.*

She took her wine to the sofa and sat, picking up the copy of *Rubyfruit Jungle* and holding it against her. Tru would be returning in another few days, and she looked forward to filling her in on what she had remembered. Out the living room window, she saw the medley of snowflakes fluttering past the pane. There was nothing she could do, now, but wait until Tru returned. Nothing, she thought, except read the rest of the novel Tru raved about. She held the book out and looked at the odd, purple flower printed on the cover, thinking that it was somehow important that she finish it, now.

Brittany took a long, calming drink of her wine, found the bookmark and began the second half.

A sudden noise jerked Brittany from a dream about her parents; the awful news that they had been killed in the accident on their way home from vacation. She looked down at the book in her lap, glad that she had read the last page of it before she dozed off, enveloped by the warmth of the fire. She was about to get up and add a log to the stack, when the sound that had awakened her startled her again.

Knuckles. Knocking on the kitchen door.

Frightened, her heart pounding, she got up to investigate. Her steps halted abruptly when she saw his renascent expression outside the window of the kitchen door. Angry that she had been startled from her sleep, she

approached and glared at him through the multi-paned window. “Go away, Max! I told you I’m not interested!” she shouted at him.

His lips curled in a grin. “Open the door,” he mouthed through the fogging glass.

“No! I said go away!”

He raised his voice. “Do you want me to freeze to death out here? I’m not going to try anything, I want to warm up for a minute.”

She stepped closer to the glass. “Go get back in your car and warm up on the way home. I’m not feeling well, okay?”

His shoulders drooped as he cocked his head at her pleadingly. “I have a flat tire, and I don’t have a spare. Come on, Brittany. Open the door.”

Brittany thought of the weather, and how far away from help he was. “I’ll call a tow truck or something for you—”

“No!” he shouted, then he touched the back of his hand to his nose and said more softly, his breath fogging the pane in the kitchen door, “I want to come in and warm up first. I’ll call the auto club. Let me in.” He tried the doorknob, but found it locked.

Something on his face frightened her, something in his measured tone that told her more about his intentions than she wanted to know first-hand, alone up here on this mountain. “Max, I said no, and I mean no!”

Max’s face went rigid and he struck the door violently with his fist. “Open the goddamn door!”

Brittany took a few involuntary steps backward at his outburst. “If you don’t go away, I’ll call the sheriff!” she warned.

He continued to stand there, his face red, the snowflakes melting in his hair.

“I’m calling the sheriff, now,” she announced, going to the wall phone by the doorway into the living room. She picked up the receiver and glanced

back at him, hoping to find him gone. He stood in the same place, with a blank expression. She lifted the receiver to her ear, and heard

nothing. Alarmed, she punched the answer button twice and listened again to nothingness. The phone was dead. *Damn this weather!* she accused silently. Tru had mentioned that the ice sometimes built up on the phone lines and caused problems. She sighed, intending to tell him again to go away. As she turned around, what she saw there, chilled her as thoroughly as the winter cold.

Max still waited at the window; he lifted one hand and slapped a large hunting knife against the window pane. His grin was malevolent. She realized in a sharp surge of adrenaline, that he must have disabled or cut the phone wires.

She shrieked, her eyes going immediately to the deadbolt. It was locked with a key, from inside as well as outside, and she hadn't paid much attention to it until now. Now, when she needed to know in a rapid fashion, how to keep him out.

Before she could make it to the deadbolt, he used the handle of his knife to shatter one pane of glass. His hand snaked in, searching for the deadbolt on the inside. She lunged forward, turned it to the locked position and pulled the key out, as he grabbed her arm through the small broken window. She jabbed him in the arm with the key, and he yelped, and let go. She sprinted to the front door, praying that deadbolt would take the same key.

When she thrust the key into the slot, it wouldn't turn. *Wrong key! Where was the front door key?* She glanced around frantically, and remembered it was on a small indentation in the fireplace ledge, off to the side. Another detail she had not registered fully in her brain until the moment when it most mattered.

She snatched it from its resting place and leaped to the front door to engage the deadbolt, hearing him banging on the outside in frustration, guessing correctly that the next place he would go would be the front entrance. She put the first key in her left pocket, the second in her right.

When she crept back to the kitchen, her knees wobbling, her heart battering her chest, he was back at the kitchen door, holding the knife and, grinning malignantly.

She moved back around the corner, her back against the wall, and tried to catch her breath. *Think. Think. Is there another way for him to get inside?*

She thought of the garage but knew there was no direct door in the house to it...then she remembered the door on the porch. Off to the left. On the same side as the garage. What if Tru had left the key in that deadbolt on the porch? If so, what would he gain by accessing the garage? *Maybe nothing*, she thought. It didn't provide another door into the house. She hoped she wasn't forgetting anything. *Windows? Could he break windows?* She had to protect herself against that.

Her tongue felt bloated, and she coughed from the drought in her mouth. *My God, I'm trapped on this mountain with a lunatic!* her mind screamed. She pressed her hands to her head and tried to think. *I need a—the guns!*

Brittany made a mad dash for the master bedroom, and destroyed the closets looking for the shotgun Tru had shown her only a few days ago. *It will blow away the target, even if you're a bad shot*, she had said. Brittany saw it there, propped in a corner. She grabbed it, released the latch and the empty barrel dropped open. She picked up the box of buckshot shells on the floor nearby, and held it tight as she hurried back into the living room.

Sitting hard on the fireplace ledge, she shook the shells from the box and pushed one into the chamber, snapping the barrel back into place, and searched for the safety switch. She found it quickly, and released it. For a moment, she was surprised that she even knew how to load it. *Must be another memory, floating back*. Then she grabbed a handful of shells and shoved them in her pockets. Expelling a staccato breath, she looked at the front window, but saw only snow. She wanted to see nothing but the front side of every curtain until Tru came home. Then she had another horrible thought. What if Tru did come home? What if Max was waiting for her, and attacked her before she came in?

I can't call her. Max disabled the phone line. And my cell phone was apparently lost in the accident. Tru was not supposed to return until—when? Tomorrow night? *No, the morning after that... there's no way Max could be outside that long.* She enjoyed the slight relief of that knowledge.

Creeping over to the tiny plastic bell knotted at the end of the drawstring, intending to lower the shade of the living room window, she wrapped a hand around the string. His face appeared like a macabre jack-in-the-box, framed in the window

Spasmodically, she released the blind to the sill. Sobbing, Brittany put her back against the wall and slid to the floor, clinging with whitened knuckles to the precious shotgun.

Tru picked up her cell phone and punched in a speed-dial number. She waited. A busy signal incited a laborious sigh from her. She disconnected. “Macy, would you be upset if I called it a night and went back to the room?”

Macy stirred her champagne with her finger, and then plunged the digit into her mouth. “No answer?” she said around her finger.

“Busy signal. I knew I should have gotten her a new cell phone.” Tru drank the last of her champagne, and pushed the empty glass to the outside edge of the table for the waitress to pick up.

Macy dried her finger with a cocktail napkin. “So try her again later.” She tossed the crumpled napkin aside.

“I can't figure out who she'd be talking to. She doesn't really know anyone—anyone.”

“Obviously, she knows someone, or she wouldn't be on the phone, right? I mean, maybe she's listening to a spiel from a telemarketer.”

“Maybe,” Tru murmured, unconvinced. “Although the old Brit would blow a rape whistle into the receiver before she'd put up with that crap.”

Macy knocked back the rest of the champagne in her glass, and rubbed her stomach, feeling full from the feast they had enjoyed. “What else could it be?”

“Well, the last time a bad storm came through Castle Mountain, it knocked out the phone service. The line gives a busy signal when that happens.”

“I haven’t heard of a storm up there, have you?”

Tru slid her glass back over and poured the remainder of the champagne into her flute. “No, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t one. I haven’t watched the Weather Channel at all today.”

“You’re a worry-wart. She’s probably curled up next to the fire, reading a good book.”

Tru looked down at her phone. “I wish I knew that for sure.”

Macy smiled knowingly. “Look, I can see that you’re going to be no fun at all. Let’s take this other bottle with us and go back to the hotel. We can order room service and you can watch the damn Weather Channel.”

Tru smiled. “Thanks, Mace’.”

Macy flipped open her cell to call a cab.

31

TRU SPENT THE REST OF THE EVENING ALTERNATING between monitoring the Weather Channel, and punching her speed dial. Explanations for Tru’s inability to get through to Brittany defied her ability to reason it away. The reports given on the cable station mentioned only light snowfall, no storms. Tru wondered who or what would keep Brittany on the phone so long. Macy suggested that perhaps Brittany took the phone off the hook, and Tru assured her that she would not do that, since they seldom got calls, except from Macy herself. The answering machine had

been broken since before Brittany's disappearance, and Tru wished ruefully that she had replaced it or gotten voice mail before she left.

"Do I need to go get Helki to come do the buddy-thing with you?"

"No, don't bother her. She's probably not alone."

"Yeah, I know, she's always got to have her own room in case she gets lucky."

"She usually does get lucky." Tru puffed on apple vapor.

"I don't get that, Tru." Macy put a new cartridge in her eCig. "I mean, you're the star of the show, and she gets laid more than you do."

Tru changed the TV to the Weather channel again. "Helki doesn't have a steady girlfriend."

"Neither do you, it seems."

"You know what I mean."

"You mean if you have a girlfriend, you don't get laid as much?"

"No. I mean Helki pursues it. I don't. I love Brittany."

"Well, you might love her a little too much. You can't seem to focus on anything but her."

"Macy, maybe you ought to get laid a little more."

"Pfffft! Don't get me started. I barely have time to sleep. Sex is out of the question."

"Maybe that's your problem. You just don't understand how it is to be in love."

"Oh, honey, I've had my share of rides on the love-train. The tickets got too expensive."

“Scrooge.”

“Well, I’m just saying. You need to lighten up on it. Brittany is fine. You’ll see her soon.”

Macy’s glibness notwithstanding, the mystery threatened to keep Tru up all night, and finally, Macy insisted she take a Xanax so that she would be rested for the gig the next day. Tru took the pill with great misgiving, and thirty minutes later, Macy glanced over at her and found her sleeping soundly. She discarded her magazine and turned the lights out to get some sleep of her own.

Brittany became aware of the cool metal against her cheek and lifted her head, the events of the night before attacking her senses in vivid detail. She had awakened with her arms on her knees, still clutching the shotgun. The hammer of it had left an impression on her chin, which she rubbed absently. Checking her watch, she saw it was almost noon. Releasing the clasp, she turned the watch over and read the inscription again. *Merry Xmas ‘04, Brittany. I love you. T.* Absently, she rubbed her thumb over the engraved words. Sighing, she refastened the watch. The fire had long since burned out, and she cautiously checked the windows on her way into the kitchen.

The light did not come on when she turned the switch on the coffeemaker, and she cursed bitterly, her tongue aching for the revitalization the caffeine would bring. She wiggled the plug to no avail, and finally opted for the tin of Café Vienna she had seen in the pantry. She turned the gas flame on under the kettle and paced the kitchen, the shotgun still in hand. The light switch didn’t work. She checked the other switches, and electrical appliances, and found them all dead. *He must have cut off my electricity, too.* Yet, a careful perusal of the area between the house and the barn belied his presence. She could see no fresh footprints. A light snowfall had smoothed the ground with soft whiteness. Maybe he did it soon after he cut the phone lines. She hadn’t used anything electrical since falling asleep, preferring to sit in the dark so the paltry moonlight would make it brighter outside than inside, where he might be able to see her. She was now intimately familiar with the merits of the cover of darkness.

Now, without the central heat, she would have to keep a fire going, and was exceedingly grateful that Tru had filled the wood box by the fireplace. While the water heated, she first went to the bathroom to relieve her bladder, and then to the hearth.

Once the flames were going, she stepped over to the window and scanned the front yard. *No sign of him.* Images of some slasher movie materialized in her mind. One by one, each character in the film entered some dark room, though she had implicitly told them, from the comfort of the

sofa, not to. And each met a demise characterized by the profuse loss of body fluid and various appendages. Brittany hastily pushed the visage away. *No need to make things worse by nurturing paranoia.* He was probably gone, after making sure he would make her situation miserable.

The overwhelming scent of smoke made her turn around. A cloud roiled out of the fireplace, spreading across the ceiling, blackening it. She rushed to the hearth, waving plumes of smoke away, coughing, thinking she must have forgotten to open the flue.

Brittany raced into the kitchen for a pitcher of water, and threw it on the flames. More smoke billowed up to the ceiling, and she lifted her T-shirt over her mouth and nose, trying to block the smoke from her lungs. She separated the coals with the poker, and leaned into the opening to check the flue. To her surprise, it was wide open, and she reminded herself that it had to be, since she had let the fire burn all night. Brittany's gaze traveled up to the ceiling above the fireplace, and comprehension surfaced. *He plugged the chimney.*

Cursing, she returned to the kitchen, at the beckon of the whistling kettle. A faint whinnying came from the barn, and she remembered her promise to care for Wheezie and Juts while Tru was away. As she turned the fire out under the whistling kettle and stirred in the International Coffee, she tried to convince herself that the danger had passed. She moved to the bay window and examined the ground. No indication whatsoever of any tracks. Since it snowed lightly all night and was not snowing now, she surmised that he had not been out there since late last night.

Max was another jilted male who felt the need to express his indignation violently, but he probably got over it and went home, once he was sure he had succeeded in scaring her half to death, and making her environment uncomfortable. She told herself these things repeatedly as she drank the coffee, and watched the back yard and the tree line beyond. *Is he really a lunatic? Or does he want me to think that, so he could have his revenge for my brushing him off? If it is what he is doing, I'll have him arrested for... something. Terroristic threatening, maybe.* It was cold comfort, when she wasn't certain just where he was. And she still understood that his bite might be much worse than his bark. Lunatic? Or Asshole? Which was Max?

The answers did not present themselves, and she remained at the table, listening to the insistent whinnying of the horses, peeking through the slit in the bay window drapes, drinking her coffee, and cradling the shotgun.

Macy shook Tru awake and handed her a cup of strong coffee delivered by room service. Tru sat up groggily and stared at the television, which Macy had had the foresight to turn on for her. The weather reports were unchanged for the most part, and Tru groped immediately for her cell. The busy signal again assailed her ear and she closed the phone and dropped it despondently back on the nightstand.

“Still busy?” Macy inquired, sitting on the other bed with coffee and a blueberry muffin.

Tru nodded and stared at the television, enduring a repeat of the non-threatening weather.

Macy pried the steaming muffin apart, capturing a berry before it fell and popping it in her mouth, cooling it with frantic, inward breaths. She held half the muffin out to Tru. “You want part of this?” Tru shook her head, her sleepy eyes still on the TV screen. “I’ll bet your phone line is screwed up. Don’t worry about it. I’m sure she’s fine.”

“Is there any way we can—”

Macy cast her a severe look. “You’re not about to weasel out on the show today, are you?”

Tru picked up the coffee cup. She thought about how great the gig had been last night, and was looking forward to taking the stage again. *But what about Brit?* “Well, I don’t think my performance is going to be all that great if I can’t stop worrying about Brit.”

“So call the Sheriff. Have him check on her.”

Tru smacked herself in the forehead. “Damn! Why didn’t I think of that. Thanks, mega-manager.”

“Anything to get you back on track.”

Tru called the Larimer County Sheriff’s Department and spoke to a deputy. She explained her concerns and he told her he’d normally be happy to check on her friend, but the bridge before Castle Mountain road was out again, and they were still working on it. The ice had caused further damage. He reassured her, though, that the same ice that had affected the bridge was affecting phone lines in the area. Tru hung up feeling no better about it. She relayed the information to Macy.

“Yeah, but, the phone lines are down, he said, right? That’s all it is. They’ll repair the bridge and go check. You’ve done all you can right now. Stop creating demons.”

“It’s just... I need to know that she’s okay...maybe I ought to—“

“Tru Morgan, don’t you even start with that shit. You took the time to get Helki up to speed, and then that woman had your life on hold for three months, and then she disappeared, and you’re still playing catch-up. Don’t even think about canceling on me, now. You could walk out of that bar with a new label tonight. That’s something you can’t afford to pass up with only two independent albums under your belt.” Macy sipped her coffee and regarded the wan-looking Tru.

“I know, Macy. But the career seems pointless if there’s something wrong with Brittany. I lost her once, and I couldn’t take it if—“

Macy set her coffee on the night stand between the beds and seated herself next to Tru. “Girlfriend, let me tell you something. You’re going to have to learn to separate your professional life from your personal life, or you’ll find yourself in the unemployment line or flipping hamburgers. You’re far too talented for that shit. You’ve got to tell yourself she’s okay and go in there today and knock ‘em dead. By tomorrow morning, you can be home with her.”

“I know, Macy,” she sipped cautiously at the steaming coffee. “I just wish I could talk to her.”

“Doesn’t look like that’s going to happen, honey. Suck it up and drive on, isn’t that what they told you in the Army?”

Tru sulked, staring at the TV screen over her manager’s shoulder. “I’m not in the Army anymore, Macy.”

Macy grabbed Tru’s outstretched legs, and shook them. “No, you’re not. You’re a singer and a songwriter. And a damn good one. I’m not going to let you flush that down the toilet, this time.” She stood up, as if to punctuate the declaration. “Your clothes are hanging up in the bathroom. We’ve got to meet with some promoters today, and then rehearsals. I suggest you take a long hot shower and get your shit together, pronto.”

Tru mumbled, and got up carefully with her coffee, familiar with these periodical pep-talks-slash-butt-kickings from her friend and manager. Macy was probably right. She was just spooked because of what happened the last time she couldn’t talk to Brit. She leaned down and kissed Macy on the cheek. “Thanks, boss.” She went into the bathroom and shut the door.

By midnight, Tru and Macy and the band members were leaving the auditorium after the show in the limo provided by the club; Macy had managed to get the transportation included in the deal. Helki, MadCap and Rocko were talking excitedly about their performance and the response of the crowd, and even more importantly, the response of the money-people who could set them on the track toward real success.

“You should be jumping for joy, Tru.” Macy murmured, watching Tru stare out at the passing scenery, as the chauffeur navigated the streets of downtown, and they moved out of LoDo toward the hotel. “The show was a smash. The label guy says he wants to talk about a deal, for chrissakes.”

“I am excited, it’s that I’m worried about Brit. I want to get home and see that she’s okay. Then I’ll let the rest sink in.” Tru removed her leather jacket, to allow the air from the window to fan her sweaty shirt.

Helki reached over and patted her on the leg. “She’s okay, Tru.”

Macy added, “Yeah, listen to Helki. Don’t disappear on me, Tru. We’re meeting him at the studio next week. You’ve got to finish cutting tracks for the new CD. He wants to come listen.”

“I’m not going to disappear. Let me get home and take care of everything. I’ll be ready by next week, I promise.”

Macy studied her favorite client. “I hope so, there’s a lot riding on this.”

“It’s fine Mace’, really. We’re leaving bright and early in the morning, right?”

Macy didn’t answer, but felt uneasy by Tru’s lack of enthusiasm. “You keep your cell phone on all the time. I want to be able to reach you.”

Helki shook her finger sternly at Tru, mimicking their manager’s reprimand.

Tru smiled in spite of her worry.

Rocko tapped Helki on the leg with a drumstick. “So who was that hot little blond number I saw going into your room?”

“None of your business, Rocko.”

“We’re just jealous, Helki,” MadCap said. “We want you to teach us your secrets...”

“Shut up,” Helki grinned.

“Please, Sensei,” Madcap said with forced reverence. “Please teach us.”

They all laughed.

Brittany zipped and snapped up Tru’s Army jacket and pulled on her leather gloves, telling herself that it was ridiculous to imagine him out there somewhere. No one could have stayed outside last night in this weather, not even a lunatic. She picked the revolver up off the table, aware that in taking the pistol along, she verified that her fear was stronger than her rationale, and opened the kitchen door, careful of the broken glass. She paused just outside the door, the thought occurring to her that leaving it unlocked might allow him to go inside and hide while she was in the barn. She was proud of her forethought, and pulled the key out to lock the door behind her.

She paused on the steps almost involuntarily, her eyes drawn to the deep-freeze against the wall on the patio. In her mind, she saw Max’s face as it had been the night before, through the kitchen door window. Brittany took a steadying breath and focused on the barn. *I can’t let this make me crazy. I promised Tru I’d feed Juts and Wheezie, and once that’s done, I can lock myself in again.* Then she had a horrid thought. What if he had harmed the horses?

Once inside the barn, the familiar sight of the Morgans pawing and snorting, incited an almost euphoric gratitude. She went over to them and stroked their noses. “I’m sorry, you guys.” Brittany scooped oats from the metal garbage can and dumped it in the feed bins, taking the ice pick to the water trough as she had seen Tru do.

Wheezie reared her head and Brittany looked into the Morgan’s mirroring eyes. She saw his reflection before he grabbed her.

They struggled, and she lashed out with the ice pick instinctively, catching him in the arm, but feeling that the blow was ridiculously ineffective. He knocked the pick from her hand, and she remembered the gun. Quickly, she grabbed it from her outside coat pocket but he stopped her before she could

aim at him, slamming her gun hand against the barn wall in a painful blow. The weapon fell from her hand and he picked it up and trained it on her.

“You know, it was pretty fuckin’ cold out here in the barn last night, Brittany. I hope you’re worth the wait.” A grin slithered across his face. “Run,” he commanded. Brittany clenched her aching hand and began to back slowly out of the barn as he followed menacingly. “Run!” he shouted, pointing the revolver at her and squeezing the trigger.

The bullet struck the ground next to her and Brittany whirled and dashed out the double doors and around to the back. *Why didn’t I go toward the house?* She chastised herself with horror. *He would have caught me before I got there, and could fumble the door open and get it secured again,* she amended, hoping she was making the right decision as she slipped on the

incline and slid down, stumbling to the bottom. She lifted her gaze to see him standing at the crest of the slope. He fired again, and Brit heard the bullet whiz past her head. She lunged into the woods, wet, snow-crusting limbs striking her face and neck, their burdens dripping between her collar and neck. *I should have headed for the road...But it’s too late, now...* She continued to thrash her way through, aware of the tenderness in her hand from his action to disarm her, and not knowing where she was going, only wanting to go anywhere Max wasn’t. At odd intervals, he fired at her, and the adrenaline in her veins kept her moving in blind panic.

She ran, faltered, fell, got up and ran again, until she came to the back of the tributary, recalling it was the one that she and Tru had ridden to. She searched for an escape route, but only found herself at a face-off with him as he appeared at the ridge and looked down at her, laughing, descending upon her.

Huffing the frigid air from her aching lungs, she spun around and saw that the water flowed between her and a possible escape through the woods. She turned back to look at him and he advanced more slowly, as if savoring this moment when he had finally cornered his prey. His foot came down on the packed earth by the rushing stream, and he raised the pistol, aiming it at her chest. “Go for a swim, Brittany,” he coaxed, snarling. “I know how much you like the water.”

She looked back at the rushing rivulet, the image of it enveloping her with a memory she wished vehemently to forget. A shot spit at the dirt by her feet and she whirled and leaped into the icy torrent, flailing toward the opposite bank, tears freezing around her eyelids before leaving her eyes. She turned to look back at him when he called her name. He trained the gun on her, and she could not get her balance in the eddy. He squeezed the trigger. She didn't hear a report. It did not come.

He cursed and threw the empty gun down, jumped into the water behind her, his hands forcing her below the surface of the freezing deluge of rushing current. She struggled for air, choking on the icy gulps that slipped into her mouth and filled her throat. Her arms were already numb with cold, and she felt herself flailing uselessly, understanding with stark clarity that hypothermia would take her just as surely as his vicious hands around her throat.

She sunk beneath the surface briefly, struggled back up, heard a sound she could not define, and saw him moving back into the current away from her, as if he'd lost his balance. He was looking up at the crest of the incline. Her eyes swept to the hillside, at the figure with a rifle...*Tru!* Her heart leaped in her chest, and she swam haphazardly back to the bank toward the hill, her body quaking and growing leaden with the effects of the frigid water. Her body felt like it weighed five hundred pounds.

Hawkeye, Hawkeye, Hawkeye... She fell on the bank, heaving and gasping, the cold wind chilling her to the marrow, as Tru fired at him again. Max held to a bleeding portion of his shoulder, and climbed up the opposite bank, disappearing into the woods.

Tru leaped down the rest of the hillside, swinging the rifle over her shoulder by the strap, and threw her an arms around Brittany. "Brit! Are you okay?"

Her teeth chattered so violently, that she could not form the words to answer. Tru removed her own raincoat and placed it around Brittany, helped her up and half-dragged her up the hill and back to the barn.

Once inside, Tru grabbed a horse blanket and threw it around Brittany. "Let's get you in the house, and I'll call the sheriff."

Brittany managed to clatter out, “He cut the phone line.”

Tru cursed. “I knew it! Don’t worry, I’ll call the sheriff on my cell. Then I’m going to hunt down that fucker and blow his head off,” she told the shivering Brittany, lifting her to her feet.

“Don’t—“ Brittany spoke through clattering teeth, and Tru doubted for a moment Brittany’s sanity, until she continued with, “I want to help you kill him—“ The unmistakable anger in Brit’s voice was clear, though vibrated by the palsy of cold.

As they started for the barn doorway, Max appeared there, like a dripping, puffing gargoyle, and threw himself at Tru. They fell together onto the barn floor, and Max’s hand found the ice

pick Brittany had dropped earlier. He pushed Tru down beneath him, and raised the pick high above her struggling body. A loud, *thwang!* reverberated through the barn, and Max fell forward. Tru pushed him off her and saw a violently shaking Brittany holding the snow-shovel. “Butt-stroke to the head!” she rasped in a learned hand-to-hand combat phrase from training, almost crazed with her victory.

Tru thought, *I’m glad you remembered that...* looked around quickly and then rushed into the tack room. She returned seconds later with the nail gun and a long extension cord. Plugging it in, she knelt beside the motionless young man, pinched the sodden material of his clothing out flat next to him, and began punching nails into his clothes and through the planking, until a halo of nail-heads surrounded his torso and arms.

Tru grabbed Brittany, who had collapsed against the wall, shivering, and helped her across the large span of yard to the back door.

Once inside, Tru guided Brittany to the master bedroom and peeled off the raincoat, the trembling woman’s gloves, then sloughed the Army jacket off her. She found a robe and some warm socks, and put them on her, followed by a blanket. “Okay, stay here, and warm up a little until I get back. Don’t get in the shower, though, that would be too quick...”

Tru exited without waiting for a response and hurried out to the Cherokee. She slid into the front seat and got her cell phone from her bag and told the sheriff what had happened. That done, she went back into the barn.

Max was still very securely nailed to the floor, but now unconscious. Tru stepped over to him, and could not help but smile at Brittany's quick thinking. *A snow shovel*. She thought of the bayonet training they had had in the Army. *Butt stroke to the head!* she'd said.

A ripping sound brought her attention back in time to see Max writhing against the nails, some fabric at his side torn away. He grabbed for her ankle, clamping a hand around it. "I fucked your girlfriend—" he grinned maliciously.

Tru used her other foot to mash his wrist back to the floor, picked up the nail gun, and drove a nail into his palm. Max screamed his pain and anger and made a collection of threats. She didn't want this to turn into some real life reflection of a cheesy B movie with the bad guy getting loose and coming after them again. Art should imitate life, not the other way around. So for good measure, she moved around to the other side of him and shot another nail in his other palm. Screaming and cursing at ear-splitting decibels, he promised all manner of vengeance to her back as she dropped the nail gun and walked out of the barn, leaving him effectively crucified like a modern-day Antichrist.

32

A FULL HOUR LATER, BRITTANY SAT AT THE TABLE in sweatpants and -shirt and a heavy robe, sipping greedily from a cup of Morning Thunder tea. She couldn't bear any more coffee and Tru told her it had the stimulant, Maté in it.

Tru sat across from her with her own mug, and her cell phone vibrated in her pocket. She pulled it out and flipped it open. "Hi Macy."

"Everything okay on Lezbo Mountain?"

“Oh Macy, you have no idea...so much has happened...I’ll have to call you later, though, I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. It’s okay now. Just a long story...”

“Well, I can’t wait to hear it...and I also can’t wait to tell you this—”

“Can it wait, Macy?”

“Well, I guess it could, but I think you’re gonna wanna know...it’s about Travis and that night at the hotel.”

Tru’s eyes darted to Brittany, who was focused on something beyond the window panes. “Really? Well... what?”

“On the drive back from the airport, I thought about our conversations...I had this idea I wanted to check out. So I stopped by his place on the way home...”

“Okay...” Tru glanced at Brit, who caught her eyes and smiled wearily.

“On the pretense of a sisterly visit, which of course he was suspicious of, I borrowed his bathroom, and while I was in there, I found a little bottle with white pills in it. I took one with me when I left, and looked up the imprint on the Internet when I got home. Guess what they were?”

“I give up.”

“Rohypnol.”

“What? What’s that?”

“A Roofie. A date-rape drug—”

“Oh my god,” Tru breathed, then when it hit her fully: “Oh my god!”

“Yes! You see? That’s why you didn’t remember anything, and that’s why you were passed out. It wasn’t the alcohol at all. He dosed you.”

Brittany noticed her expression, and mouthed “What’s wrong?”

Tru shook her head. “I can’t believe...”

“I can. I called him up and confronted him and he didn’t admit it, but he did seem amused. I told him I never wanted to see him again, and that I no longer considered him my brother. I told him to go to hell.”

“You did?”

“Yes I did.”

“Did he take you seriously?”

“Oh yeah.”

“I’m sorry, Macy.”

“Why are you sorry? He did something reprehensible to you. It’s unforgivable. I now officially hate his fucking guts.”

Tru sighed laboriously. “Well, I’m at least relieved to know it wasn’t...” She remembered to be discrete, since Brit was now paying attention to the one-sided conversation. “You know... but I’m sorry about... you know.”

Brittany rolled her eyes. “Do you want me to give you some privacy?”

She covered the phone. “No, I’ll tell you about it later...”

“So... I know you need to go,” Macy said. “but I had to tell you that. Call me later.”

“Okay.” Tru snapped the phone closed, staring at her hot tea, assimilating.

Brittany was still frowning. “What’s going on?”

A knock interrupted further discussion of it. Tru got up to let the sheriff into the kitchen door, and he removed his hat, placing a handbag on the table. "I think this belongs to you, Ms. Jabot."

Sheriff Packard was a stout, broad-shouldered man who played professional football before a knee injury left him with a permanent limp. His three years as sheriff were successful ones, and he was well-liked in the Castle Mountain area.

He removed his gloves and brushed snow and moisture from his thick, sand-colored beard. "Are you going to be okay, young lady, or would you like a ride to the hospital?"

Brittany tried to smile warmly, but 'warm' was something she was still working on. "No, sir. I'm okay, I think. I had a shower a few minutes ago." She began to rummage through the purse that did not seem familiar, but obviously belonged to her.

Tru looked out the window toward the barn, where deputies and paramedics had finally freed Max from the barn floor. Tru motioned Brittany over to the window where they watched Max emerge from the barn in handcuffs, both his hands wrapped in bloody gauze, the sides of his

clothes torn and gaping open in places. There were bright blood stains on both his arms. The two women cringed in unison, the sight of him reinforcing their very real brush with death.

Tru put a supportive hand on her shoulder and addressed Packard. "What's the story on this Max-guy, Sheriff? Did he snap recently, or has he always been a homicidal maniac?"

The sheriff sniffed. "Well, first, I need the details about what exactly went on here, if you don't mind giving a statement. And we'll need you both to come down and file official charges, of course, after this report."

"Sure, anything. I hope they lock him up and throw away the key. He almost killed us."

The sheriff took a chair at the table beside Brittany, while Tru brought him a cup of Maté tea. “This guy would have killed you, Ms. Jabot. His name is Max Bradke. He’s the Highwayman.”

Tru and Brittany shared a look. They both saw the papers everyday, and Tru recalled the first time she heard about him, from Macy at the Lost & Found, and then in the paper each time he claimed another victim.

Tru took a chair at the table with them. “I knew he was a little strange, and he made me uneasy, but I had no idea he was that dangerous—until today, of course.”

Sheriff Packard clicked out the ballpoint on his pen. “He’s a very disturbed young man. He gets real pleasure out of chasing women down, as if they are animals. He’s a hunter, but his prey is women... with blond hair and blue eyes...” He glanced over at Brittany.

Tru dropped her forehead into her palm. “Jesus Christ.”

“Yeah. You two should thank whatever God you pray to. You’re very lucky to be alive.” Packard pulled a slim cigar from his breast pocket and lit it with a torch lighter, and had a sip of coffee. Tru had to edit the knee-jerk need to offer him an eCigar instead. “Now, then. I need to take a statement from each of you. Start from when you first met him and go from there.”

Brittany related her version of the story, deftly leaving out the personal relationship between she and Tru, and telling him she remembered seeing Max at a convenience store, the night she had her accident. Tru was surprised by this, knowing it meant Brit’s memory grew stronger.

Tru’s embellishment followed, regarding her arrival at the house to find the window of the kitchen door broken, and seeing the footprints into the barn, with two sets leading out. She grabbed her rifle and followed the prints to find Max in the stream, trying to drown Brittany.

Packard took brief notes in a small spiral tablet with an odd sort of shorthand, offering any information he had, and promising more after they interrogated Max at the sheriff’s office. He looked up sheepishly. “Ah, I

realize you two ladies have been through holy hell today, but I've got to ask ___"

"What?" Tru watched him tap a stubborn ash from the end of his second cigar.

"Well, now, I've seen a great many ways to apprehend a suspect since I came to work here... but I don't think—" A smile creased the middle of his beard. "I don't think I've ever seen someone nail a guy to the floor, and crucify him in the process."

Brittany gave Tru a curious expression. "Crucify?"

Tru lifted one sardonic brow. "He tried to grab me when I went back out to check on him. I didn't want him to get away. I put nails in his palms."

Brittany absorbed this, remembering the bandages on his hands when they led him out of the barn. "Fitting for the Antichrist, I suppose."

Tru gave a half-humorous laugh, because that's what she was thinking when she left him impaled and walked out of that barn.

Packard cleared his throat meaningfully. "Touché."

"She's not above using a nail gun to protect me, Sheriff." She stole a glance at Tru.

Packard chuckled. "If you ever want a job with the sheriff's department, let me know. But we use bullets in our guns."

Tru snickered, and stood with him to open the kitchen door. He paused. "Oh, about all that sabotage he pulled on the phone: I'll call the utility companies for you and let them know. They should be out here by tomorrow." Tru nodded. "So, you'll be okay until the wires can be fixed?"

"I have a cell phone."

"I do, too, apparently," Brittany said, pulling the waterlogged cell from the purse on the table. "But it drowned."

At Tru's assurance that they would be okay, he replaced his gloves and wide-brimmed, plastic-covered hat. "Oh, I'll have a couple deputies stay behind and unplug that chimney. You're going to need it tonight."

She shook his hand and thanked him as he touched his hat in parting and stepped outside.

Tru grabbed the tea kettle of hot water and the box of Morning Thunder tea and came over to sit next to Brit, warming her cup with a refill. "Are you really okay? If you're not, I'll take you to the hospital myself. Your hand is swollen."

Brittany shook her head, spooned some cream and sugar into the cup and took another drink. "I've had plenty of hospitals already. I'll be okay as soon as I get some heat into my bones again."

"There's a clinic down the mountain. If your hand doesn't look better in a day or two, we could have it checked, to make sure it's not broken."

Brittany nodded. "The paramedic said she thought it was okay. I can make a fist, it's just sore."

Tru remembered something Max said. "Um... Brit... Max didn't... do anything else to you, did he?"

She frowned at her. "What? What do you mean?"

"He said something out in the barn before I... crucified him."

"What did he say?"

"He said, *I fucked your girlfriend.*"

Brit let out an exasperated sound. "God, no. He probably just wanted you to think that. Crazy prick." Tru let out a sigh of relief, and gave Brit's arm a reassuring squeeze. "I'm glad I came home when I did. I knew something was wrong."

Brittany covered Tru's hand with her own. "You saved my life, is what you did."

They both looked out the bay window as the sheriff traveled out of the back drive toward the road.

Brittany caught her eyes firmly. "I'm very thankful for that Hawkeye badge you have, Tru. "

Tru's eyebrows lifted. "How did you know about that?"

Brittany took another drink of the hot tea. "I snooped a little while you were gone," she confessed, pushing away from the table, and padding into the living room when she heard the footsteps of the deputies on the roof. "And I remembered a lot of things."

"Oh?" Tru followed her. "Like what?" She grabbed the blanket and put it around Brittany as she sat down on the sofa.

"Like probably all the most important stuff. Travis. You were right about him. It was all his doing. And there's something else I think you need to know..."

"What?"

They heard footsteps on the roof; the deputies, clearing out the chimney. A few seconds later, some limbs fell into the pit, followed by a knock on the kitchen door. Tru jumped up to go to the door. The deputy told her through the broken window that the chimney was all clear and it was safe to use the fireplace again.

She thanked him and as the deputies departed, she grabbed the duct tape from the drawer and cover the hole in the door temporarily, and hurried back into the living room to stack kindling, breaking up the limb and putting it on the grate too. A few minutes later, the fire was crackling and Tru sat back down on the sofa next to Brit.

"You were saying—"

Brittany stared into the growing flames, feeling the warmth moving toward her. “I remembered that night. All of it. And you know... I didn’t have that much wine...and the way I felt right before the shower... I think he might have... put something in my drink.”

“Oh fuck!” Tru rasped. “Of course! Why didn’t I think of that?”

Brittany was confused.

“When Macy called earlier... she told me she found a date rape drug in the medicine cabinet at his apartment.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, and that’s because of what I told her happened at the hotel with me and him. I only had like two and half drinks that night. It didn’t explain me being unconscious. So he drugged me, too.”

They sat in stunned silence for a long moment.

Brittany spoke first. “Maybe he just didn’t give me much...maybe he was experimenting with doses... and gave me less, because he wanted me to be awake for it...I mean, I was able to drive, but I was so groggy. I remember that... I did feel drugged. Maybe I had the accident because of it...”

This newest realization stilled them again for a while.

“He needs to die,” Tru said.

Brittany placed a hand over Tru’s. “But I want you to know, for what it’s worth...in the shower—”

Tru closed her eyes, dreading.

“It didn’t go very far.”

Tru opened her eyes. “You mean—”

“I mean, I was in there with him, yes, and it started, but then I realized what I was doing...I felt awful, cheap, and guilty...I couldn’t do anything with him... I kept thinking about how much I loved you and I couldn’t be with anyone else, even if I thought you had betrayed me.”

“So you didn’t—”

“No. Other than foreplay—touching, mostly—nothing else happened.”

Tru fell back against the sofa, relief washing over her. *He had not violated the woman I love...he had not had that part of her...* She was surprised by the tears that rolled down her cheeks.

Brit turned on the sofa to face her, still holding her hand. “I remembered a lot of things, Tru. And I think whatever I haven’t remembered will come back, eventually...”

Tru sighed, a leaden weight moving off her heart.

Brit shrugged the blanket off her and spun on the sofa to straddle Tru’s lap, her hands going to either side of Tru’s face. She watched the shock pass over the other woman’s features at the gesture, as she looked down into her eyes. She leaned down and kissed her tenderly, and then leaned back to look at her as fresh tears made their way down Tru’s cheeks. Brittany brushed the tears away gently. “I want to show you what you mean to me, now—”

For a swift moment, Tru was elated, until she realized that maybe this wasn’t what she had hoped for. “Brit, if this is because of what happened...if you’re just trying to show gratitude for the Max-thing—”

“I remember you.” Brittany blurted.

Tru’s features shifted into a maudlin pinch. “You—”

“I remember you...” she whispered, leaning down again, her mouth so close, Tru could feel her breath on her own lips as she murmured, “I remember us...” She moved her lips over Tru’s faintly. “I remember the feeling of loving you...” She pressed her lips to Tru’s, and the kiss was

interrupted by Tru's sob. Brittany pressed her cheek to Tru's, holding her tightly as the other woman cried for long, tortured moments of release, and Brittany shared in her tears, at last free of her own doubts.

Finally, Brittany leaned back again, using her sleeve to dab at both their faces. "I'm ready to make love with you, Tru."

Tru drew a deep breath. "This is going to sound crazy, considering what you just said. But... can I just hold you... for a little while?"

Brittany's slow, knowing smile was warmer than the fireplace. "That's not crazy. That's about the sweetest thing I've ever heard."

The two of them stretched out on the sofa together, arms and legs intertwined, feeling the merging of their pulses, the warmth of each other's bodies, and soon, they both drifted into exhausted, contented slumber, the fire casting dancing tendrils of orange and yellow on their serene faces.

Tru was brought out of her slumber by the sensation of Brit's mouth on hers. She came fully awake inside the kiss and returned it with growing passion. The room had grown warm from the fire, though the flames were waning now, after their long nap. She broke the kiss and stared into her lover's eyes. "Hold that thought. I'm going to feed the fire."

"You've already done that," Brit smiled.

She chuckled and wiggled out of her embrace to toss logs on the dying flames until they blazed to new life, then she lay down again next to her.

"I've missed you... missed being close to you like this..." Brit murmured. They kissed, passion increasing, as Tru's hands explored Brittany's skin like new terrain, and Brittany responded by touching her back, unabashed by any former hesitation.

Tru slipped a hand inside the waistband of Brit's sweatpants, found her wetness, and caressed her there, lovingly, as Brit gasped in pleasure. Sliding her fingers inside her, Tru watched Brit's eyes glaze with desire as she stroked in and out; Brittany's hips rose to meet the intensity of each

invasion as she began to thrust into her with increasing aggression. Brit reached climax, clenching Tru close to her, whispering in her ear, “God—Tru—I—love you!”

“Oh, Baby, I love you too...”

After the waves ebbed, Brit quickly regained her passion and began to push at her sweatpants, Tru helping her pull them down and off, and then Brit kissed her with great desire, and coaxed her head down. “I want your mouth on me...”

Tru obliged, sliding down to taste her again, finally; the sweet nectar of love that had caused an addiction she had never known before Brit. She brought her to sweet release again, and no sooner had Brit recovered, than she pushed Tru over to her back, and returned all the favors.

Tru felt that nothing had ever been so searingly sweet. Not even the first time. This was new. They had fallen in love again.

She had so often prayed to have Brittany as she had been before that horrible night ripped this love from their hands. “As you were”—to borrow the phrase from their time in the Army. But this was better. It was not a need for the past, but an embracing of the present and hope, at last, for the future.

Epilogue

Two Weeks Later

BRITTANY FOLLOWED THE ARROWS IN THE SNOW to the barn, where she found Juts saddled up and waiting. A piece of paper dangled from a string around the horn of the saddle, and Brittany pulled it off.

Hi, Brit. You and Juts may join me and Wheezie in the clearing. Love you. Tru.

Brittany smiled, and shoved the note in her jeans' pocket. She swung easily into the saddle and guided the horse outside and down the trail leading to the clearing.

Minutes later, she saw her—one leg crooked around the saddle horn, and perusing the wooded valley at the edge of the clearing.

Brittany reined up beside her. "Hi, you."

Tru smiled. "How was your therapy?"

"Pretty good. Shrink says I'm making good progress, and the rest of my memory should filter back gradually. Even if it doesn't, I think it's safe to say I'm here to stay."

"I thought I'd never hear you say that." Tru shifted in the saddle to take in that lovely face she had dreamed about so many times when she was gone on an out of town gig. "I have something to show you." She removed a large envelope from the saddlebag, and slid an official looking document from it, handing it to Brit.

"What's this?"

"Look at it."

Brittany saw that it was a contract. When she glanced through it, her mouth fell open.

"They signed me."

"Oh Tru, that's wonderful!"

Tru beamed. "After we get the CD finished, I'll be going on tour."

The light went out of Brittany's eyes.

"I know what you're thinking. Don't worry. This time, you're going with me. I have an agreement with them. I can hire you as the official band photographer. I showed them some of your work."

Brittany blinked and stared into the woods dumbly. “What if I’m not as good at it, now?”

“I saw the pictures you developed yesterday. You haven’t forgotten how to do it. I have complete faith in you.”

Brit took a deep breath. “Wow...Where are we going on tour?”

“All over the U.S. first, and then Canada I think. They are even providing us a big tour bus.”

Brittany smiled.

“So, will you do it? Will you go with me?”

Brittany surveyed the land, only small blankets of snow remained at the edges of the forest, and the sun warmed her for the first time since she re-entered her own life. “Absolutely,” she grinned. “It sounds like a blast.”

Relieved, Tru patted the horse and stared over at her. “You think you’re going to recover, huh?”

Brittany nodded. “Well, that little therapy session you gave me last night was very convincing.”

“And the night before.”

“Yeah. The night before that was great too...”

“...and the night before that...” Tru leaned out to grab Brittany’s saddle horn, placing a kiss on her lips. “It’s my professional opinion that you are still in need of further treatments.”

“Is that so? And am I to assume that you will be in charge of this therapy?”

Tru patted Wheezie on the neck. “Of course.”

“What if I don’t want to?” she tested.

“As you were,” Tru ordered.

Brittany smiled at her former lover, now made new by time and circumstance. “I’m getting there.” Her eyes fluttered in the direction of the house and then at Tru. “I’ll race you back.” She reined Juts around and prodded her into a run, and Tru followed.

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