



What's left when freedom isn't an option?

The Loyalty Gene

by G. R. Driver

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Part One: The Girl Next Door

Chapter Zero

“No, Mom, I’ve already told you. I’m not going to run away.” They’d discussed this a dozen times, and sixteen-year-old Stephanie refused to budge.

Her mother pointed towards the house next door. “The people next door are normal humans. They can help you hide.”

“I’m not running away and leaving you with Gene. He’ll *hurt* you! And what happens if the neighbors call the police? Neither of us has papers. Immigration or Homeland Security will deport us. How long can you survive without Gene?”

“Sweetie, this isn’t about me—”

“No, Mom, it’s about us. What about your new idea? What if it works?”

Mom stepped to the kitchen window and peeked around the curtain. “He’s still there,” she turned back, her shoulders slumped. “Well, I guess he’s cute enough. Are you sure?”

“It’s the best option we have. Besides, I’ve learned everything you can teach me about men. Meeting him will be my field test.”

“Promise me you’ll remember your limits.”

“I promise.” Stephanie embraced her mother, then reached for the door.

Chapter One

In the news today: The Humane Society of the United States announced its intention to add protections for genetically modified cats and dogs.

“Do all guys get yelled at as much as you?”

At first, fifteen-year-old, Jason Thomas thought he’d imagined the voice. Glancing up from his tablet PC, he noticed a girl standing by the now open gate between his and the neighbor’s yards. And not just any girl, but a smoking hot redhead in a short skirt and T-shirt. She looked cool and confident, and he couldn’t believe it. Pretty girls rarely spoke to him. It wasn’t a coincidence a “friend” nicknamed him, Nerd Boy the Untouchable.

Earlier in the day, Jason’s Mom kicked him outside. “Go get some fresh air. Your Dad paid all that money to have the deck built. Someone needs to use it.”

Reluctantly he’d gone outside. Never mind the bright sun made it almost impossible to read. The screen on his tablet only got so bright. The umbrella over the patio table helped, and he’d managed, until now.

Jason rubbed his eyes and blinked. He tried not to stare, but how often did fair-skinned, red-haired beauties wander into his yard? She even had freckles!

He dithered and knew it. “Hi,” he said and stood. “Yeah, I have a knack for getting in trouble.” A knack? The most beautiful girl in the world asked him a question, and he said he had a knack. If she sneered and vanished back into the neighboring yard, he wouldn’t blame her one bit.

But instead of sneering, she smiled and nodded. “You must, ‘cause Mom and I hear it all the time.”

Now what? Should he apologize? *Oh, I’m so sorry I get yelled at.* What would one of the cool kids do? They’d do something stupidly impressive. Jason took two steps, vaulted the deck railing, and plummeted to the ground. Fortunately, he stuck the landing.

“Well done!” The girl said with a laugh. “But I bet your Mom’s going to yell at you—”

The French door at the back of his house swung open, and his mother stormed out. She must have had their AI snooping on him again. “Jason, what are you thinking? We have stairs.” Then Mom noticed the girl and immediately switched gears. “Who’s your friend, Jason?”

“Hi,” the girl answered Mom’s question. “I’m Stephanie Timms. We moved in last week.”

“Hello, Stephanie,” Mom said, “I’m Shirley Thomas. We moved in just a few weeks before you. Dare-devil Jason,” she pointed, “isn’t normally so reckless, but he misses his friends.”

“Mom?” It took all his will power to keep from screaming. He forced a smile instead. “Could you stop talking, please.”

Stephanie covered her mouth and stifled a chuckle.

“Well, excuse me, Mr. Knieval,” Mom shook her head and stepped back inside.

After the patio door closed, Stephanie asked, “Who’s Mr. Knieval?”

Shrugging, Jason turned back to his new neighbor. With most of his surprise worn off, he noticed her eyes were an odd pale green. “I don’t know,” he said, forcing himself to not stare. “Mom turned forty a while ago, and her mind is going.”

“Yeah, my mom drives me bonkers too. It was her idea for me to meet you.”

“Oh.” He tried not to let the disappointment show. The rational part of his mind rationalized it for him. *What did you expect, nerd boy?*

“Wow,” she said, “for a second there, you looked really sad.” Instead of sarcasm, there was honest interest in her voice.

“Well, I’d hoped you came over on your own. Not because someone forced you.”

That set Stephanie to staring as if he’d grown horns. She crossed her arms and tilted her head. Darn, but it made her even cuter. “I think,” she said, “you mean that.”

Now it was his turn to think. It wasn’t easy because of the girl’s attractiveness. His eyes kept wandering to places they shouldn’t. Finally, he forced his eyes up to hers. “Look, if you don’t want to hang out with me, you don’t have too.”

A light breeze played with Stephanie’s dark red hair. Sweat began to bead on his forehead. She tucked that bit of hair back behind her ear. “You want us to hang out, but *only if I want to?*”

Why did she look so surprised? “Yeah, that’s what I said.” He shrugged.

“Okay,” she said.

And that was all it took? Surprised, Jason gestured for Stephanie to precede him. Not that he didn’t hang back to watch her walk up the deck’s wrap around stairs.

“Want something to drink?” he asked, “Mom makes the best lemonade.”

“If it’s unsweetened, sure.”

“Wait, I almost forgot to introduce you. “Turning toward an outside camera, Jason called out, “Alfred?”

“Yes, Master Jason?” Alfred’s voice, in his best South-London accent, came from the attached speaker.

“Say hello to Stephanie, she’s,” he turned back to the girl and winked, “she’s a friend.”

“Hello, Miss Stephanie. I must say that Master Jason has a remarkable taste in friends.”

“Jason,” Stephanie gripped his arm, “who’s Alfred?”

“Alfred is our household AI. Now that he knows you, it’ll be easier the next time you visit.”

Stephanie smiled and waved towards the camera. “Hello Alfred, it’s nice to meet you too.”

Jason’s mother stood at the counter, running lemons through the juicer. A pitcher of ice water at the ready. “Oh,” she said, “it’s Evel Knieval and friend. Pull up a couple of stools, and I’ll pour you some lemonade.”

Jason pulled two adjacent stools out. “Stephanie wants hers without sugar.”

“No problem,” Mom replied, then turned to their guest. “Watching your figure?”

“Nope, Mom and I like tart flavors.”

After sitting, Stephanie's head swiveled back and forth, taking everything in. "You have a beautiful kitchen, Mrs. Thomas."

"Thank you, Stephanie. Here's your lemonade."

"Thank you."

Jason took his glass and added a heaping spoon of sugar.

Mom made a small glass for herself, without sugar, and took a sip. Then she stole Jason's spoon and added sugar to her glass. "Are you in the same grade as Jason?"

"I'm homeschooled. Mom doesn't worry about grades."

"How old are you then?"

"Sixteen."

"What a coincidence, Jason turns sixteen in a few weeks. He'll be in the eleventh grade this fall. Are you studying for your driver's license?"

Stephanie shook her head. "No, my father won't allow it."

"Oh?" Mom gave Jason a sideways glance. She then turned back to Stephanie, "Does your mother work?"

"She's my father's secretary."

"Well, ask your mother to call or come over for a cup of tea sometime." Mom finished her drink and stood. "I'm going shopping. You two should go out on the deck."

Kicked outside, they took seats at the patio table.

"Can I ask you a question?" Stephanie asked. "How many girlfriends do you have, like right now?"

What the heck? Did she think he was popular or something? "I don't have any girlfriends right now. Although," Jason leaned back and tried to look confident. "I am accepting applications." He smiled crookedly, expecting her to get the joke. In the driveway, Mom beeped her minivan's horn and drove away.

Stephanie may or may not have gotten the joke. In either case, she asked seriously, "What kind of girl are you looking for?"

Continuing the joke, he kept his voice serious. "Well, my ideal girlfriend would have to be pretty; I mean at least as pretty as you, with red hair and freckles. Oh, and she'd have to have beautiful eyes," Jason leaned forward, closing the distance between them. "What color are your eyes?"

Stephanie leaned forward with her elbows on the table. The way she sat projected thoughtful confidence. "Mom says my eyes are peridot green."

Last year's science class covered gemstones. Interested in the subject, he'd spent some extra time reading about the subject. Peridots varied from dark olive to a pale, translucent green. This close, Stephanie's eye color really stood out. "Like the gemstone?" he asked.

"Um-hmm. Just like it."

"Well, I'll add peridot green eyes to my list. Along with intelligence, my ideal girlfriend has to be smart."

"Ah-ha!" she pounced. "Why do you think I'm smart?" Then she blushed and sat back.

She'd given him a perfect opportunity to tease her. But they both knew he'd been talking about her. Better to have it out in the open. "It's your eyes. You pay attention to everything going on around you."

"Still," she said, "I'd think boys cared more about boobs than brains."

Their brief trip inside for drinks had calmed him down, but Stephanie's use of the "B" word threatened to start him sweating again. He decided to play innocent. "What do you mean?"

Now, her peridot green eyes twinkled with amusement. "You've stared at mine enough." Her gaze flicked up to his hairline. "Uh oh, it looks like you're sweating again."

A fatal crash and burn seemed likely, but... "Just because I like your boobs, it doesn't mean I don't appreciate your brain."

Instead of taking offense, Stephanie merely nodded. He'd seen Mom nod the same way when checking off items on a shopping list. She said, "What else are you looking for?"

Sweat ran down his cheek. She had to be playing with him. A giant ball of flaming death seemed an all too certain future. "Since we're being honest," he paused, and she nodded. "I think you should apply."

"Since we're being honest, I'll consider it." Then she laughed. "You know, you aren't anything like I expected."

"What did you expect? Remember," he lifted a finger, "we're being honest."

"I thought you'd be a jerk like my father, but instead, you're goofy and nice and...and cute." The last part she added with flushed cheeks.

Cute and nice sounded fantastic but goofy? Jason pictured the floppy-eared, hat-wearing cartoon dog. Then he looked across the table at Stephanie. Instead of treating him like nerd-boy, the untouchable, this gorgeous girl said he was cute and nice. *Call me Goofy*. Jason smiled and said, "Woof!"

Stephanie laughed again and shook her head.

"Hey," Jason said, "do you want to come to my birthday party?"

"Do I need to bring anything?"

"Just yourself, and maybe a kiss for the birthday boy?"

Natalie waited while her youngest daughter peeked through the curtain and watched the boy return home. She said, "For a girl who didn't want anything to do with the boy next door, you spent a lot of time with him today."

Stephanie turned; her face still flushed with excitement. "Oh, Mom, I like him. He isn't anything like Gene."

"You didn't do anything off-limits, did you?" Stepping over to the sink, Natalie filled the cast-iron teapot, then set it on the induction cooktop.

"No, I promised, didn't I. Besides, it never came up. We had too much fun flirting with each other. Was it like this for you with Gene or Pavlo?"

"Maybe with Pavlo, but that was over twenty years ago. Some of those things are difficult to remember."

The next morning, Jason mowed the grass. While guiding the semi-autonomous machine, his mind was awl with thoughts of flashing green eyes. Last night, he used his tablet to research eye colors. It turned out that Stephanie's peridot eyes were an impossibility. Heck, he didn't need the internet to tell him she was special. On his second circle around the yard, he spotted her, wearing another short skirt and T-shirt, standing at the gate between their yards.

“Hey,” he said while the walk-behind mower whined to a stop.

“Hey,” she replied. “Mom wanted me to ask if you could cut our grass sometime.”

“I’ll do it as soon as I finish here.”

“Thank you. Let me know when you want to hang out again.” Stephanie turned and headed back to her house. Watching her walk made his pulse race. At the foot of her porch steps, she paused and glanced back his way. Then, pink-cheeked, she ran inside.

With both yards mowed, Jason worked the perimeters with a string trimmer. The sun beat down, and he’d long since removed his shirt. Around the back of Stephanie’s house, he found her sitting on the steps. “I’m almost done,” he announced.

“I have ice water if you’re thirsty,” she held up a glass.

Jason set the trimmer down and took the glass. The roof over her back porch cast an inviting shade, but he stunk from sweat and stepped back into the sun. The chilled water forced an involuntary shiver. “Thanks,” he said.

Tilting her head to the side, Stephanie said, “Don’t stand in the sun.” She nodded at the step next to her. “Sit.”

“I’m sweaty. It’s best if I stay downwind.”

“Don’t be silly, sit.” She patted the spot right next to her, and Jason sat.

He said, “Every time I see you, I add something else to my girlfriend specifications.

“Be careful, the more you add, the harder it gets to find the right girl.”

And she said that with a straight face. Was she deliberately teasing him? “Finding her isn’t the hard part. Convincing her I’m boyfriend material, is what’s difficult.”

“What if the girl has a list too?”

Now they were getting somewhere. “What’s on your list?”

At first, he thought he’d called her bluff, and she didn’t have a list. Then in a low voice, she said, “Just one thing. I don’t want to be treated as property.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. The best relationships are between equals.”

They sipped their ice water in silence for a moment, then she spoke. “I don’t know if we’d get along.”

If Jason hadn’t glanced her way at exactly the right moment, he’d have missed it. That little knowing smile. The smile that said he’d taken her bait and all she needed to do was set the hook. Stephanie liked him too, but she wanted him to work for it. Not that he minded, he also knew how to tease.

“True,” he said, “but that’s what relationships are for. We date, get to know each other, then I find out about your uncontrollable flatulence.”

“What? I don’t h—”

“Then, you find out I have anosmia.”

“Anosmia? What—”

“See, we’re perfect for each other. Although, you’ll want to be careful around my parents. Their noses work perfectly.” Jason gave Stephanie his best toothy smile.

Modern science had well-established, absolute standards. The speed of light in a vacuum is a perfect example. They needed to add a new standard: the speed of Stephanie’s mood swings. Her cheeks went from normal to an affronted red within a second. “You rat! If anyone has uncontrollable flatulence, it’d be a stinky boy.” Turning towards him, Stephanie reached out and poked his unprotected stomach.

Jason poked back. Oh, he poked with care. Girls had zones a boy didn't trespass without permission. Also, being weaker and naturally less aggressive, girls were more easily hurt. So, he poked with care.

Stephanie, apparently, never learned girls were weaker or less aggressive. She retaliated with speed, precision, and force. It soon took all of Jason's high school wrestling skills to keep her from poking him into submission.

He succeeded in trapping one of her legs and hoped, desperately, that his mother didn't see this. Wrestling with a girl, who wore a skirt, might give Mom the wrong idea. While he worried, Stephanie wriggled free and poked him with both index fingers.

Then Jason had his opening. With Stephanie's attention on freeing her leg, she uncovered her left side. Instead of poking, he tickled. She stiffened, then shrieked.

"Stop!" Stephanie tried to shout, but out of breath and laughing, she couldn't yell.

Jason continued to tickle. "Give up?" he asked.

"Never!" she replied and...farted.

Jason let go at once. This was the part where the prettiest girl in the world called him a disgusting jerk. His hopes for a relationship would vanish, and she'd never talk to him again.

Unsure of how to fix it, he mostly kept his eyes averted while Stephanie straightened her clothes. Finally, unable to wait any longer, he broke the silence and apologized. "I'm sorry, Steph, I didn't—"

"You're a rat," she interrupted, then chuckled. "I guess you're glad you have anosmia, whatever that is."

The need for another scientific standard came to mind, the speed of relief. Somehow, he'd lucked past the worst possible outcome, and a crazy boldness replaced his worry. In a mock-straight tone of voice, he said, "In the interests of clearing the air. I don't really have anosmia. Which means you can't smell anything."

Stephanie groaned and stretched her legs. "All that and a pun. I hope you suffered." They listened to the birds for a minute before she broke the silence. "Do you still want to hang out?" Her voice quiet, as if she'd understand if he refused.

"You're kidding, right? I thought you'd be furious with me." He glanced to the side and caught her looking at him. She smiled, and he smiled back. "Sure, I'll take a quick shower and be right back." Jason darted towards the gate, then stopped and returned for the trimmer.

All Stephanie said was, "I'll wait for you here."

"You're in a hurry," Mom noted as Jason streaked through the kitchen.

"Stephanie and I are going to hang out again."

"Oh, I thought it might be something like that. Are you still mad we made you leave all your friends behind?"

At the bottom of the stairs, Jason stopped and turned back. "Ha-ha, Mom."

Chapter Two

In the news today: Select members of the International Flat Earth Society launched themselves into space in a bid to disprove the “Globular Earth” theory.

“Mom, can Stephanie stay for dinner?”

“I don’t see why not. Does she like meatloaf?”

Busy at the counter, Mom hadn’t noticed Stephanie following behind Jason. “I like almost everything, Mrs. Thomas. Can I help with anything?”

“Thank you, Stephanie, but no. You and Jason can go play Xbox or something.”

“Thanks, Mom.” He half-turned away. “C’mon Steph. I’ll show you our family room.

The family room sat a half-floor lower than the living room and a half-floor above Dad’s office. On their way, Stephanie commented how the reversed floorplan made everything look odd.

“What do you want to play?” he asked. They stood at Jason’s shelf of game chips.

Peering at the labels, she said, “I don’t know any of these. Pick something fun.”

Jason handed Stephanie a controller then pushed the ottoman against the couch. He plopped down, kicked his shoes off, and put his feet up. A moment later, Stephanie followed suit. Compared with Stephanie’s smaller bare feet, his seemed huge. Her purple-painted toes attracted his attention. “Nice toes,” he said, then regretted saying something so stupid.

But Stephanie didn’t seem to mind. She smiled at the compliment. “Mom painted them for me last night. She said the purple went with my eyes.”

“They’re really pretty. Your eyes...and your toes, I mean both are.”

“Thank you.” Steph wiggled the toes in question.

From her toes, his attention shifted to her legs. She had beautiful legs, and he almost reached out to touch. Thinking he’d been quiet too long, he cleared his throat. “Sorry, I got off track. Now, this is a racing game. Pick a character, and we’ll do some practice laps.”

“Okay.” As Stephanie fiddled with the buttons, her actions became increasingly sure. She toggled through the characters and, of course, picked the female character with auburn hair. “I’m ready.”

“Press that,” he pointed to a button, “to start the race.”

He won the first race and the second. The third race, though, Stephanie won by a slim margin. “You’re getting better,” he said.

“This is so much fun!”

“You don’t have a Nintendo?”

“No, but when I go home tonight, I’ll ask Mom to buy one.”

“Want to make a bet on the next race?”

“Like what?”

Jason felt his face burning, but he had to try. “A kiss, the winner gets a kiss.” There, he said it. Would she get mad and leave? Would she friend-zone him?

“A kiss?” she asked.

With his heart on the line, he watched for anger or, worse, rejection, but instead, the faint flush on her cheeks signaled interest.

She nodded, “Okay, a kiss, but it has to be a good one.”

Jason felt light-headed. Not only had she accepted, but she also upped the ante. His palms began to sweat. “Deal!” he replied and waited for her to start the race.

With a kiss on the line, Jason used every bit of his skill. The three lights went red, then green. He and Stephanie accelerated off the line. Coming into the first turn, a row of texture shifting power-ups beckoned. As in the previous races, Steffi dodged between them. Maybe she thought the boxes were a barricade? He knew how they worked and scored a green shell. Heading into the next turn, he angled for a pit maneuver. Steffi saw him coming and cut her throttle at the last second. Unable to react in time, he overshot and spun out of control. By the time he regained control, her kart had a huge lead. At the turn where the track went vertical, she overcontrolled instead of drifted and bounced off the guard rail. Jason lined up to throw the shell, then reconsidered. If she didn’t know about the powerups, would using one on her be cheating? Did he want to win a kiss bad enough to use this advantage?

Robert Thomas arrived home to find his wife busy with supper preparations. He did his best to sneak up on her because surprising your wife with an inappropriate fondle is one of the better perks of marriage. Instead of her usual pretend outrage, Shirley glanced up and said, “Since you’re sneaking around, go take a peek into the family room.”

A minute later, Robert returned, smiling. “Who’s downstairs with Jason?”

“That’s Stephanie, the girl from next door.”

“Hmm, something about her reminds me of your old friend, Christina.”

Memories of their shared college adventures caused Shirley’s cheeks to turn pink. “Well, they both have red hair.” Shirley and Robert shared a smile over their college memories.

“Anyway,” Robert cleared his throat. “I think Jason has outgrown the ‘girls are icky’ stage.”

“Oh, yes.” Shirley agreed. She felt happy for her son while also dreading the problems girlfriends brought.

“Well, I’m happy to see he’s also inherited my taste for attractive women.”

His oblique compliment had the desired effect, Shirley hugged her husband and pulled his head down for a kiss.

Ultimately, Jason decided he didn't want to risk damaging their relationship. Gritting his teeth, he ignored the power-up and raced as hard as he could. In the end, it was awfully close. He might have won, but she got on the inside at the last turn and maintained their separation.

Jason lost the race. Maybe, if things worked out, he'd try again. Not that he'd try the same thing anytime soon. A girl, this pretty had to get hit on all the time. She'd sense a creep from a mile away. The trick was to keep cool.

From upstairs, Mom called them to supper. They put down the controllers and stood. Red-faced, he didn't want her to see his disappointment.

A hand touched his waist. "Where's my kiss?" Stephanie asked.

Head down, he turned to her. "Ah, I didn't think you'd..." His words trailed off as she stepped close and tilted her head up. For a moment, he thought he'd die, that his heart would explode right there. He closed his eyes as their lips touched. A hint of some unquantifiable perfume filled his head. Her arms slipped around him and held tight. He did the same but feared he'd hurt her if he squeezed too hard. Every part of her felt warm and soft.

Mom called again.

Jason opened his eyes and watched as Stephanie did the same. Her impossibly green eyes held tiny specs of brown. They broke the kiss and stepped apart. His lips tingled.

On their way upstairs, one of Stephanie's hands found his. Her surprisingly warm fingers tightened, and he squeezed a response. Just like that, they became a couple. If life were a video game, he'd have unlocked an achievement. Together, they turned the corner into the dining room. Dad, wearing a huge grin, turned to greet their guest. But when Dad moved, Stephanie stepped back out of view.

Of course, Dad noticed and frowned. Mom noticed dad's sudden concern and paused while setting the sliced meatloaf on the table. Both parents turned to Jason. Dad asked, "Is there a problem?"

Confused, Jason turned back. "C'mon, Steph, say hi to my Dad." He stepped to the side, and with small steps, Stephanie came into view.

"Hello, Mr. Thomas," she said.

"Hello Stephanie, is everything all right?" How many balky court-room witnesses had Dad soothed with that tone?

"I guess I'm not used to meeting new people," she said then stepped fully to Jason's side. "Thank you for having me." At no time had she released Jason's hand; in fact, she gripped even harder. Mom noticed the hand holding first and grinned sideways at Dad.

Dad's eyes flicked to Mom's then back. Jason marveled at their silent communication skills. His father shrugged and said, "Well, let's all sit and dig in."

Eager to make a positive impression and to show off his manners, Jason held Stephanie's chair. At first, it confused her, but she figured it out and sat.

Usually set for three, the dining room table easily accommodated a fourth. Glancing across to Stephanie, Jason realized he wanted his father to approve of his choice of girlfriend.

"How was work today, dear," Mom began supper with the same question nearly every weekday. His father usually replied in generalities, unable or unwilling to get specific. Tonight though...

"The partners voted to take on a new type of client." Dad scowled. He usually didn't display emotion about his clients.

“What type of client?” Mom asked.

“A genie peddler. The FBI ran a sting and rounded up five of those monsters and almost two dozen genies.”

Across the table, Stephanie glanced up. “Excuse me, Mr. Thomas, but what’s going to happen with the genies?”

“The usual. A combined team from Animal Welfare and Child Protection Services will evaluate them, and they’ll be sent to one of the reservations.”

“I heard the government sterilizes them.”

“If they’re capable of giving birth or siring children, yes. No one wants more genies underfoot.”

Stephanie’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t like genies?” Until now, Jason had never heard an angry tone in her voice.

“Young lady, I don’t make a habit of arguing with guests. But,” Dad raised his hands, palm out. “I understand some people are sympathetic to those...unfortunates. At best, genies are pets like a dog or a cat. But the perverts who keep them do so for the most repugnant of reasons. I trust I need not go into detail?”

Stephanie shook her head, and Jason let out his breath. He did not want his father and Stephanie to fight. Not when things were going along so well. “Hey, Dad?” Jason interrupted, “Did you see the football news today? The Steelers' new quarterback looks great. The coach says he’s got an arm like Roethlisberger.”

Perhaps welcoming the distraction, Dad shook his head. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

No one spoke for a moment, then Jason’s mother addressed Stephanie. “What does your father do?”

Stephanie glanced at Dad, then answered. “He sells things. Some months, he’s only here for a day or two. Mom stays busy scheduling his appointments and taking his calls.”

“Do you think your mother might want to go out for lunch someday?”

“I’ll ask, but she’s really busy, though.”

Even though she lived right next door, Jason walked Stephanie home. The disagreement between her and his father worried him. “I’m sorry about my dad.”

They’d reached the foot of the stairs leading up to her small back porch. This is what his house had before Dad upgraded to a wooden deck. Like most houses this time of year, the porch light remained off. Even this early in the summer, porch lights attracted tons of bugs.

“It’s fine. I watch the news. Lots of people have similar opinions.”

“Still, I know it’s important to you.” Jason tried to make eye contact.

Stephanie turned away. “Genies didn’t ask to be born. Humans made them. Humans, not the genies, are the bad guys.”

As much as he wanted to ask for another kiss, Stephanie’s dark mood made him wary. “I agree. Thinking that people are property is bad.” When she didn’t reply, he frantically tried to come up with an exit strategy. “Look, I don’t know anything about genies. They’re just stories on the news. But I get it’s important to you, and that makes it important to me.”

“Just like that?” she asked. “Why?”

“Cause I like you, and I’m pretty sure you like me too.”

“And you like me because I’m pretty?” she challenged.

“Yeah, you’re hot, but there’s more. You have a great sense of humor and you stand up for yourself, but most of all, it’s how sweet you are that keeps me chasing after you.”

“Not my boobs?” It wasn’t too dark to see her smile.

Jason dared to push a stray lock of her hair back into place. “To tell the truth,” he said, “I’m more of a butt guy. Your boobs are great, but your butt is awesome. I can’t wait to see you in tight jeans.”

She closed the distance between them, and her eyes flicked down then back up to his. “I don’t have any jeans.”

“Really?” he moved closer.

“Uh, uh, just skirts and dresses.”

They were an inch or two apart, and it only seemed a little odd they still discussed clothing. “Skirts are cool. I like your legs too.”

“You keep surprising me, and you make me laugh.” Her fingers traced up his arms. “Do I get a goodnight kiss?”

He almost replied but tipped his head down and kissed her instead. The kiss started chastely enough, but—and he didn’t know who went first—the tip of his tongue touched hers. It felt like an electric current jolted up his spine.

Each of them shifted position, as they searched for more contact.

Inside her house, a door closed with a bang and startled, they moved apart. “Wow,” they both said at almost the same instant. Then they both laughed.

Jason took her hands. He said, “I really, really liked that.”

“Me too,” she said.

“I don’t want to let you go.”

“Text me when you get up, and I’ll come over.”

“Kay. Another kiss?” Instead of waiting for a reply, he reached to pull her close, but she was already there.

Later, he lay on his bed, trying and failing to read. His thoughts kept revolving around red hair and green eyes.

“Master Jason?” Alfred’s voice came from the overhead speaker.

“Yes, Alfred?”

“Miss Stephanie sent you a text.”

Surprised, Jason sat up. “What is it?”

“She said, ‘Goodnight and thank you for the goodnight kisses.’”

“Alfred, tell her, ‘It was my pleasure, and I can’t wait to see her again.’”

While Robert and Shirley prepared for bed, Robert said, “Jason’s a chip off the old block, isn’t he?”

“Oh? How so?” Shirley reached into the dresser for a clean nightgown.

Robert spoke while openly admiring his wife’s behind. “Because he also found a cute girl and managed to sweep her off her feet.”

Shirley’s eyes found her husband’s reflection in the mirror. His eyes, she noticed, followed her butt as she bent over the drawer. Maybe she wouldn’t need a nightgown?

Chapter Three

In the News Today: For the second time in as many days, The Christian Movement for World Peace clashed violently with The Muslim Movement for Better Understanding.

Jason pulled up his shorts and plopped down on the edge of his bed. His “plop” bounced his rolled-up socks into the air and down on to the floor, where they rolled out of reach. Sighing, he stood and reached down to pick them up.

"Your Mom's in a good mood."

The unexpected voice almost made him jump across the room. He spun and found Stephanie standing in his bedroom doorway.

Rattled, he almost stuttered. "H-hi."

"Your Mom's in the bathroom, and I got tired of waiting for you. Can I come in?"

Jason nodded. How long had she stood in his doorway? He plopped down again, this time holding his socks.

Stephanie moved around his room, peeking into his closet and even into his open dresser drawer. Instead of sneakers, she wore flip-flops today, and her lavender nails sported tiny green polka dots. "You're lucky," Steffi said. "I got stuck in the smallest bedroom."

"This room has drawbacks."

"Like what?"

"The master bedroom is closer." He shrugged to indicate the hallway. "Last night must have been special, or something cause Mom got kind of loud."

Stephanie coughed. "I know how it is. Sometimes my parents do it in the living room."

"What?" Jason realized his parents must have done the same. Where would it be safe to sit?

"Maybe that's why your mom is so happy this morning."

Still holding his socks, Jason considered how often his mother began the day in a cheerful mood. *They must do it all the time!*

Stephanie stopped her examination and glanced at Jason. "You didn't text me this morning." Her glance wasn't exactly an accusation, but it was close.

That brought him back to reality. He'd intended to send a text after breakfast, but between the failure of his usual trick to fall asleep, and then later with his parents carrying on, he'd slept in. "I couldn't fall asleep."

"Next time, send me a text. If Gene isn't home, I'll stay up and keep you company."

"Kay. Hey, you know what else I forgot? I forgot to say how nice you look." He must have said the right thing because Stephanie's smile lit the room.

Nodding towards his closet, she asked, "Are you going to wear a shirt today?"

"Um yeah." He already had his favorite Slayer T-shirt laid out.

Nodding, she reached into his closet and removed a short-sleeved button-down shirt. "Here, wear this."

"But..." he considered objecting but stood and donned the shirt.

"And don't wear those ratty old tennis shoes." She reached down and tossed him a pair of leather boat shoes. "Wear these."

"But..." she'd already turned back to his dresser, closed the top drawer, and opened the next one down. What he called a dresser was really a chest of drawers, five drawers in total, from his sock drawer at the top, to the deeper shirt drawer at the bottom. If Stephanie continued looking through each drawer, and if she continued to bend at the waist, he didn't need college trigonometry to calculate the angle her skirt might end up at. He sat, keeping those angles in mind, and pulled those shoes on.

Downstairs, Mom washed breakfast dishes while singing along to her top-40, golden-oldies radio station. "Good morning, sleepyhead. And Stephanie, I'd wondered where you went." Then Mom stared. "Whoa!" she said. "You did *not* pick out your clothes."

"I did it for him," Stephanie beamed.

"Great job, Steph. Jason looks very handsome. Now, I'm making waffles, would you like one or two?"

Stephanie tried to refuse but settled for, "just one waffle, please."

Mom didn't bother asking Jason. She already had one on his plate while a second steamed on the iron. That waffle went to Stephanie, and mom made his second.

Instead of maple syrup, Stephanie fished the wedge of lemon from her iced tea and squeezed it over her waffle. Mid-squeeze, she caught Jason watching and gave him a sheepish grin. Showing his solidarity, he forked the lemon from his glass and passed it over.

Mom joined them after making her own waffle. Perhaps, because Stephanie didn't use syrup, Mom ate hers plain. She didn't know about the lemon trick.

"Stephanie," Mom asked, "do you ever miss not going to school? You must miss not having friends."

"I don't know how to miss something I've never had." Her eyes flicked to Jason for a moment before turning back to his mother. "Although Jason is a good friend."

Jason put his head down and groaned. "Oh, no. It's the kiss of death!"

"What are you going on about?" asked Mom.

"Stephanie friend-zoned me," he mock-wailed.

Rubbing her head, Stephanie asked, "What's wrong with being friends?"

Mom spoke up, "Pay no attention to Charlie Brown here. If he's friend-zoned, it's his own fault."

"What's friend-zoned, and who is Charlie Brown?" Stephanie glared at Jason.

Jason sat up and rolled his eyes. “Seriously, Mom, that’s an ancient reference, even for you.” He turned to Stephanie, “Charlie Brown is an old cartoon character.”

“Who carried a torch for ‘The little red-headed girl.’” Added Mom with significant glances for her son and his guest.

Jason felt his face grow hot. Across the table, Stephanie’s cheeks were also red.

Perhaps satisfied with the awkward situation, Mom stood up with her plate. “It’s a lovely day outside. I’ll leave you two alone and eat breakfast on the deck.

Several quiet minutes passed before Jason spoke, “I’ve never thought to put lemon on waffles.”

“It’s something Mom and I do. You probably wouldn’t like it.”

“Speaking of like, I like how your impossible eye color gave away your secret.”

“Oh?” She sat back and crossed her arms. “Whatever do you mean?”

“I’m not supposed to know this—Mom and Dad think it’ll screw with my ‘Emotional Development’—but I was gene engineered too. I got a ‘Certified Genius Gene’ package, and you got those beautiful eyes.”

Those beautiful eyes studied him, and Jason began to fret. “Did I, uh, screw up?”

Stephanie grimaced. “I guess this is one of those relationship building moments,” she took a deep breath and began counting on her fingers. “First, you didn’t screw up. Second, don’t worry about offending me. I’m a big girl. Third,” Stephanie stopped and shook her head. “Third is complicated. And it’s about your father. Where does he get off hating genies after having you gene-edited? Fourth, well, I inherited my eye color from my mother.”

“You know my Dad’s a lawyer, right? The law is a big deal to him. He’s like a walking, talking legal textbook. Genies are illegal, and that’s probably why he thinks the way he does. Gene editing is small stuff, and it’s legal, and that makes it okay. I bet if Dad ever meets a genie for real, he’ll be super nice. Dad kind of sees himself as a protector of victims. He only does criminal defense to make sure his clients get a fair trial.”

“Fair enough,” she said.

“As for me,” Jason reached across the table and tapped the back of her hand. “As for me, you have to tell me right away if I do or say something you don’t like. No holding stuff back, ’kay?”

Smiling, Stephanie scooted her chair back to the table, then reached across and speared a bite of his waffle. “Don’t worry,” she said, “I still like you.” She chewed the butter and maple-syrup soaked bite with interest. “Maple syrup,” she decreed, “is much better than I expected. So, boyfriend, what’s friend-zoning?”

“Oh, it’s when a boy likes a girl, but the girl only wants to be friends. Once a guy’s in the zone, it’s all over.”

“I don’t see why people can’t be both.”

“Some can. Like my parents. They have each other’s back like you wouldn’t believe.” He reached over and snatched a bite of her waffle. It was tangy and lemony, not at all bad. “If possible, that’s what I’d like for us.”

“Well, my parents don’t have a great relationship. You’ll have to help me figure my part out.”

“Your dad—” Jason caught the sudden heat in Stephanie’s eyes. “Sorry! *Your father*, he doesn’t hit your mom, does he?”

“No, he’s not that kind of terrible.”

“Oh, I’m missing something then.”

“You’re lucky, trust me.”

Thunder crashed outside, and Mom ran inside with her plate. “It’s pouring outside!” She focused on Jason and Stephanie, “Do you two understand each other better now?”

“I thou—” Jason started.

“We do.” Stephanie finished.

“Good,” declared Mom. “I’m glad I helped.”

The late morning surprise shower looked to become an all-day soaker. Stephanie called her mom for permission to stay and hang out with Jason. Before she hung up, his mom ran to the living room to pick up the extension.

“Hi, this is Shirley Thomas, Jason’s mother. Sorry to butt in, but since our kids are officially an item, I thought we should get to know each other.”

Knowing how his mother loved to talk, Jason thought this was a good time to get his new girlfriend alone. He mimed hanging up the phone, and she got it right away. In a rush, Stephanie said, “Mom, I’m going to hang out with Jason. Bye,” and hung up.

Taking Stephanie’s hand—he’d have to ask how she managed to have warm hands all the time—Jason headed for the family room. The out-of-the-way and semi-secluded family room. Once down the steps and out of Mom’s sight, Jason steered Stephanie towards the couch. Because girlfriend, minus parents, divided by couch, equals fun. Stephanie, however, decided to be the opposite, rather than the adjacent and turned an acute angle towards The Wall.

The Wall held an ever-changing collection of family photographs. Every few months, Mom switched some with the others kept in storage.

“Do you know all these people?” asked Stephanie. A note of incredulity was present in her voice.

Stepping over, Jason rested his hands on her waist. Yep, she was warm here too. “Most are family. Some pictures go back generations.” He pointed at one. “This one’s old.”

Stephanie peered at the now-obsolete high-definition image, then remarked in surprise, “He looks like you!”

“That’s my great grandfather. I’m told he led an interesting life.”

Stephanie leaned back; her shoulders pressed against his chest. “Oh?” she asked and glanced over her shoulder, “what happened to him?”

“Girlfriends happened. Lots and lots of girlfriends He told them he couldn’t choose one ’cause he loved them all equally.”

Surprised, she rocked back and on the rebound, spun to face him. “You’re making that up.”

“Nope! It’s one of the oldest family legends.”

Stephanie pulled his head down until their foreheads touched. “You better not take after him,” she scolded.

He slipped his hands under the hem of her shirt. Just far enough, his thumbs grazed the bare skin at her waist. “Why would I spend time with another girl when I can spend it all with you?” Their closeness threatened to overwhelm his senses.

Her hands covered his, but she didn’t redirect him. At least not yet. “Mom says all men get bored sooner or later.”

“Sweetheart, I’m not saying your Mom’s wrong, but—”

Behind them, Jason’s mother called down the stairs. “I’m done talking to your mother, Stephanie. She said you can stay until supper.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Thomas,” Stephanie replied, then turned her considerable attention back to Jason. “What do you want to do?” she asked.

He still needed to ask about her “warm for a girl” skin temperature. But right now, her presence commanded one hundred percent of his attention. Almost of their own accord, his thumbs—still riding on the flair of her hips—hooked inside the waistband of her skirt. Both thumb tips encountered something lacy and soft.

Stephanie squirmed out of his grasp and waggled a finger. She asked, “Can we play that racing game now?”

Disappointed but unsure if he needed to apologize, Jason reached for the controllers and booted the console. “Sure,” he said, glancing back at her. “Same deal as before?”

Stephanie paused her resumed examination of the Thomas family pictures. “You mean your trick bet?”

“Trick? Yeah, but I really wanted to kiss you.”

“All you had to do was ask.” Stephanie returned and kissed his cheek, then snatched a controller from his hand. “It’s not like I’m mean or anything.”

With the footrest back against the couch, they kicked off their footwear and got busy.

It was during the first race that Stephanie discovered the power-ups. Coming out of the first turn, both teens battled for position. Intent on gaining the inside, she drove straight through an item box. The box flashed out of existence, and her character, the auburn-haired princess, zoomed down the track, a banana in her hand.

Befuddled, Stephanie asked, “Why am I waving a banana?”

“I’m no psychiatrist, but you might be trying to tell me something.”

This earned Jason a snort of laughter and an elbow straight into his ribs. “Oof!”

She said, “I better not catch you waving a banana around. It might get peeled.”

“Ouch,” the thought made him wince. “Okay, that banana,” he nodded towards the display, “is a weapon. If you throw it and if it hits me, I’ll spin out.”

Of course, she needed a demonstration. They spent the next several races trying the different power-ups and goofing off. It was a lot more fun than a serious race.

Near the end of the second race, a weapon with potential spawned ahead. New for this version of the game, tow chains offered the ability to slow another racer and then to sling-shot ahead. It required a keen sense of timing to gain the maximum boost.

Tow Chain in hand, he timed his approach. They drifted through the same turn; he held his drift longer for the additional boost. Jason lined up and activated the device. A grappling hook shot out, binding his kart to Stephanie’s. Jason left off the controls and allowed her kart to tow him along. Any number of backward-firing weapons would knock him loose, but she didn’t have one. Her cart slowed to a crawl.

The fires of competition burned hot, and Stephanie growled in frustration. “You rat! You dirty rat. Get that thing off my...my...” And there, for lack of a word, her voice stalled.

“Your butt?” He prodded a little more. “Your tail? Sweetheart, you have such a pretty one.” He squeezed her knee, then slid his hand up several inches. The warmth of her skin seemed to welcome his touch. If anything, the temperature increased as his fingers traveled. Then he noticed her stillness and...If glares could burn, she’d have set him on fire.

“What,” he asked, “is your knee off limits?”

“No,” she replied, “but you’ve gotten awful pushy. I liked you better before.”

He yanked his hand away. This hadn’t gone like he wanted. “S-sorry.”

“Jason,” Stephanie half-turned to face him. “You want us to have a physical relationship, and I’m not opposed to that. But, let me set the pace, please.”

Maybe it was his certified genius genes, but instead of feeling butthurt, he considered her side. She hadn't grown up with a group of boisterous friends. She didn't go to public school and pass students grinding on or groping each other. His schoolmates engaged in R-rated public displays of affection. Treating Stephanie like a classmate probably wouldn't work.

“What should I do,” he asked.

“Take it slow. Remember I’ve never had a boyfriend before. My Mom thinks your kind should come with instruction manuals and pre-paid return labels.

“Ha, everyone knows girls are worse. An instruction manual for girls would take ten volumes.”

“Rule number one, boyfriend, don’t insult your girlfriend.”

“Hey,” Jason shifted closer. Close enough to catch a hint of her crazy perfume. “Look, I understand. We have a lot to learn about each other.” Heart pounding, Jason whispered, “We’ll make our rules as we go.” He leaned forward, and Stephanie met him halfway.

“Mrs. Thomas?” Alfred’s voice, at a far lower volume level than usual, came from a nearby speaker.

“Yes, Alfred?”

“The activities you asked me to watch for have commenced.”

“Oh, what are they doing?”

“I can play the audio or the full video if you wish.”

“Heavens no, I’d feel like a voyeur. Are they doing anything beyond kissing?”

“No, ma’am. They’ve already stopped and have decided to watch a movie. Oh, one moment, Master Jason and Miss Stephanie are now holding hands.”

“That’s sweet. Alfred, in the future they have a five-minute kissing allowance. Anything past that time requires an interruption.”

“Understood.”

After supper, they met up again and spent the evening outside. Still learning about each other, Stephanie asked about a normal school day. He did his best to describe it, skipping over the more lurid activities some couples indulged in. Stephanie detailed her and her mother’s exercise routines. When talk moved to their future, he had definite ideas, she, not so much.

“No college?” he asked. Ever since President Sanders set college tuition to a fair flat rate, everyone went to college. You could still earn a useless degree like Gender Studies, but you weren’t in debt for life afterward.

“Not for me. I never considered it until you asked.”

“You have plenty of time to change your mind and take the tests. Maybe we can go to college together?”

“I’d really like that, Jace.” Sometime that afternoon, he’d earned a nickname. It helped stabilize their relationship and satisfied an emotional requirement he didn’t know existed. Stephanie even admitted how much she liked it when he called her sweetheart. Maybe she had

the same needs as he? Girls, while being mysterious, nice to touch, and smelling so good, probably wanted the same things as boys. He didn't even mind that she wanted him to take it slow. Just sitting here holding her hand and rubbing knees made everything perfect. The only thing he'd like different would be if Alfred stopped with his weather forecasts.

Every time they got something going, Alfred popped up with some message about warm fronts and high pressures and extended range whatever's. No one, outside of northern Pennsylvania, really cared about the storms on Lake Erie.

It got to be a joke, but Stephanie didn't seem to mind, and he didn't either, much.

As they stepped up onto Stephanie's back porch, her grip on his hand tightened. "I need to tell you something," she said.

"Let me guess. You want me to tuck you in."

"What?" then she giggled. "No way, Mom wouldn't hurt me, but you'd be fair game. No, this is serious, Jace." She frowned and took a breath. "My father can't know we're seeing each other."

"Why not?" He'd heard stories about overprotective fathers.

Stephanie sighed. "Because I'm not allowed to have a boyfriend. Not until I'm a little older. Then everything changes."

"What does that mean?"

Stephanie sighed again and looked away. "It's one of *his* rules, and it's complicated."

"You're confusing."

"I'm sorry. Just remember, if Gene finds out, he won't allow me to see you again. Any time my father's home, I'll have to stay inside. Don't ever come over if he's home."

"I don't think I like your dad."

"As long as we like each other, nothing else matters." Stephanie turned back to face him. "We have a few more minutes, and I want a really good goodnight kiss." In the dim light from her kitchen windows, he thought her eyes shone especially bright.

This isn't spying, and I don't feel guilty...or anything else...not one bit. Natalie watched the video feed from the back porch. Jason and Stephanie said their goodnights. Uneasy thoughts accompanied the slight burn inside her chest. No one had ever wooed her.

She'd grown up in the household of her original owner, Pavlo Mogilevich, a man who spent little time with family and even less time with her. His wife, Maryska, mothered their children but spared little time for the girl she thought was her husband's *ublyudok*, bastard child. When Natali went to her for support, most often, she'd receive a lecture and rejection. Maryska bandaged cuts and scrapes, provided food and clothing, but did not love Natali.

Most of Pavlo and Maryska's children treated her like a guest who'd long overstayed her welcome. Although their oldest boy, Kyrylo, spent most of his time studying.

Once a year, on her birthday, Mariska, escorted Natali into Pavlo's presence. He'd inquire about her health and ask odd questions. The man seemed most concerned about her temperament. He'd ask Natali if she experienced anger or if she'd bled. After she'd satisfied his curiosity, Pavlo would dismiss her for another year. She'd been six months past her thirteenth birthday, friendless and confused, the day Pavlo's oldest son showed an interest in her.

Natali took her meals with the servants. Not that they had any time for her. After lunch and before the afternoon's chore assignment, she crept off to her safe spot behind the garage. Two old trees grew there, and she'd found a private space between them and the back wall of the garage. On the rare times, Mariska called for her, it took only a moment to dash around the garage, thus keeping her sanctuary hidden.

"So, this is where you hide." The voice startled Natali. She glanced up to see Kyrylo. Nearly seventeen years old, he looked a lot like his father.

"What do you want, Kyrylo?" Darn it, he must have followed her.

Grunting with effort, the older boy shimmied between the trees and dropped into a squat across from her. With his left hand, he flourished a large round object. "I brought you a *hreyppfrut*.

One of Mariska's imported white grapefruit! She tried to taste one once. The bitter-tart-sweet scent made her mouth water. Then the assistant cook swatted her away from the prep counter.

A faint whiff of the fruit tickled her nostrils. She wanted it, but she didn't trust this boy. "Why?" Her eyes darted to his, searching for a reason.

"I want us to be friends, Natali." His cajoling tone did nothing to allay her concerns. Kyrylo rotated his hand to show the perfection of his gift.

"Why?" Often the target of the younger siblings' gibes, she'd never been a part of the family. Kyrylo had remained aloof, never involving himself, until now.

The tips of Kyrylo's fingers pushed into the rind, and he expertly peeled the fruit. "Because I am a boy and you are a lovely girl. Naturally, we are attracted to each other." He separated a wedge and handed it to her.

He might take the fruit away at any moment. So, Natali snatched it from his hand and bit into it. Flavor exploded in her mouth. It was the most delicious thing she'd ever tasted. The older boy fed her a second wedge and a third. His eyes sparkled while she gobbled each piece. After the third slice, while she licked her fingers, he leaned forward and surprised her with a kiss.

The kiss wasn't so bad. Especially with the taste of grapefruit still fresh in Natali's mouth. A bite of grapefruit, then another kiss. It seemed a fair deal.

All too soon, the grapefruit ran out. Kyrylo pressed his case, demanding kisses. Without something to trade, his attentions lacked anything to interest her. One day, he offered her a small bar of American dark chocolate. She liked this even more than the grapefruit. Kyrylo sensed her interest and bartered for more than simple kisses.

Muffled words issued from the speaker, bringing Natalie back to the present. Jason gazed at Stephanie as if he were the one irrevocably smitten by brain chemistry. Perhaps he was, at least as much as humanly possible.

"When you do that," the boy said, "I think my brain's gonna melt."

"Do what?" Stephanie asked with a chuckle. "I don't want your brain to melt."

"You just did it again. That lip-biting thing."

"Oh, Jason," Stephanie soothed, "your brain's probably half puddled by now. Here, I'll give you another kiss and make you all better."

Watching her daughter exert control over the human, made Natalie proud. This was how it should always be! If events fell into place, someday after the boy became a man, he would provide a singular service. Stephanie would be free. The boy, well, the boy didn't matter.

The kiss went on a lot longer than the last. Near the end, Stephanie sagged, and faster than Natalie expected, the little Romeo caught her up.

“Are you OK?” His raw concern was sickeningly apparent.

Stephanie gasped, “My brains melted too.” After the pair moved to lean against the railing, she said, “We’re a fine pair of puddles, aren’t we?”

“Oh, well.” Natalie shook her head. So, much for Stephanie, the cold-blooded, femme fatale. The girl was just as befuddled with the boy as he with her. Still, if looked at from a human perspective, the kids were cute together. Natalie ignored the resurgent heat in her chest. She was happy for her daughter, dammit!

In between fervent kisses, the boy spoke. “I knew you were the girl for me from the moment I first saw you.”

Stephanie accepted those kisses and returned a few of her own. “I sort of liked you too. Even though all you did was stare at my boobs.”

“Well, that’s your fault.”

“My fault?” The infra-red filter allowed Natalie to watch her daughter’s eyes narrow.

“Yeah, a girl as hot as you should carry a warning sign.”

Well, that was as weird a compliment as Natalie had ever heard. Still, it was cute in an earnest teenaged boy fashion.

It didn’t displease Stephanie either because she smiled and asked, “What kind of sign?”

Jason grinned. Uh, oh, Romeo had something clever in mind. “So, Dad had one case, a guy got squished on a job, and there was a sign on this huge hydraulic press. The sign said, “WARNING, CRUSH HAZARD. That’d be the perfect sign for you.” He smiled, obviously proud.

“What!” Stephanie hissed. “Are you saying I’m fat?”

Jason’s, “I’m so clever” smile morphed into wide-eyed horror. “No!” he said, “I didn’t mean that!” The not-so-smart boy recognized his peril and tried to retreat. Stephanie, however, kept his hands trapped. He stammered, “I meant because I’m crushing on you really bad right now.”

It took a few seconds, but Stephanie visibly relaxed. “Oh, you mean like, liking someone a lot?”

Jason nodded as if his future happiness depended on it.

If Stephanie didn’t buy his explanation, Natalie would have to intervene. She laid a finger against the outdoor speaker switch.

“I get it now. Are you really crushing on me?”

“Yeah, big-time,” he sighed

“Good,” Stephanie grinned, “’cause I’m crushing on you right back.”

His eyes flashed with some new deviltry. “Good, just don’t squish me, ’kay?” This time he’d already taken a step back. Stephanie shouted. “You rat!” Romeo turned and fled into the darkness with Stephanie in hot pursuit. Laughing despite herself, Natalie stepped away from the panel. She’d have enough time to make a pot of tea.

Fifteen minutes later, the back door cycled. Without turning, Natalie spoke, “You’re ten minutes late, little miss.” Then she turned and nearly gasped in surprise. Stephanie looked as though she’d gone ten rounds with Jason. Grass stained her knees and the tips of her sneakers. Her ponytail had mostly come out of the scrunchie. From a certain point of view, it didn’t look good. “What did you and Romeo get up too out there?”

“He’s a rat. He tricked me into wrestling with him, and then he won.”

“And by the grass stains,” Natalie made a point of staring at her daughter’s knees and toes, “I can guess what he won.”

“What?” Steph bent and gaped at the stains. When she straightened, her face was bright red. “It’s not what you think, Mom, no! He, ah, he made me sit on top of him when I gave him his victory kiss.”

“Mm, hmm.” Natalie made it sound as noncommittal as possible. “I’ll make us some tea, and we can practice the *maskuvannya*.”

Natalie waited until Stephanie nodded. “Other than the wrestling match, how was your day with Jason?”

A huge smile lit Stephanie’s face. “It was wonderful, he...” Stephanie’s face fell when she realized her error. The *maskuvannya*, Ukrainian, for disguise, was the word for hiding their true selves. While Natalie had a lot of practice, Stephanie had little, and it showed.

Pitching her voice to mock, Natalie said, “You’ve just killed Jason. Are you proud of yourself?” Stephanie went white, and Natalie ground the point home. “Because of your mistake, Yevgeny will slip into their home and murder the entire family. It will be your fault.”

Crouching, Stephanie spun in place, searching for her father. The girl’s form was good. It would take a prepared and well-trained human male to defeat her. This, of course, begged the question as to how Jason defeated Stephanie.

Fortunately for them all, Gene Timms, once known as Yevgeny Timofeyev, remained on the American’s west coast, wallowing in drugs and fat American whores.

Natalie took a breath and turned back to the stove and the serenity of her tea-making ritual. “No, *lisichka*,” little fox. “My owner is not here. If he were, your slip would have doomed us both.”

“That wasn’t a fair test, Mother.” Teacups and saucers rattled as Stephanie assisted with the tea. “If Gene caught me with Jason, our *maskuvannya* would not have helped.

Natalie preheated the ceramic teapot. “You are still too easily tricked. How do you expect to survive with your mind intact? Perhaps it is your wish to become a full *marionetka*? Remember, it took nearly two decades for my mind to recover.”

“I didn’t expect to grow feelings for Jason. Those feelings make it difficult to concentrate.”

“Ha, feelings. You think you are in love?”

“No, not love, whatever that is, but something else. Being in his company makes me giddy.”

The snort of laughter burst through Natalie’s iron control. She knew all too well the pleasures that accompanied a man’s presence.

“Ha,” Stephanie crowed. “This time, Mother, it is you making the error. I know what feelings you’re talking about. True, I experience those. But there is more.” Stephanie paused in thought. “I wish you could know the more for yourself.”

Mom smiled. “Perhaps we will trade places tomorrow? Then Jason can wrestle me to the ground and steal all my kisses.”

Stephanie stopped pouring their tea. “That, mother, will not be necessary.”

Chapter Four

In the News Today: The Mennonite World Conference sponsored a worldwide silent prayer to protest genetically enhanced children.

Jason's mom asked, "What were you and Stephanie up too last night?"

Surprised, Jason glanced up from his bowl of cereal and caught Mom and Dad sharing odd grins. Best to play dumb. "Mmm? What?"

"While you were in the shower, I put a load of your clothes in the washing machine. The clothes you wore yesterday looked like you rolled around in the grass. If Stephanie looked the same, she might have some explaining to do."

Dad chuckled.

"I teased her, and she chased me. We wrestled a little. She's a lot stronger than she looks."

"I trust you behaved yourself?" Dad asked.

In Dad's world, misbehaving covered a lot of ground. Doing so with a girl narrowed it down to just one possibility. Mom and Dad both waited, and their intense regard made him lightheaded. "Do we really have to talk about this?" he pleaded.

"Shirley? Dad asked, with one raised eyebrow.

"We can discuss it later," she replied.

Jason exhaled.

Mom tapped a finger on the table. "There is something else we need to talk about. Have you sent the invitations for your birthday party?"

Crap! He'd forgotten. "Not yet."

"I think," Dad said, "You should skip today's visit with Stephanie. At least until you get those emails finished."

Once Dad took a stance, he didn't like to change his mind. Unless Jason had a clever counterargument. Dad, the lawyer, loved a good debate. The problem was he didn't have a good argument. He gave it his best shot. "What if I only want to invite Stephanie?"

Mom and Dad exchanged a glance, engaging in their silent communication. Mom turned back to Jason and said, "Wouldn't 'Nerd Boy, the untouchable' want his friends to meet Stephanie?"

Jason swallowed. They knew about his nickname!

Following up, Dad said, “That one boy, what’s his name? Corey?” Mom nodded to Dad. “He’s the bully who started that ‘Nerd Boy’ nonsense. Make sure you invite him.”

Later that morning, Jason sat at his desk, exchanging texts with Stephanie, and writing invitations. A knock on his door frame took him by surprise.

Mom said, “Your father wants to talk to you—in his office.”

With the words, “in his office,” Jason’s stomach clenched. No one entered Dad’s home office without an invitation. Only official and often unpleasant conversations took place in there. Given the timing, it had to be about Stephanie. He tapped out a quick message, “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Unease built as he trudged downstairs.

Dad sat behind his desk. He glanced up and smiled. “Close the door and have a seat. I’ll be right with you.” While Dad busied himself, Jason studied the framed pictures of himself and mom hanging on the wall. There always seemed to be one or two new snapshots. Finally, Dad finished. “When I acquired my first girlfriend, your grandfather talked to me, just like I’m doing with you.”

Jason nodded.

“There are two rules you never break. The first is to always treat your girlfriends with respect. Never push for something they’re unwilling to give. My law firm defends a lot of creeps who don’t respect the word, ‘No.’ Second, don’t surprise your mother and me with a grandchild. I expect you to be smart.”

“Dad! We’re not...I mean, we haven’t. Look, it doesn’t matter anyway ’cause she’s not that kind of girl.”

His father’s lips curled up in what might have been a smile, but instead, they formed into the same pinched expression he used whenever Mom did something unwittingly funny. Dad didn’t dare laugh at Mom. Jason’s face warmed when he realized what his father’s hidden amusement implied. How dare Dad think something like that about Steph—

His father must have sensed the impending explosion because he reached into a drawer and tossed a sealed package across the desk. Jason’s eyes focused on the box...of condoms. Oh, he’d seen them in stores, and health class covered their use. Like every other boy in the class, he snickered when the coach rolled one over a banana.

Dad pointed at the box. “Those are for you. Not because I think anything negative about Stephanie. No, they are for you because I *know* how clever you are. Even if you don’t want to have sex today, you will soon enough. When you do, no matter what, put one on.”

His face still warm, although now from embarrassment, Jason gulped and picked up the box. “Ah, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now don’t think your mother and I are giving you the green light to run around spreading pollen. Those condoms are more of an insurance policy. We’d prefer you to wait until you’re older.”

“How much older?”

“The age of majority in Pennsylvania is eighteen.”

A sudden thought made Jason grin. “Dad? Did Grandpa buy these for you too?”

The question made his father laugh. “Yep, even the same brand.” Dad rubbed his chin, then shrugged. Leaning forward, he spoke in a hushed voice. “Let me tell you a story about your grandfather. Way before he found his first girlfriend, he bought his own condoms, via the old postal service. The best part is he purchased a ‘He-Man Condom Sampler’ and ended up with a

huge box full of condoms. One hundred and forty-four in total. It scandalized your great-grandmother.”

“I don’t know, sweetie. Going to a party seems risky.” Mom blew on her steaming cup of tea.

Since meeting Jason and his outgoing mother, Stephanie realized how reclusive her mother was. “It’s only a few more people, Mom.”

“A few more boys, you mean, and boys are just men with even less self-control.”

“It’s a birthday party, Mom, not an orgy.” As soon as the words left Stephanie’s mouth, regret set in. Mom had valid reasons for her beliefs.

But Mom laughed and waved at Stephanie's outfit. “Even though you're dressed for one?”

A week earlier, Mrs. Thomas took Stephanie aside. She’d once dated a musician with music tastes like Jason’s, and she’d kept a favorite outfit from those days. Perhaps Stephanie might try it on?

The outfit, a leather mini-skirt and cotton T-shirt, fit quite well. Mom snickered when she found Stephanie trying it on, then returned with a pair of fishnet stockings. “If you’re going to dress like a trollop, you’ll need these.”

“So,” Mom continued their conversation. “How many boys will be there?”

“Just two of Jason’s friends.”

“Three boys, then? And you dressed like a party girl? It won’t be good if Jason starts showing you off. It made me extremely uncomfortable when Pavlo did it to me.”

“But Jason isn't showing me off.”

All Mom had to do was raise an eyebrow.

“Well, maybe a little.”

Mom’s expression didn’t change.

“Well, so what if he wants to show me off? He says I’m the prettiest girl in the world. His friends aren’t going to do anything.”

“Let’s hope not. How’s your bond coming along?”

Her bond to Jason was the entire reason for their relationship. Although, instead of Mom’s original idea, she’d developed a human-like affection for him.

Mom didn’t believe it, but Mom didn’t believe pair bonding was real. Convincing her otherwise wouldn’t be easy. “I don’t know. It’s difficult to describe. I miss him when he’s not around, and I’m crazy happy when we're together.”

With one eyebrow raised, Mom pressed for more. “And what else?”

She knew exactly what Mom meant. “All right!” Stephanie lifted her hands in mock surrender. “Sure, there’s some, like when we’re kissing, but it’s not just about sex. I like him for him, not just for his genitals.”

“Harrumph,” Mom tossed back her tea. “What you describe sounds like a Hollywood romance movie. As for me, I only care about Gene’s genitals. He’s lucky I cannot remove them for my use.”

Before Mom changed the subject, Stephanie quipped. “We could call a taxidermist.”

It wasn't hard to surprise her mother, but Stephanie set a record with her suggestion. Mom's eyes went wide, then a corner of her mouth quirked up, and she chuckled like an over-the-top movie villain. With a flourish, Mom lifted an imaginary phone handset to her head. "Please, Mr. Taxidermist, mount this penis for me so I may mount it later." Her grin matched the chuckle.

"It's beyond icky, Mom, but would it work?"

"I don't know, our addictions are complicated." Mom pushed her seat back from the table. "I asked about your bond to Jason because it may cause a problem."

Tilting her head, Stephanie said, "How?"

"Ah," Mom said. "You forgot our loyalty gene. What if one of those other boys gets fresh."

"They're his *friends*, they aren't going to..." Stephanie's words trailed off. What if Mom was right? "What should I do?"

"Wear your sneakers. Kicking someone while wearing pumps is a bad idea."

Mrs. Thomas met Stephanie at the back door. "Don't you look cute! Turn around now. Let me see how everything fits."

Tugging the skirt down, Stephanie obliged.

"Hmm," Mrs. Thomas mused, "Oh, I love the black sneakers and fishnets, but my old shirt must have shrunk, I don't remember it fitting so tight."

Stephanie reached for the door. "Should I change?"

Laughing, Mrs. Thomas pulled Stephanie towards the counter. "Heavens, no, you're fine."

"As long as you're sure," Stephanie said and tugged her skirt down again.

"Nervous, dear?"

"A bit."

"Of course, you are. No offense, but I wonder why your parents homeschooled you without any socialization. Look, Jason cares about you. You know that, don't you?"

Stephanie's stomach fluttered. No matter what Mom thought, her and Jason's feelings were real.

Face hot, Stephanie nodded. "I care about him too."

"I know you do. Both of you have smitten written all over. Jason's a good boy and won't allow anything bad to happen. But if you feel outnumbered, come and hang out with me."

"Thank you, Mrs. Thomas."

"Don't worry, if the boys get too rowdy, I'll send Robert down. He'll glower them into submission."

"Thank you, Mrs.—"

"Stephanie, if you want to thank me, just keep on being yourself. Now, before you jump into the mosh pit, there is one boy you'll want to keep an eye on. His name is Corey, and he's always been jealous of Jason. Has Jason mentioned his nickname? No, well, you'll want to hear this ..."

In honor of their reunion, each teen wore a T-shirt proclaiming their allegiance to thrash metal. Of all the music forms from the previous century, thrash metal never died out. True, it had far fewer fans than the current mumble-metal craze. Every few years, promoters organized another "Clash of the Titans" tour. Holographic representations of Slayer and Megadeth headlined the show. Cover bands for Testament, Anthrax, and other legends of thrash filled out the lineup. Inveterate thrash purists kept Metallica out of the lineups.

Seth wore his most prized possession, a battered 1993 vintage Megadeath, *Countdown to Extinction* T-shirt. Corey wore a brand-new T-shirt with the coiled snake from Metallica's Black album. True to his metal soul, Jason wore his most precious Slayer T-shirt.

The three boys had only been alone for a few minutes before Corey badgered Jason.

"What's this bull Seth's spewing about you having a girlfriend?"

Jason glanced at Seth, who shook his head slightly. They both knew how Corey behaved.

Seth said, "Lay off, Corey, it's his birthday."

"Break, hell. I say if Nerd Boy has a girlfriend, she's either ugly, a heifer, or both. Sorry, Nerd Boy, but happy birthday anyway."

"Ah, thanks? You guys want some lemonade? Mom made it this morning."

"Sure, said Seth, "Your mom makes the best."

Corey cringed. "Lemonade? Jeez, guys, can this party suck any harder? Nerd Boy, where's your dad stash the booze?"

"It's upstairs in the kitchen cabinet closest to the dining room. Help yourself, but don't get caught. Dad will flip out."

Seth walked over to the wall terminal. "Guys, I made a cool playlist. It starts with Testament and White Zombie." He thumbed a chip into the slot.

Does testosterone have a scent? Stephanie's nostrils twitched as she walked down the steps. One hand on the handrail, the other held a tray of chips and drinks. That undefined scent mingled with perspiration from active young men. The combination tickled her nose and sent waves of tingles to places she'd rather they not go.

The music, a semi-sensual groove of drums and guitars, made her want to dance. Although the lyrics didn't make sense. What the heck was an Astro-Creep?

Jason whirled into view, his arms windmilling. He noticed her and tried to stop, but momentum pushed him against a taller, thin boy. The thin boy gawked at her before catching a third boy's forearm against his temple. Like dominos, Jason, thin-boy, and the forearm swinger, tumbled together into a sweating, writhing heap. The stereo speakers boomed a repeated chorus, "*More human than human.*" Stephanie didn't know if she should dance, laugh, or administer first aid. Fortunately, the always alert Alfred muted the song to a reasonable level.

After setting the tray down, she turned to the pileup. Mindful of her skirt, Stephanie bent and pulled Jason to his feet.

"Thanks, babe," he said and pulled her against him.

Babe? That's new—his lips pressed against hers, and all those tingles struck home.

Some undetermined time later, the stereo switched to another metal track, the bass drum a steady, thump, thump, thump. A singer, different from the last, crooned about a boy and a girl who were "made for loving" each other.

She and Jason swayed together, not quite dancing, but close. His arms crushed her against him, and his jeans, the ones she liked so much, chafed her thighs. Someone coughed, and Stephanie blinked her eyes open. Jason's warm brown eyes looked back, holding promises for later. Across the room, forearm-swingers and thin-boy snickered.

Smiling, Jason waited while Stephanie unwrapped her right leg from behind his left. Knowing Jason's friends had watched the whole thing made her really uncomfortable. *Thanks, Mom, for the timely yet obscure warning.*

Jason tilted his head and squeezed her hand once. She nodded and squeezed back. Together, they turned to face his friends.

“All right, which of you jokers decided to play Kiss?” Jason huffed. Neither boy spoke, but the thin boy wore the biggest grin. Stephanie decided she liked the song. Maybe she and Jason were made for each other?

“Stephanie, the guilty looking goober is Seth. We’ve known each other for a long time. I call his mom, ‘Mom.’”

“Hi, Seth.” She said to thin-boy.

“Stephanie,” Seth gave her a warm smile. His eyes flicked up to hers and stayed there. She awarded Seth a point. He continued. “You don’t know how glad I am to meet you.”

Turning to forearm-swinger, Jason said, “This is Corey.”

So, this is the boy who started that awful nickname. Not bad looking, but something caught her eye, and she glanced down. *Eek, it can’t be comfortable for a guy to wear pants so tight.* Corey’s eyes never shifted away from her boobs. “Hi, Corey,” Stephanie said. Besides his prolonged staring at her boobs, she deducted a second point because he wore those pants.

“Hello,” he replied, finally glancing up. “Are you going to mosh with us?”

“Is that what you were doing when I came down? Can I watch instead?” Stephanie tugged her skirt down. “I’m not dressed for jumping around.”

“Believe me,” Seth said, “we noticed.”

Stephanie tugged her skirt down again. The motion drew all the boys’ eyes. She sighed; Mom had tried to warn her.

The boys played a complicated three-way game of Rock-Paper-Scissors, and Corey won. He selected Metallica’s *Fade to Black*. The song started off with a beautiful guitar progression that built to a majestic culmination of sound. It was beautiful, but the lyrics told a sad story. She’d never heard anything like it.

Seth went next, and he selected Megadeth’s *Hanger 18*. Unlike *Fade to Black*, this song started fast and featured a gravelly-voiced singer. The song told a confusing tale about cryogenics and computers inside an aircraft hangar. However weak the lyrics, the guitar players seemed very skilled.

Then came Jason’s turn. He chose something called *Angel of Death* by Slayer. The same band whose name was on the shirts she and Jason wore. She’d thought the name might be an abstraction. Perhaps intended to remind listeners of their inherent humanity. Nope. The song started with a blood-curdling scream and was all about death and genocide. It was horrible. She lasted about thirty seconds before fleeing upstairs and away from the terrible, terrible song.

Of course, Jason followed. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Stephanie gave him her best smile while suppressing a shudder. “I’m just gonna hang out with your Mom for a bit.” She pushed him towards the stairs. “Go have fun.”

Once in the kitchen, Shirley handed her a tall glass of lemonade. “Dreadful, isn’t it?”

“Why?” Stephanie wanted to question everything about that awful song but didn’t know where to begin.

“Boys and their rebelliousness. Our,” Mrs. Thomas caught Stephanie’s eye before continuing, “Jason needed to rebel more than most. If it helps, I think you’ve already fixed him. His musical tastes will catch up.”

The lemonade caught up to her. Instead of using the powder room off the foyer, Stephanie ran upstairs to Jason's bathroom. It was a little out of the way, but the boys weren't using it. After she washed her hands, she took a quick peak inside Jason's bedroom. Dirty clothes lay scattered about. It took less than a minute to pick them up. While straightening his bed, footsteps scuffed on the hall carpet. The steps didn't have Mr. Thomas's booming stride, nor did they have Mrs. Thomas's quiet, purposeful steps. Maybe Jason wanted to sneak up on her? Not that she'd mind. Nope, she'd welcome a boyfriend ambush.

Instead of Jason, Corey appeared in the doorway. His smile said he'd hoped to find her. "Hey," he said, his eye's flicking across her chest and legs. Another facet of Mom's warning became clear, being alone with a boy, other than Jason, made her extremely uncomfortable. She didn't need to run away, but Corey gave her the weirdest vibes.

"If you're looking for the bathroom, it's across the hall." Not that she thought he wanted the bathroom; no, he'd come looking for her.

"In a minute," he said, then took a step into Jason's room. Corey's head swiveled until it locked on Jason's bed. "Is this where you guys do it?"

Stephanie's mouth dropped open. She recovered fast and, ignoring the weird vibes, turned to face Corey. "That isn't any of your business."

Smirking, Corey said, "We share all the dirty details." His eyes studied her "heavy metal" hairdo. "I'm dying to hear all about yours."

Crossing her arms, she said, "I don't believe you. Jason wouldn't."

Instead of contradicting her, Corey stepped over to Jason's comm display. As usual, it displayed a high resolution "selfie" of the old Mars rover, Opportunity. She never understood why Jason admired the photo so much.

Corey said, "How can you like a little nerd like Jason?" He didn't turn to watch her until he finished his question.

Oh, she didn't like Corey one bit. She wouldn't feel guilty if he tried something, and her reflexes kicked him into next week. Time to go on the offensive. "You mean Nerd Boy the Untouchable?" Just as she'd expected, Corey's mouth fell open when she repeated that disgusting nickname. "Lucky for me, Nerd Boy turned out to be very touchable." She smiled while gauging the distance between them. Just in case her reflexes needed the room. "I touch him every chance I get. Too bad for you. He's all mine now."

"What?" Corey asked. Surprise and confusion writ plain on his face.

"You had your chance. He's with me now."

"What are you talking about?"

She'd had enough of this conversation. A lean to the left, then when Corey matched her, she *moved* to the right, flowing past the too-slow boy. On her way downstairs, she worried what to tell Jason about her conversation with Corey.

Ten minutes passed before Corey returned to the family room. She and Jason shared the recliner. Which, in this skirt, took some careful arrangements. Jason cheered her on while she demolished Seth in the racing game.

For supper, Dad fired up the grill and cooked to order. That is if you ordered a hot dog or a hamburger. Seth asked for a steak and got a hamburger. Mom dished out her homemade potato

salad. Last night, she and Stephanie teamed up to bake his birthday cake, frozen banana with dark chocolate buttercream icing. When they lit the candles, everyone sang happy birthday, although Stephanie pretended that she didn't know the words.

After the cake, Stephanie told Jason she'd go home early and give him more time with his friends. He walked her to the gate, and they kissed goodnight. Then feeling guilty because he'd rather stay with her, he hurried back to his friends.

"Dude," Seth high fived Jason. "You won."

"What did I win?" He pulled out a chair and sat.

"Everything. Every contest in history. Stephanie is a keeper." He glanced over at Corey. Usually outspoken to the point of rudeness, Corey had remained quiet for most of the day. "What do you think, Corey?"

"Holy shit," mused Corey. Mom and Dad were inside cleaning up the kitchen, so it looked like he'd gotten away with swearing. "Seriously, Jason, I...I apologize. Stephanie is awesome. At first, I didn't believe it, then I had to believe it. The hottest redhead I've ever met is into Nerd Boy, the—no longer—untouchable. All that's left is for you to spill the dirty details."

"What?" Jason, who'd basked in the unexpected praise, sat up straight.

"Pictures, man. Where are they? A chick that hot had to have sent you an f-ton of nudes. Break 'em out so we can drool over them. I already hate you, let me despise you."

Seth spoke up. "This ain't cool."

Jason waved it off. "It's not a problem. Even if I had pictures, I wouldn't show them to anyone. There ain't no way I'd do anything to betray her trust."

"Wait," Corey regained his snarky smirk, "I get it now—you ain't banging her. Nerd Boy ain't getting any of that. Have you even gotten past first base?" He didn't wait for an answer and turned to Seth. "Can you believe it, Nerd Boy ain't tapping that ass."

He'd had it. Jason stood. "I've heard enough, Corey, it's time for you to go." Turning to Seth, he added, "It's been great seeing you again. Give your Mom my love."

"Will do." Seth turned to Corey, who hadn't budged. "C'mon, man, let's go."

But Corey continued. "Listen to me, I can see she's into you. All you got to do is ask, and she'll...GAH!!"

While Corey spoke, Jason tipped the chair over, spilling his "friend" onto the wood deck. He hit hard, although not as hard as Jason wanted. "Get out," Jason said, his voice cold. They'd fought more than once over the years, usually with Corey getting the better of it. Not tonight, though.

Corey jumped to his feet and threw a jab. Jason sidestepped and swung a left cross into Corey's ribs. He followed it up with a stunning uppercut that rocked Corey back onto his ass. Seth jumped in between the two former friends.

"Guys," Seth hissed, watching the back door. "You're gonna have parents out here any second." Turning to Corey, Seth bent and helped him stand. "Time to go, asshole."

Corey grunted and spit a mouthful of blood onto the deck. "Fuck both of you," he growled and stumbled towards the stairs.

Seth shook Jason's hand. "Man, I'm sorry. I'll get him home. Take care of Stephanie. She's worth whatever it takes."

Jason followed them to Seth's car and waited until they left.

When he returned to the backyard, the sounds of splashing water came from the deck. Dad stood there with the hose, rinsing the blood away. His eyes followed Jason, and the grim set of his jaw spoke volumes.

“Uh, Dad, uh, I...I’ll do that. It was my fault.”

Dad chased the last of the blood from the decking and turned to Jason. “Your mother and I witnessed the whole thing. You made me proud.”

“I did?”

“You did. Bullies have no place in a civilized society. Oh, they exist, and sometimes men like us will deal with them. Let me give you a quote.

“People sleep peaceably in their beds at night because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.”

Dad and his quotes. He read a lot of military science fiction and seemed to have a quote for every situation. “Thanks, Dad. I guess I better go and apologize to Mom.”

“I’ll handle your mother. You have someone just as important to speak with.” Dad gestured towards the house next door. Jason turned, Stephanie stood in the gateway, arms crossed as if hugging herself. “I think your girlfriend might have watched as well. If so, she may think she’s somehow at fault. Talk to her, but don’t let her do anything foolish.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

They met halfway across the yard. The sun was low on the horizon and cast long shadows. He didn’t like her closed posture and held out his hands. Stephanie took them, and he pulled her into his arms.

“I saw the whole thing, Jace.”

He loved hearing her use his nickname. “I’m sorry ‘bout that.”

“It’s all my fault. You lost a friend because of me.”

“Nah, I didn’t lose anything of value.”

“If you want pictures, I can send you some tonight. The other thing...I can’t. I would, but...I just can’t.”

“Sweetheart, no. I don’t need pictures. As for the other thing, even if we wait until we marry, that’s fine with me.” He’d slipped and used the “M” word and could see it startled her.

“What? Marry? Who said anything...? No, we can’t...do that either.”

“Steph, sweetheart, I was just saying it’s fine if we wait that long. I wasn’t proposing.” *Not yet, anyway.*

“Oh...you scared me.”

“Yeah, I’m Mister Scary.”

Her right hand pulled free of his and thumped against his chest. Like all her thumps, it packed a good bit of oomph. Sometimes she’d notice his wince and offer to kiss the spot and make it better. Now, though, was not the time.

“Sweetheart, Seth and I are close. His mom treated us like we were her own. Corey was a latecomer. Other groups bounced him out, and he hooked up with us. Probably because we were less judgmental. He’d always been an ass and never changed. Nothing that happened tonight was your fault. A friend doesn’t ask...what he asked about.”

She wrapped him up in a rib-cracking hug. “Are you sure?”

“I...can’t...breathe.” He joked, and she almost thumped him again. This time he caught her hand and kissed her knuckles. “Yes, I’m certain. Look, you’re way more important to me than Corey.

“Really?” she sniffled.

“Hey, now. None of that.” Turning his head, Dad had hung up the hose and gone inside. “The deck’s empty, wanna snuggle on the hammock and see how many weather forecasts we can rack up?”

She nodded. Darn, Jason knew, he’d won the prize of a lifetime.

Sometime after Alfred’s third or fourth weather report. Dad stuck his head outside. “If you two will behave, I’ll tell Alfred to put a sock in it.”

Later, after he kissed her goodnight for the final time of the evening, Jason caught her hand. “Steff, I don’t deserve you.” As it turned out, they had time for another goodnight kiss.

“All right, daughter, why are you crying? Did that...that boy do something to hurt you?”

“No, mamma, nothing like that.” Sniffle.

“Then what?”

“He told me he doesn’t deserve me.” Sob, sniffle.

“Oh,” Mom shrugged, “well, that’s true enough. Wash your face and come watch the tri-d with me. Masterpiece Theater is rerunning *The Notebook*, and I love the ending.”

Chapter Five

In the news today: Today at the United Nations, Russia and China joined forces to veto a resolution to ban all genetic slavery.

“Congratulations, Son, you are now a licensed driver.” Dad clapped Jason on the back while he nodded towards Stephanie. “I suppose you’ll be wanting the car, hmm? Maybe take someone on a date?” Across the deck, the ladies occupied the big umbrella-covered patio table. Stephanie waved when he caught her eye.

“Sure, Dad, just as soon as you give me some of my allowance.” For keeping up with his chores, Jason accumulated a weekly allowance. Although Dad kept the money in a separate savings account, “For college expenses.”

Occasionally, Dad threatened to pay Jason as a contractor and bill him for using the family power tools. Dad said, “I can write it off on my taxes.” One couldn’t be sure if Dad joked or not. He was a lawyer, after all.

Dad dipped into his front pocket and brought out a credit chip. “I have it right here. You’ll need it to pay your share of the car insurance.”

“Robert,” Mom chided, “don’t tease your son.”

Rolling his eyes, where his wife couldn’t see, Dad handed over the chip. “Don’t worry about the insurance, we’ll cover it until you find a job.”

Jason had held credit chips before, but they’d always been temporary issues. This one was his. To test it, Jason slid his thumb across the sensor, and the small holographic display lit with his name, Jason T. Thomas, and a six-digit verification number. The number changed every thirty seconds. “Thanks, Mom and Dad.” Mom stood and hugged him, Dad shook his hand, and Stephanie, with a little half frown, crossed her arms and legs. They’d been together long enough to read each other’s moods. Something bothered her.

Rather than discuss it in front of his parents, Jason thought they needed some privacy. “Hey, sweetheart, want to take a walk?” Stephanie gave him a small nod. “Mom, Dad, excuse us, please.” He offered his hand, and they took a walk.

Mom and Dad’s voices started up as he and Stephanie turned the corner towards the front of the house. One or both of them would grill him later.

They made it to his covered front porch and the old metal porch glider. Dad picked the glider up at a yard sale in, of all places, McConnellsburg, Pennsylvania. After a complete refurbishment, it became one of his parent's favorite spots.

He asked, "Want to talk about it?"

Stephanie crossed her arms, "There isn't anything to talk about."

Uh oh, something had her upset. "Are you sure, 'cause it looks like something's bothering you."

"I knew this was coming. We don't have to break up on my account."

"Whoa, back up, and tell me why we'd need to break up."

"You've got your license now. You want to go on dates. I get it, it's *normal*." He noted an extra sneer in the way she pronounced "normal."

"Sorry, sweetheart, but I still don't get it."

"Ugh!" She threw up her hands. "Fine, I'll use small words. Mom only allows me to visit you here. I can't go anywhere else. That means no dates."

"Oh," Did she really think he'd break up with her? "This is because of your dad, isn't it?"

Oops, that set her off. Stephanie huffed and slid to the far end of the glider. "How many times do I have to remind you, Gene, isn't my dad? You have a dad. I have a jerk who impregnated my mother."

"Sorry!" They'd discussed this before. "What do you think I'm going to do?"

"Find another girl, go on dates with her, and make me girlfriend number two."

"The proper term is 'Side Chick.' But I ain't interested in another girlfriend. I can barely handle you." He thought this would elicit a smile or maybe even a chuckle. It didn't.

"Why are you so stupid?"

"I don't think loyalty is stupid. Wait, is this your way to tell me you want to see other guys?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

Then he got it. Stephanie was experiencing a "Woman's Problem." Health class hinted about them. What no one ever told him was how to handle them. Sometimes when Mom didn't feel well, Dad offered to rub her back. Hey, he was Jason, the caring and concerned boyfriend, he'd power through this!

"Sweetheart, I understand. You don't feel well. Can I give you a back rub?"

At first, he thought he'd pulled it off. He'd rub Steff's back, and everything would go back to normal.

"You're such a boy! I'm trying to help you."

"You always say that like there's something wrong with being a boy. What's wrong with me wanting to help you."

"I don't need your help." With those words, she stood and ran home, crying.

Two minutes later, Mom and Dad exited through the front door demanding an explanation. He tried to explain, but his parents hadn't known about her dad's restrictions. It got dicey then as Mom and Dad discussed if Jason should even see Stephanie.

Two days had passed since Stephanie's blow-up. He'd sent text after text, but she hadn't replied. At first, he thought her father came home, but there hadn't been a sign of him either. Jason sat out back, ostensibly for the fresh air but really because he'd hoped to spot a sign of Stephanie.

“Oh, Jason!”

He instantly recognized Stephanie’s voice, but not the new lilt in her voice. One of the internet stories he wasn’t supposed to know about had used the term, “a come-hither look.” One glance at Stephanie provided a graphic definition. She stood between the gateposts, one hand twisting a lock of hair. With the other, she crooked a finger in a “come to me” gesture. This was just the start of the sensory overload. Instead of her normal skirt, the brief strip of red tartan around her hips barely covered anything. There wasn’t any way she could bend over wearing it. Just thinking about it made him sweat. To top it off, she wore a white button-down shirt knotted just below her boob...chest. He forced himself to think, “chest.”

“Oh, boy,” Jason mumbled. Speaking louder, he said, “I’ll be right there, sweetheart.” Then he remembered Alfred’s video pickups. Mom would freak if she saw Stephanie dressed like this. Fortunately, the camera currently pointed towards the back yard. He hurried.

Just before the camera swung towards Stephanie, Jason yanked her behind the gate. Laughing, Stephanie pulled it with her. When they stopped, the pair occupied a nice private wedge-shaped space between the fence, the gate, and the rear wall of her house. All in all, they had a snug little area here. The kind of space perfect for teenaged mischief.

“Ohhh, Jason,” Stephanie cooed. The lilt even more pronounced. “You’re such a naughty boy, sneaking me in here with you.” She stepped close, an exaggerated sway to her hips, and stumbled on the uneven ground. Reacting quickly, Jason caught her up, although he had difficulty finding safe places for his hands. Even the cloth-covered parts didn’t offer any safety.

Unfazed, Stephanie steadied herself. “What do you think?” she asked, twisting her hips and flipping up the side of her skirt.

“Mom would ground me for life, just thinking about what I’m thinking.”

Eyes flashing, Stephanie hissed, “You’re supposed to be thinking about me!” Then she smiled, and that come-hither lilt came back. “Does it give you any ideas?”

“Um,” there really wasn’t anything other than that one thing. “You mean that thing we aren’t supposed to do.”

“Uh, huh.” Both of her hands pressed against his chest, then slowly trailed down to his waist. “I think you should try something. You might get a surprise.”

At this moment, a surprise would be finding out she wore underwear. “Sweetheart, I’m not complaining, but are you sure about this?”

She arched her back, pressing her shoulders against the fence. “Jason,” she purred and licked her lips. He’d seen her do the same after Dad served up a particularly juicy burger.

Will power dwindling, he tried one last diversion. “Are you feeling okay? You’re all flushed.” Small beads of sweat dotted her brow.

“Oh, I’m hot.” The way she said it made him gulp. “And, you’re exactly what the doctor ordered.”

His knees trembled.

She gave him another crooked finger, and like a man under a spell, Jason stepped into her arms. Their lips touched, and Stephanie pulled him close.

They skipped the small gentle kisses and jumped right into a full-on open-mouth slobber fest. Stephanie wasn’t like any other girl. Besides her impossible eye color, she was always warm to the touch. Kissing her or snuggling with her, heck, just touching her felt wonderful. Now, maybe because of their shared excitement, she felt feverish. He felt it through her clothes. Even worse, he felt her heat through his shorts. One last sliver of restraint remained.

He broke the kiss; his lips numb instead of tingly. “Ah, Steph, you know that thing we, err, you can’t do, ahh this...we should take a break.” Where was Alfred’s weather reports when they needed them?

“But Jason, don’t you want me?” she pouted for show then bent towards his neck. Instead of the expected brush of lips, teeth clamped against his shoulder. She bit far harder than any time before. Hard enough, he feared, to draw blood.

“Ow,” he hissed, twisting away. One of Stephanie’s legs wrapped around the back of his thigh, trapping him. He tried a stern voice. “Steph, you’re hurting me.”

“Oh, poor baby,” she husked, then nuzzled his neck in a far less aggressive fashion. “Let Steffi kiss it better.”

Her burning hot lips pressed against his neck. A brief rasp of tongue followed. Behind him, Steff’s heel pressed the back of his thigh, pulling his groin against her. One of her hands dipped low and squeezed. He followed suit, and a throaty gasp told him she welcomed the contact. Jason’s pulse pounded; this was it! His self-control sounded abandon ship and leaped overboard. Stephanie writhed against him, her hands pressed down on his shoulders, lifting herself up and—the back door to her house opened, footsteps scuffed across the porch, and a woman called out, “Stephanie! Get back inside, right this instant.” Jason tried to turn to see who spoke, but Stephanie held him pinned against her.

“Ah, but Mom...” she whined.

“But nothing, little miss.”

“Mom, just two more minutes, please?”

“No!” The word carried all the finality a mother could bring. “I’ll give you ten seconds to say goodbye to your boyfriend, but that’s it.” Footsteps tapped across the porch, but the back door didn’t cycle shut.

Like a leaky balloon, Stephanie sagged against him. “I’ve gotta go,” she said.

“When can I see you again?” Jason panted. His heart pounded; it was right there!

“Another day, maybe two.” She kissed him, a far more tender kiss this time. Warm fingers traced along his jaw. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.” They kissed again, although it was a sad kind of kiss, like an apology or something.

“Wait here until Mom, and I go inside.” It was the last thing she said before slipping away.

Two days later, Alfred announced, “Miss Stephanie is inbound.” Jason flew out the door and met her halfway across his yard. This time she wore a normal skirt and T-shirt. If anything appeared different, it was her downcast eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but she pressed a finger against his lips. “I’m sorry,” her voice low but clear, “I took advantage of you.”

He nodded. The schools always harped about consent. “It’s cool, I consented. What happened?”

“Wait,” she held a hand up. “I’ll tell you, but first, do your parents know?”

“Are you kidding? They’d skin me alive.”

“Whew,” she breathed. By mutual agreement, they sat on the edge of the hammock under the tree and away from Alfred’s microphones. “Did you ever have the flu really bad? Bad enough to say or do things you shouldn’t?”

Brows furrowed, he thought about it. “No, but I’ve heard it can happen.”

“It was like that for me. Mom grounded me, but I snuck out, and...well, you know what happened.”

“You’re better now?”

“Everything’s back to normal.” Her eyes locked on his. “Especially those things I can’t do. They’re still off-limits.”

“It’s cool.”

Green eyes searched his. “I think you mean it.” Then her eyes narrowed. “Why aren’t you mad? I was plenty mad when Mom interrupted us.”

“A couple reasons. One, I’m not ready to be a father. If I got you pregnant, Mom and Dad would kill me. Two, let’s just say I’ve slept great the last two nights.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You weren’t the only one overly free with your hands. Some things are no longer mysteries.”

“You didn’t!”

Jason affected his most solemn voice. “I regret nothing.”

“You, you rat!”

“Hey, you wouldn’t believe how fast I fell asleep the last couple of nights.” He affected a dreamy tone of voice. “I owe it all to you.”

“You are such a rat. And I can’t believe you’re telling me about...that.”

“Have I told you about my insomnia? It requires frequent treatments.”

“If you didn’t have a guilty mind, you’d fall asleep easier.”

“If I didn’t have a smoking hot girlfriend, I’d be able to sleep on my stomach again.” This earned him a thump. Stephanie’s cheeks were bright red. “Did I embarrass you?”

“No, not really. Not after what happened. You’re a boy, and it’s my fault, anyway.”

Jason glanced down. “You weren’t yourself. If anything, I took advantage of you.”

“Come here,” she said. Jason turned, and Stephanie pulled his head to hers. “Someday,” she whispered, “I’ll make all this up to you.” Her lips pressed against his, stifling any reply he might make.

Cold, merciless green eyes flicked up from her board and stared into his. Her nostrils flared as she prepared to speak. “B-3,” said Stephanie.

“Hit,” Jason replied with a wince. This shot landed near the end of his aircraft carrier.

Say what you want about Stephanie. She was the sweetest, most affectionate, and heartbreakingly beautiful girl in the world. He’d do anything for her, and she for him. But teach her to play Battleship, and she turned into Chester Nimitz defending the Pacific Fleet.

Her eyes flicked down, and she placed a peg to mark her successful attack.

“H-8,” Jason said.

This time a self-satisfied smile accompanied those cold, cold eyes. “Miss,” she said

“Crap!” he exploded. Time for a distraction. “Hey, remember when we talked about photographs? I’d love to have a picture of you wearing that little red skirt.”

Nimitz melted back into Stephanie, who chuckled. “I think Mom locked it away. She was kind of mad I snuck one of her skirts.”

“Wait, a second.” This was a concept he needed to confirm. “That tiny skirt belongs to your mom? Can she still fit into it?”

“Sure, Mom and I are exactly the same size.”

“Oh, my goodness! Just like Seth said, ‘I really won everything.’”

“What are you rambling about.”

“There’s an old saying. Kind of a legend. If you want to know what your girlfriend will look like when she’s older, look at her mother. If your Mom still fits into that little skirt, chances are, you will too at the same age.”

“B-2,” Nimitz was back, and there was blood in the water.

“Hit.”

“Stephanie,” Mom called down from upstairs. “Can you stay for supper?”

“I’ll call and ask, but probably.”

“Ask your mother to come over for supper. We’re having spaghetti, and I made a lot.”

Quiet so his mother couldn’t hear, Jason said. “Tell your mom to wear that little red skirt.”

Stephanie rolled her eyes. He’d probably pay for it later.

Jason reached and handed Stephanie the family room handset.

“Hi Mom, both of us have an invite to supper. The Thomases’ are having spaghetti.”

Stephanie’s eyes met his. “And Jason wants you to wear that little red skirt.”

His jaw dropped. Stephanie actually asked! With his luck, her mom would wear it and blame Jason. Well, Dad probably wouldn’t be mad.

“Yeah, I think it made an impression.”

Audacity for the win! He waggled his eyebrows.

“I’ll pass that along. Thanks, Mom.”

“Mom said she might wear that dress for you someday. But not tonight, she has to work.”

“Bummer,” he said, frowning to appear dejected.

Laughing as though he’s told a grand joke, she said, “You’re lucky to have me. Mom doesn’t like men, much less boys.”

“Maybe I can change her mind?” He tried for that, butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth, look.

Stephanie pursed her lips. “You know, you might be able to do it. I’ve told Mom she needs a man like you.”

When everyone finished eating. Jason and Stephanie cleared the table and tidied up. His parents excused themselves upstairs to “catch up on their day.” The occasional burst of muted laughter made him think something else might be happening.

“Do they know we can hear them?” Stephanie asked.

“Nah, Dad’s too respectable. Mom though, I think she has a wild streak.” He gave her his best significant glance. “Just like you.” Much to his delight, Stephanie played along. She glanced away, then back; her eyes dreamy. The look was a pure come-on, and he fell for it every time. He leaned in for a kiss.

Instead of a kiss, Stephanie pushed him back and hip-checked the dishwasher door shut. “You think *I* have a wild streak?”

Playing tag was his name for the latest development in their physical relationship. Neither of them had discussed rules, but neither worried over an occasional misplaced hand.

Measuring the angles to prevent her from slipping past, Jason feinted left, then right and swooped in for the win. Far faster than he expected, Stephanie ducked under his arms and slipped past, the palm of her hand patting his butt on the way.

By the time he spun around, she’d made it through the doorway into the dining room. The kitchen had another exit, this one leading into the short hallway joining the living room and foyer. Unless she doubled back, it gave him a chance to head her off. He darted through as Stephanie turned the corner from the dining room. She dodged to her right. Jason lunged, wrapping his left arm around her waist, and spun to absorb her momentum. They twirled across

the living room, once, twice, then the back of his knees hit the couch, and they fell. Jason landed on his back with Stephanie astride his pelvis. One arm remained around her waist, the other fell out to the side. All he needed to do was tip his head up to kiss her, and that's exactly what he did.

"Master Jason?" Alfred's cultured voice broke his concentration. Stephanie snickered and switched to nibbling his neck.

"Yes, Alfred?" Stephanie's nibbling made concentrating hard.

"The National Weather Service reports a fast-moving low-pressure front will bring rain showers tomorrow."

The nibbling reached his earlobe. Talking, and that wasn't all, was really hard. "Thank you, Alfred, for another timely weather update."

"You are most welcome."

Stephanie pushed up with her hands to lift her weight from his chest. "Am I too heavy?" she asked. "I can move..."

He moved both hands to her waist to keep her in place. "Don't wiggle. Now is the time to hold still."

She rolled her eyes, but she stopped wiggling. "What about your parents?"

"Do you hear anything from upstairs?" They both listened.

"No."

"They won't be down until morning." He glanced at the grandfather clock. "We have a half-hour before I walk you home. One hand slipped underneath her shirt to tickle her back. His other hand slipped below her waist and administered an appreciative squeeze.

"What are you doing?"

"Scratching your back."

"And?"

"Nothing." He'd already slid his hand up to her back.

"I like it when you touch me, and I don't mind if you sneak something now and then. Just keep it to a minimum."

"You're a very accommodating girlfriend."

"I'm the best girlfriend ever. Don't forget it,"

"Right, but remember, I'm just a dumb boy who needs kisses to remember complicated stuff."

Relaxing her arms, Stephanie settled back onto Jason's chest. Her weight was just a little more than one might expect. He chalked it up as another item that helped make her special. Then she kissed him, and his thoughts went elsewhere.

"The low pressure over Wisconsin is expected to keep the hot, dry air over Western Pennsylvania in place for another few days." Once again, Jason wondered which of his parents dreamed up Alfred's weather forecast schedule.

Stephanie chuckled and rolled onto her side. Sometimes Alfred's weather updates didn't stop until they did. This one included a forecast for the winds aloft over Lake Erie. "Thank you, Alfred," said Stephanie. She rolled back on top and stared down into his eyes. "I think she said, 'you're the perfect boy for me.'"

"And you're the perfect girl for me."

They kissed, pressing their lips together, then deepened the kiss, tasting each other. Stephanie's perfume, a light, delicate scent, filled Jason's nostrils. Five minutes later, Alfred's next weather update forced another break.

Stephanie shifted to the side, and Jason rolled with her. They remained close, their legs entwined. He said, “Your perfume drives me crazy.”

“I don’t wear perfume.”

“Really? It’s one of the reasons I love kissing you.”

“Maybe it’s my shampoo? What does it smell like?”

“Hmm? Let me check.” He nuzzled her neck, and Steffi gasped at the contact. The scent filled his nostrils. After taking his fill, Jason said, “It’s spicy, warm, and inviting. It seriously makes me want to misbehave.”

“You’re silly, how can something smell inviting? Anyway, you better not misbehave.” Her eyes belied the warning.

“I hear the words, but your eyes tell me something different.”

“My eyes don’t get a vote.”

He reached up and ran his fingers through her hair, marveling at its softness. “You set the limits, sweetheart. I won’t push until you tell me it’s okay.”

Stephanie stretched and kissed his forehead, “You really mean that too.” Her words a statement and not a question.

“Yep.”

They kissed again, going deep. Stephanie reached for his free hand and guided it to her waist, then up her side a bit then down again. He hadn’t earned an all-access pass, but every step represented more of her trust.

“Mom, I have a weird question?”

“Okay,” amused, Natalie sat her book down. “I’ll do my best to give you a weird answer.”

“Do we emit some kind of intoxicating scent?”

Of all the questions Stephanie might have asked, this wasn’t even close to expected. “You mean like a Venus flytrap or a pitcher plant?”

Stephanie shrugged, “I guess. Jason says he’s addicted to my perfume.”

“You don’t wear perfume.”

“I know, that’s why it’s weird. Jason says it makes him crazy and almost out of control.”

“Sweetie, Jason’s a sixteen-year-old boy, control isn’t one of his strong points. I think he’s exaggerating. Oh, I have bad news about the next couple of days. Your father is coming home early. Call Romeo and tell him you’re grounded until Gene leaves again.

The video display on Jason’s wall pinged, and its 2D image of NASA’s Opportunity Mars Rover dimmed.

Alfred’s voice came from the speaker. “Miss Stephanie is calling.”

“Oh, put her through.” Jason hopped up from his bed. She’d seen him in his boxers before. As the image resolved, he straightened his hair. Stephanie appeared on the screen, her hair damp and combed back. She wore an oversized black t-shirt emblazoned with red jagged letters spelling, “Slayer.”

“Hey!” he said, “is that the shirt I left on your porch?”

Stephanie grinned. “Yep, it’s my nightshirt now.”

“I hope you washed it first.” He’d last worn it while cutting grass. “It, ah, looks really good on you. Especially with your hair damp and looking so dark. It’s kind of goth.”

“What’s goth?”

“It’s an old lifestyle, I’ll show you tomorrow.”

Stephanie’s smile flattened out. “That’s why I called. Gene’s coming home early, and I’m grounded until he leaves again.”

“That sucks.”

“What will you do without me?” she asked, her voice wistful.

“Probably pine away to nothing without having you kiss me back to life.”

Stephanie giggled. “I’ll give you plenty of kisses after he leaves again.”

“Plenty of kisses sounds like heaven.” Jason sighed. “Tomorrow, I have to cut the grass. Afterward, I guess I’ll work on AI programming.”

A lock of Stephanie’s hair slipped out from behind her ear. She reached and tucked it back into place. “You’re always reading about programming. Do you think that’s what you’ll do?”

“Maybe, Mom and Dad say I have to go to college. Software Engineering is a good career. What about you? Maybe we can go to college together?”

A female voice came from somewhere out of the frame. “Tell Romeo goodnight, I need to turn the security system back on.”

“Mom says I have to go.” Stephanie frowned.

Jason grinned. “So, I’m Romeo?”

Shrugging, Stephanie said, “It’s what she calls you.”

“Well, I won’t call you Juliet, ’cause our story won’t have a tragic ending.”

Stephanie glanced off to her right. Jason thought perhaps towards her mother, then back to him. She said, “I have to go, goodnight, Jace.”

“Goodnight, sweetheart.” The screen flickered back to that of Opportunity. The old robot who’d managed a brave, yet temporary, existence.

In the morning, Mom’s good mood threatened to outshine the summer sun. They must have done it again. Weeks earlier, he’d have wanted to hide from embarrassment. Now though, in an odd way, he felt happy for them. Maybe, if he admitted it to himself, he envied them for their relationship. Mom and Dad were always a team. He wanted the same thing for himself and his wife. Right now, he couldn’t imagine his wife being anyone other than Stephanie.

“Earth to Jason.” His mother pulled out the chair opposite him and sat. “Such deep thoughts.” Mom paused. “Want to talk about it?”

“Huh?” He looked up with pretended confusion. No way, he’d admit his mom could read him so easily.

“You’ve done nothing but stare at the window, and your waffles are cold. That spells deep thoughts. I think you’re going through a new stage of emotional development. You have a wonderful girlfriend, and your dad had one of *those* talks with you.” She smiled and waited.

“Am I so easy to read?” Funny, he thought he should be embarrassed, but he wasn’t. He felt strangely confident. *Is this what adulating is like?*

“You’re my son. I’ve watched you grow. What else would you expect? Now, do you want to talk about anything? Maybe discuss your feelings about Stephanie? If you’d prefer to talk to your father...” His mother moved back as if she intended to stand.

“No, wait!” Jason held up a hand. “It’s that I realized, just now, that I want the same kind of relationship you and Dad have.”

“Ah, and does your current girlfriend factor into this?”

“Yeah, I’d like it to be with Stephanie, but what you and Dad have is years and years away for me.”

“I remember my first boyfriend, a handsome young man named Kenneth. I was certain he was the one and that nothing could come between us.” Mom smiled, and Jason remembered seeing pictures of his mother when she was a teen. Mom had been hot, oh, not as hot as Stephanie but still hot. There was that one picture of her with a disembodied arm around her waist. Whoever belonged to the arm had long ago been scissored from her life. “The thing, Jason, is it takes time for relationships to develop. During your time together, you and Steph will learn and grow. You might stay together, you might not. The single best piece of advice I can give you is to always be honest with her and with yourself.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome.” Mom smiled. “You know, there is something unusual about your girlfriend. She’s quite direct and, as far as I can tell, knows exactly what she wants. Girls mature earlier than boys, but Steffi is way, way ahead for her age. If anything serves to keep your relationship going, it’ll be that. You, however, have your work cut out trying to keep up with her.”

“Sometimes, I think she’s two or three steps ahead of me.”

“I think so too. I also think Stephanie’s genuinely fond of you,” Mom smiled and nodded as if somehow taking credit for everything. “And you of her.”

“Since yesterday, I think I more than like her.”

Mom pursed her lips. “Hmmm...more than like? As your mother, I can appreciate your attempt to define the exact degree of like. Be careful explaining it to Stephanie. With a girlfriend, you’ll want to keep it more general. Use phrases like ‘a lot.’”

Jason spent the morning mowing and trimming. Once on Stephanie’s property, hopeful for a glimpse of his girlfriend, he sometimes snuck a glance towards a window. On one circuit of their yard, he found an older looking man (Stephanie’s father?) standing at the foot of the back porch. Until now, Jason hadn’t seen him up close. The man was wiry, with thinning unkempt hair and pale watery eyes. If this was Mr. Timms, he looked nothing like his daughter. He held up a hand, and Jason killed the turbine.

“So, you’re the boy, my...Natalie hired to cut the grass.”

The man’s accent and phrasing made Jason pause. Still, he knew to be polite. “Yes, my name’s—”

Mr. Timms cut him off with a dismissive wave. “Has she paid you?”

Until now, he hadn’t considered pay; spending time with Stephanie seemed a fair trade. Still, this man needed a different answer. “No, not yet.”

Gesturing towards Jason’s own yard, Timms said, “How much do you get for mowing your own yard?”

His weekly allowance came to fifty dollars, not that he ever saw the money. His father kept track, calling it the textbook fund. “I get fifty a week.”

“Fifty?” The amount seemed to amuse the man. “Fifty dollars to cut grass?” He said it as if it were the punch line to a joke. “Nah, that’s too much.” He reached into his front pocket and removed a thick wad of folded bills. After flipping through the stack, he stopped. “I’ll give you twenty.’ He removed a single twenty-dollar bill, then five more. “This for today and the last five weeks.” Mr. Timms held out the money.

Jason reached out to take the bills, but Timms held tight. “How old are you, boy?”

“Sixteen, sir,” he hadn't intended to add “sir.” It just slipped out.

The man nodded. “You know, I have daughter, the same age as you. Boy, if I catch you sniffing around her, I'll...” Mr. Timms didn't finish his statement, but he let go of the money.

Jason slipped back a step. He looked into the man's eyes and saw nothing. No humor, no anger, nothing.

Mr. Timms stepped back onto his porch. He waved to Jason to get back to his task. “You just keep cutting the grass and minding your own business. I'll keep paying you, and we'll get along fine.”

Jason kept his eyes down while finishing the lawn

After Jason went to bed, his parents filled a pair of wine glasses and settled onto their sectional couch. Robert said, “I didn't see Stephanie today. I hope everything is well with Elizabeth and Darcy.”

Shirley laughed once, then began to cough. Robert thumped her on the back and waited. She took another sip and set her glass on the side table. “Why Elizabeth and Darcy? I'd think Odysseus and Penelope are a better role model.”

“You're right, except for that long break in their relationship. If Odysseus and Penelope teach anything, it's true love is worth waiting for.”

“No Stephanie today?” Mom asked while she worked on a dried flower arrangement.

“Her dad's still home.” Jason poked at his tablet; this AI hacking tutorial fascinated him. Much of it went over his head, but bits and pieces made sense.

Mom stepped over and glanced through the kitchen window. “Oh, I guess Steph must miss her father. He's on the road so much.”

Engrossed with his research, Jason didn't think before he replied. “She doesn't like him. She even gets mad if I call him her dad. From what she's said, he treats her and her mother like property.”

“When did Stephanie tell you this?”

Unaware of his mother's heightened interest, Jason continued. “We talk about it once in a while. He yells and bosses them around a lot. Stephanie stays in her room as much as she can.”

Mom put down the flowers. “Are Stephanie or her mother abused?”

Jason realized the danger in his offhanded comments. Hadn't Stephanie told him not to say anything? If his mother called the police, he might never see his girlfriend again. Back peddling, Jason said, “Stephanie never said her father hit her or touched her mother. All she said was that he bossed them around.”

“Hmmm, I won't get involved, but tell Stephanie I'll help if she or her mother need anything.” As his mother turned away, he heard her mutter. “I wonder if I should call Natalie?”

Later in the afternoon, Alfred announced the arrival of a message. “Master Jason, Miss Stephanie has sent you a text. She says you better be miserable without her.”

“Thanks, Alfred. Please tell her that I am a sad, depressed, wretch without her company.”

“Ah, I am certain she’ll enjoy hearing that.”

On the morning of his third day without Stephanie, Jason sat at the kitchen table, sipping unsweetened grapefruit juice. Five minutes earlier, his mother passed by on her way to the detached garage. She’d invited him to join her on a day-long clothes shopping expedition. He’d declined, even after Mom upped the ante by offering lunch at the local Chinese restaurant. Not wanting to miss her shopping day, Mom kissed his head and set off in her little electric minivan.

Jason took another sip of the incredibly tart juice and shivered. How could Stephanie like this stuff? She even preferred it over apple or orange juice. Still, drinking it somehow made him feel closer to her.

Three tentative taps at his back door drew his attention. Through the glass, a familiar girl with a headful of auburn hair waited. Jason threw open the door, and Stephanie darted inside and into his arms.

After their third kiss, Stephanie said, “I would have come sooner, but Gene did something to the security system, and it took Mom hours to fix it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t say anything about this, but Gene spies on us. Mom’s really smart and hacks the security system so I can sneak out the back door.”

“Your mom is a hacker?”

“Yeah, she’s super smart. That’s why I can call and send messages.”

“Wow, so when do I get to meet her?”

Stephanie glanced away, then back. Her hands rose to comb through his hair. “I don’t know. Probably not for a while, but I hope not too long.”

Sometimes Stephanie said odd things like that. It didn’t matter, she was here now. He grinned and opened his arms as if to attack her.

Stephanie grinned back and opened her arms in a counterattack. Her eyes widened when he darted forward and lifted her up as high as he could.

“Jason! Ack! Put me d—”

Stephanie’s full weight surprised him. Like her unexpected strength when they wrestled. Given her slenderness, he figured she must have incredible muscle density. Carefully, he stepped forward, ignoring her protests, and set her on the edge of the kitchen counter. Their disparity in height reversed, Jason stepped in close and looked up into Stephanie’s narrowed eyes.

He’d never seen Stephanie this annoyed with him before. “Jason! That wasn’t smart. I’m wearing a stretch skirt, and they creep up, you know.”

“Yeah? I better get a good look then.” Jason leaned to the side while Stephanie glowered. “Nope, everything’s still covered. You do look good, is this a new skirt?”

“It belongs to Mom. She let me wear it to look nice for you.” Her tone implied he’d ruined everything.

“I’m just putting you on a pedestal, sweetheart.”

“Very funny.”

“Do you have a bathing suit?” Jason interrupted their shared reading of a classic science fiction novel, *The Dragons of Dorcastle*, by Jack Campbell. They accomplished this feat with Stephanie sitting on his lap, their heads close together. Jason flicked to the next page when Stephanie indicated.

“A bathing suit? No, why?” Stephanie’s voice carried a note of irritation, she disliked interruptions when they read together.

“Dad bought an above ground pool. It’ll be installed tomorrow.”

“A pool? Jason, I don’t even know how to swim.”

“No problem, I can teach you, and you’ll look so hot in a bikini.” Jason closed his eyes to imagine the sight.

Dad didn’t screw around. The pool he purchased took up a large, sun-filled corner of the back yard. The installation crew assembled it in hours. Later in the afternoon, a water delivery truck filled it with fresh-pumped well water. It took days for the frigid water to warm enough for swimming.

As it turned out, Stephanie’s mom had an old bathing suit saved from years past. Stephanie teased him with fake descriptions. One day she claimed it covered everything from her knees to her neck, the next day saying it covered little. Now, Jason and Stephanie stood on the raised wooden platform. He wore trunks, and she wore a denim skirt and a strappy shirt.

“I’m ready,” he said.

Stephanie stepped to the edge and dipped a toe into the water. She performed an exaggerated shiver and stepped back. “You’ll stay next to me the whole time?”

“I promise!” he said and drew and drew a finger over his chest in the shape of an X. “Cross my heart.”

“You first,” she said, pointing at the water.

“When am I going to see your swimming suit?” suspicion tinged his voice.

“After you get in and are ready to catch me.”

Grinning, Jason stepped to the edge, turned around, and fell back into the water. As he sank below the surface, he watched a spray of water arc up towards his startled girlfriend. It took a moment to find his footing, then he stood and faced his dripping wet and unhappy girlfriend.

“Did you splash me on purpose?”

“No, no sweetheart.” He shook his head, vigorously.

“All right, wait right there.” She peeled the shirt up and over her head, revealing a dark green string bikini top. Then, with the most interesting wiggle, she dropped her skirt. He almost asked her to do it again. Stephanie’s string bikini bottom matched the top. It rode low on her hips and, along with the top, exposed a *lot* of skin.

“Wow!” he said.

Smiling, Steffi turned in place, stopping when she faced Jason again. “Satisfied?”

Jason shook his head. “Nah, the water’s too cold for anything like that to happen. But *you* are smoking hot.”

Stephanie affected an open-mouthed, hands-on-hips, look of outrage. Jason laughed and held his arms open. Instead of jumping in, she sat on the edge of the wooden deck and slipped into the water.

After toweling each other dry, they spread their towels on the grass beside the pool. Jason lay on his stomach while Stephanie rubbed sunblock on his back.

“I’ll tell my mother you liked her bikini.”

“Please, and tell her I said, ‘Thank you.’” The warm sun and Stephanie’s soothing hands took their toll, and he dozed off.

“Roll over on your back.” Stephanie wiped her sunscreen covered hands on a corner of Jason’s towel.

“Umm, I’m good like this.”

“What do you mean? You’ll burn without sunscreen.”

Speaking low so his voice wouldn’t carry. “Steph, I can’t roll over right now. Give me a few minutes, ’kay?”

It didn’t take a rocket scientist to understand his problem. Stephanie figured it out within seconds. “Really? All I did was rub your back.”

“Look, I’m a guy, it doesn’t take much.”

Then she surprised the hell out of him. “What if I want to see it?”

“I didn’t think we were ready for that.”

“Jace, we’re not gonna do *that*. But we might do something else.”

“Oh? What?”

“Come on.” Stephanie stood and offered her hand to Jason. He rolled over, and Steffi, eyes pointedly aimed below his waist, pulled him to his feet. Together, they walked to the opposite back corner, to the blind spot behind the old tree.

With his back to the tree and out of view from the house, Stephanie gave him a kiss. “Keep alert for your kitchen door opening. If anyone comes, we’ll pretend we’re kissing.”

Jason nodded. He didn’t trust his voice.

“Show it to me,” she said.

He pushed the front of his trunks down, and *it* popped into view.

Stephanie’s eyes widened a bit. “It’s bigger than I expected,” she tilted her head to the side, “and it’s kind of pretty.” Her eyes glanced up to his. “Can I?” She reached out as if to touch it.

“Y-yes.”

His response earned him one of Steffi’s dazzling smiles, then her exquisitely warm hand wrapped around him.

Blood thundered in his ears, all he could do was groan, “Ahhh…”

A hand grabbed his arm, shaking him awake. “Huh?”

“Rollover. Hurry, your Mom’s coming.”

Unsure why Steph wanted him to do it, he rolled onto his stomach. Once turned over, the reason became painfully clear when his erect member pressed into his abdomen.

Mom brought iced tea. Sweetened for him and unsweetened for Stephanie. Jason hoped the distraction would help to relieve his “swelling.” After mom disappeared back into the house, embarrassment made Jason wish he could sink into the ground.

Stephanie lay on her stomach next to him and chuckled. “I’ve been aware of that thing for weeks now, but I had no idea it did it on its own.”

“It gets like that at the worst times.”

“It must have been a nice dream.”

“Oh, yeah, you were in it.” It *had* been a nice dream, one he’d revisit tonight.

“What did your perverted imagination have us doing?”

“A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“It doesn’t count if it was with me.”

“All right.” He described the dream, in detail.

Steffi whistled. “You have a vivid imagination. Just don’t get any real-world ideas.”

“Might as well tell me not to breathe.”

“You’re such a boy.”

Jason looked over Stephanie’s shoulder, down along her back to her string bikini-clad buttocks. “Yeah, I’m a boy with a very pretty girlfriend, who drives him crazy.” He laid his head down, facing Stephanie. “What about you?” he asked, “Don’t you get ideas?”

“Probably the same ones. *You drive me crazy too.*”

“Good!”

“Good? Is that all you can say? Just for that, you owe me a kiss.”

Jason rolled onto his right side, and with one arm, pulled Stephanie close. Fully aware of the nearby kitchen window, he kept their kiss short. When finished, they remained on their sides, legs touching. Jason’s little problem masked by Stephanie’s hip.

“Steph, would it bug you if I told you that I love you?”

Anyone else would have missed her hesitation before she replied. Jason noticed it but attributed it to his surprise question.

“No, not unless you’re trying to get somewhere with *that*.” Her hip bumped him.

“That thing may make my life difficult, but it doesn’t rule me. I think I love you because ‘like’ doesn’t cover how I feel.”

He noticed another brief hesitation, then she said, “So, you don’t want to have sex with me?”

Now it was his turn to play it cool. “Nope, not at all. It’s the furthest thing from my mind.”

“The furthest thing from your mind is currently poking my hip.”

“Sorry.” Jason disentangled his legs from hers and rolled back onto his stomach. He grumbled, “I shouldn’t have said anything.” He’d screwed everything up and didn’t know how to fix it.

A warm finger drew nonsense patterns on his back, and the sensations drew him back from his funk. Stephanie said, “Jason, love isn’t something my family knows about.”

“What does that mean? Your parents—”

“My parents aren’t like yours. They’re not married, and they don’t love each other.”

“But...” his words trailed off when he realized he didn’t know what to say. “Why does your mom—”

“It’s complicated. Look, you can’t tell anyone this stuff. It’s a secret.” Jason nodded, too surprised for words. “Gene is Mom’s second...boyfriend. She didn’t love her first, either. Because I’m her daughter, it’s altogether possible I can’t love someone romantically.”

All this serious talk made his little problem a non-issue. Jason sat up and crossed his legs. “I don’t understand why you think that. Love is the same as like, just bigger and more intense. Don’t you love your mother?”

“Of course, but it’s not the same.”

“No, it isn’t, but it proves you can love.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think Mom and I are wired like you.”

“Love between a parent and their child begins with pheromones and brain chemistry. Romantic love has similar beginnings. It just works on different parts of the brain.”

“For normal brains, sure, but Mom and I are different. Don’t ask me to explain how or why. We just are.”

Jason lay back down, he’d made his confession, and while she accepted it, she told him, in no uncertain terms, she didn’t—and wouldn’t—feel the same. In his rush to tell Stephanie what he learned about his feelings and because he wanted to share with her his happiness, he’d screwed everything up.

When her back door clicked shut, Natalie glanced up to watch her daughter shuffle inside.

“What’s the matter, sweetie? Are you and Romeo on the outs?”

On her way to a chair, Stephanie forced a smile. “Nothing like that, Jason said he loves me.”

“Oh, this is news. I’ll make tea, and you can tell me all the gory details.”

Minutes later, mom and daughter sipped their tea in silence. Natalie kept her eyes on Stephanie. She’d talk when she was ready.

“This afternoon, while we took a break from swimming, he told me he loved me.”

“Something so romantic should come with trumpets and a white horse. All you got was a damp towel.”

“Have you ever wondered what it’s like to be in love?”

“Me? That’s never been an option.”

“What about me?”

Recognizing her daughter’s concern, Natalie set her cup down. “Sweetie, I don’t know. There isn’t anything about love in my design documents.”

Chapter Six

In the News Today: The Federal Bureau of Investigation issued a statement about a recent increase in Human Trafficking activity along the I-70 corridor. Motorists are urged to report suspicious activities.

The sign, with its bright red, block-letters, stood out against the neutral-colored wall.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING NOTICE

Are you or someone you know being sold for sex or—

That's all Stephanie had time to read before Gene hustled her and her mother from the highway rest stop.

Early that morning, Gene woke everyone and ordered Stephanie and her mom to pack for a week's stay. "Pack nice clothes." He directed. "Hurry up, we need to leave," he shouted. They'd been on the road all day, and Stephanie knew what it meant. Gene found someone willing to buy her.

Preparations for this began shortly after her twelfth birthday. About the time most daughters learned about the "Birds and the Bees and Birth Control." Natalie's daughter learned the facts of life for a genetically engineered sex slave. Those earlier talks helped her to stay calm. She knew her owner would be wealthy. Her price almost guaranteed a pampered life. After all, buying her was equivalent to purchasing a near irreplaceable and unique artistic masterpiece.

Mom's concerned glances confirmed she also suspected Gene's agenda. His constant hovering, even bribing their way into the family restrooms, prevented any private talks.

The seemingly endless ride gave Stephanie ample time to consider her future. Thanks to her mother's design, once her new owner "made full use of her," she'd begin to develop a deeply powerful bond. Her mother's term, the bond was an actual full-blown physical addiction to intimate relations with one person, her owner.

Other than Mom's crazy idea, there wasn't a way out. Stephanie couldn't go to the police. If she did, they'd discover her and her mother's undocumented status and arrest them. Addicted to

Gene, Mom would soon die without a fix. If Stephanie ran away and avoided capture, her inherited genetic “programming” created another obstacle. Stephanie’s infrequent ovulations brought extreme mood swings. Worse, her fertile state also made her especially vulnerable to bonding. If she were “in the wild” and ovulated, she’d bond to whoever was strong enough to deal with her.

That left Stephanie with Mom’s crazy idea. Gene was Mom’s second owner, and she still felt a vestigial bond to her first. The idea, the crazy idea, was simple. If Mom could retain the effects of multiple bonds, her daughter could as well. This might allow Stephanie to switch between them. When the Timms “family” moved to their new home, Jason, the boy next door, became the target for Stephanie’s secret bond. The tricky part was limiting how much Stephanie became addicted.

A truck, with a loud diesel engine, roared past in the right lane. The noise jarred Stephanie from her thoughts. As the truck raced past, she noticed its Cincinnati Bengals bumper stickers. Jason worshipped the Pittsburgh Steelers and despised the Bengals. He’d taught her the rules of American football, and they’d watched games together.

Like bright summer sunlight banished the dark, just thinking about Jason pushed her black thoughts away. She remembered running her fingers through his never-quite-combed hair, and how she melted when his cool breath tickled her neck. She’d been slow to realize they liked each other. He, of course, knew it right from the start. That first day when they met, it amazed her than a man, well a young man, would *ask her* to keep him company. Visiting Jason and his parents felt like she stepped into a fairy tale. His parents behaved as if they loved each other, and they never ever screwed in front of her.

The day wore on, and Gene became more agitated. Like her and Mom, Gene was an undocumented alien. His forged identity would never pass if he tried to board a plane.

Mom did what she could to keep him calm, even bending over and sucking him. Stephanie slumped down in her seat and pretended to sleep.

Once her eyes closed, thoughts of Jason stomped all over her worries. No one knew him like her. She understood his jokes and listened to his dreams. If she had any regrets, it was cutting him off when he confessed his feelings. It wasn’t his fault that she couldn’t love him back. She should have lied and told him she felt the same.

Night fell, and Gene looked for a place to stay. An old motel with a vacancy sign beckoned. Their room, a double, surprised everyone with its cleanliness. Gene shooed Stephanie into the bathroom. “Take a shower and get in bed. We leave early.”

After she finished, Stephanie exited the bathroom carrying her clothes. Gene had Mom face down on their bed while having sex with her from behind. The wet slapping sounds and rhythmic grunts chased her to her own bed. Even under the covers, with the pillow over her head, the nauseating sounds went on and on. Finally, they stopped, and Gene grumbled his way into the bathroom. When the door closed, Stephanie rolled over and dared a peek. Mom lay on her side, covered with a sheet. Her even breathing indicated she’d stay zoned-out for a while. The tears came, and Stephanie curled up. She’d never felt so alone in her life.

While eating breakfast, Stephanie felt her first real twinge. Something, some part of her was missing. She listened to the men moving around them, searching for one special voice. Every man she brushed past smelled wrong. The sensation increased even after Gene resumed his drive. She tried to doze, to drift away, but some undefined itch kept her on edge.

Around noon, while Gene recharged their van, she and Mom managed a brief conversation. “Mom, somethings going on with me, I can’t stop thinking about Jason, even more so than yesterday.”

Mom nodded. “If you concentrate and remember his touch, does it help?”

Stephanie closed her eyes and imagined him kissing her good night. It did seem to push the odd sensations back. “It does.”

“You may have bonded to him a little. Good, that’s what we want.”

“I guess.” She knew her mother’s plan, but this was the first time she experienced what it meant for her. “Will it always be this way?”

“Not exactly. We’ll talk later.”

A change in the road surface woke her. A sign read, “Welcome to Wichita.” Wichita, Kansas? All she knew about Kansas was they had tornados.

Gene found another hotel, much like the last one. As before, he told her to get in the bathroom and “Get cleaned up.” They had a meeting later, and she needed to look nice.

After her shower, Stephanie stood at the sink, brushing her teeth. The bathroom door opened, and Mom, nude from the waist down, entered. Mom pushed the door closed and reached for a handful of tissues. Grimacing, her mother blotted away at the mess between her legs.

Gene must have had himself a quickie, or Mom would still be out of it.

Neither spoke until Mom turned on the shower. Once covered by the noise, her mother leaned close. “It’s not what you think, not exactly. I got Gene to talk. He said this is a trial visit. A couple of days, then we’ll return home.”

Stephanie blanched. No telling what it took for Mom to tease information from Gene.

The mansion set far back from the road. As Gene navigated the curved asphalt drive, more of the structure came into view. While the building presented a narrow face to the road, the bulk of it lay hidden. Another interesting fact was that Gene didn’t stop at the front entrance. Instead, he continued around to the rear of the house and parked near a service entrance.

A man met them at the door. Tall, gray-haired, and fit. His face tight while he studied his visitors. Gene stepped forward. “Mr. Smith? I’m Gene Timms.”

Fear made the moment unreal, and Stephanie almost burst into giggles. Clamping down on her emotions, she forced herself to stay quiet.

“Ah, Mr. Timms. Too bad, you’re unable to fly. The drive must have been interminable.”

Mr. Smith invited them inside. After a few darkened rooms and hallways, they ended up in a well-appointed library. Another man, far younger than Mr. Smith, waited there with a drink in his hand.

“My son, Daniel,” Mr. Smith indicated the young man.

Gene spoke. “This is Natalie and our daughter, Stephanie.” He pointed at each in turn.

The young man, Daniel, spoke. “Jesus, Dad, they’re both beautiful. Hell, they could be twin sisters.”

The outburst drew a sharp glance from Mr. Smith, which his son pretended to not notice. “Mr. Timms, would you or your property want anything to drink?” He waved at a side table, holding an assortment of beverages. “We have some time before dinner.”

Gene gestured to Mom, and she fetched a vodka for him and ginger ales for herself and Stephanie. Stephanie didn’t trust herself to speak. They took seats near an unlit fireplace. Daniel sat next to his father.

“I trust you received the information packet?” Gene asked.

“I did,” Smith replied. “and I dislike the terms for this visit.”

“It’s quite simple. No one is to touch my daughter until I have received payment in full.”

Smith crossed his legs and smiled. “Agreed, but the non-refundable deposit should entitle me to a few samples.”

“Natalie can provide samples as needed. She is identical to her daughter in all important aspects. She is also quite skillful.” Gene ended his statement with a leer.

Whoa! Gene just offered Mom to this guy, and all she did was smile. What’s going on?

Smith studied Mom, then turned back to Gene. “The spec sheet notes these creations have perfect loyalty. That they will *aggressively* resist advances from another suitor. If this is so, then how is she capable of providing samples?”

Smiling, Gene turned to Mom. “Tell him, Nat.”

Natalie nodded. “Mr. Smith, My owner has conditioned me to accept an occasional lover, who he selects. It won’t be an issue for me if he remains in view. I may even enjoy the experience. *If you’re capable.*” Her last statement made the challenge clear.

Double whoa! Mom just threw down the gauntlet! I wish I were as brave.

Smith chuckled as if only his satisfaction mattered. “What is it like, missy, fucking a man who isn’t your owner?”

Mom smiled. Smith’s words couldn’t rattle her. “It’s a bit like wanting steak but only getting the bone.

Daniel burst out a laugh, then cut it off at a curt gesture from his father.

Supper might have been delicious, but Stephanie thought it tasted like bile. Somehow, Daniel appointed himself her companion and sat across from her. Every time she dared to glance up from her plate, his blue eyes were there.

Negotiations went on throughout the meal. After the desert, Natalie took Stephanie to the powder room. “I’m going with Gene and Mr. Smith to provide ‘samples.’”

“But, Mom that’s—”

“Sweetie, I’ll be fine. Who knows, it may even be fun.”

“What about the son, Daniel?”

“He’ll keep you company, nothing more than that. Be polite, but keep your guard up.”

“But what if he wants me to...you know.”

“Sweetie, you’re my daughter, and there isn’t a single man in the world you can’t handle. If Daniel doesn’t behave, do whatever you need to make him stop. Just don’t hurt him too much.”

After the parents retired upstairs, Stephanie and Daniel returned to the library. They sat across from each other at the empty fireplace. She refused or ignored his repeated offers of a drink or conversation.

“You don’t want to talk, do you?” he asked.

She had enough of his badgering. “No, leave me alone.”

“Why not? I’m beginning to think you don’t like me.”

A desperate surge of anger gave her strength. Daniel’s twinkling blue eyes annoyed her. “I don’t know you well enough to dislike you.”

“Oooh, zinger!” Daniel clutched at his chest. “Direct shot.” He leaned forward. “You’re even more beautiful when you’re angry.”

Either Daniel told the truth or, more likely, attempted reverse psychology. If she didn't want to appear more attractive, she'd have to act nicer. Either way, she didn't care. She did the smart thing and tuned him out.

Apparently, this didn't please Daniel. Stephanie heard an irritated chuff, and a finger reached out and touched her knee. "Don't ignore me," he said.

"Take your hand off my knee."

With a laugh, he removed his finger, then slid forward to sit on the edge of his chair. "I'm sorry, Stephanie, it's...look, you're beautiful, and I'm a guy, I can't help but be attracted to you."

She gave him a flat distrustful stare.

"Hmm...you are not what I expected."

"What, that I'm not a bimbo?"

"No, you're not. Let's try something different. Do you shoot pool?"

"Pool?" She hadn't intended to reply.

"It's a game. C'mon." He stood and stepped to the side of his chair and waited.

Stephanie stared, unsure of what she should do. Mom was upstairs, doing who knows what with that disgusting old man. If Mom could do that, Stephanie could play a stupid game. With a fresh sense of confidence, she followed Daniel across the room. Under an ornate leaded glass lamp, stood a large covered rectangular table. With a flourish, the younger Smith removed the cloth cover and exposed a green felt-covered surface.

Daniel gestured, "This is a pool table." From underneath the table, he produced a hollow wooden triangle and placed it on the table. Daniel proceeded to fill the triangle with different colored balls. "These are the pool balls. The object is to use a stick, called the cue, to strike the white ball, to knock your balls into the pockets."

"Which balls are mine?" The question sounded stupid as soon as it slipped out. If Daniel noticed, he didn't react.

"It depends. The person who breaks gets whatever goes in a pocket. If nothing goes in, it's an open table for the next player." He glanced at her across the table. "I have my own stick, we'll share."

"How am I supposed to make this shot?" Stephanie had stripes, and the only available shot had the cue ball in an awkward spot.

"Lean over the table and stretch out your arms. You'll want to put some English on the cue, and it'll roll back and set up your next shot."

"What does 'English' mean?"

He showed her a small, disarming smile and approached. "If I may?"

Since beginning the game, Daniel kept his hands to himself. Most of the time, he kept to the opposite side of the table. Heck, she only caught him trying a peek up her skirt once. "All right, show me."

"Lean over the table and line up your shot." Stephanie tensed as he approached. "I'm going to touch you and show you how to aim. Please, don't freak out." His chest pressed against her back. This close, his cologne, a delicate lime and tobacco scent tickled her nostrils. "Aim the stick to strike the cue low. You want to put back-spin on it." She changed her point of aim slightly. Out of her sight, his fingers ghosted over her hip. "There, you got it. Hit it medium-hard." Stephanie struck the cue ball as instructed. It slid forward and tapped the nine-ball, which rolled into the pocket. At the same time, the cue rolled back and lined her up for a shot on the twelve.

Excited about making a difficult shot, Stephanie allowed her guard to drop. She stood, grinning, and found herself in Daniel's arms, one of his hands curved around her hip.

She tipped her head back and met his eyes. "Daniel, please don't be a creep."

His eyes flicked away, and Stephanie thought he'd behave. But he glanced back, his jaw set with determination.

In a rough voice, he said, "I read the papers your father sent. Is it true you'll fall in love with whoever you sleep with?"

"It's not love."

"How do you know? The spec sheet said you've never..."

She had enough. Remembering her mother's advice, Stephanie reached back and removed his hand from her butt. Daniel resisted, so she used her full strength.

Eyes wide, Daniel took a step back, his left hand cradled the right.

Mom will be proud I didn't break any bones.

Stephanie set the pool stick on the table and returned to her seat across the room. An hour or so later, the parents returned and found her there. Daniel kept himself occupied on the opposite side of the library, shooting pool one-handed.

Back at the hotel, Gene announced he had phone calls to make. "Both of you get a shower or something."

Inside the shower stall, Stephanie studied the marks on her mother's pale skin. "Are you all right? Wait," she said, inspecting the bruises on her mother's chest, "those look like teeth marks."

"I think they are. Mr. Smith gave the girls a workout."

"Mom! He hurt you. Why didn't Gene do something?"

"Sweetie, sometimes sex can be a little rough. Tonight, was one of the rougher times. Don't worry about me, it takes a lot to hurt genies like us." Mom chuckled, "Poor Gene sat there and watched the whole thing. I think he learned a few things."

"What about your bond, and how could Gene just sit there and watch?"

Mom hugged her. "Sweetie, my bond might as well be etched in stone. One or two sessions like tonight won't change me. You, however, are almost a blank slate. It might have damaged you. Turn around now, and I'll wash your hair."

That night, Gene behaved like a man possessed. He barely waited until Stephanie had the pillow over her head before taking her mother. It took a long time before she managed to sleep.

"Dad, are you sure this is a good idea?" Daniel steadied the Stolichnaya with his good hand. His father set the funnel and poured a double measure of a clear, odorless liquid into the vodka. As usual, Dad ignored his concerns.

The older man capped the bottle with care. Then after giving it a swirl, he returned the bottle to a small bar. "Mr. Smith" turned to Daniel with a sneer. "Sometimes, I wonder if you're really my son." He held his eyes on Daniel, "Do you want an evening with the mother or not?"

"I'd prefer the daughter."

"Heh, yeah. If the father's correct, and she's still cherry." Dad poured a finger's worth of bourbon and sat. "I received the results from the lab. The data in the information packet checks out. From a DNA standpoint, they are exactly what Timms' says they are."

“They look like sisters.”

“Yes, they do. How old do you think the mother is?”

“Hell, Dad, she looks eighteen, but she has to be thirty or so.”

“The mother is forty years old. She’s had four daughters and is still so tight, it almost hurt.”

“Damn, now I can’t wait to check her out.”

“You will. Now, the plan. First, the vodka,” Dad waved towards the collection of bottles. “A drink or two will loosen up Timms and make him nice and relaxed. During supper, you’ll be very forward with the mother. Get her hot, and it’ll distract him. When it’s time, I’ll tell you to take her elsewhere. Timms will follow, and it’ll be up to you to put on a show. Keep him interested. I’ll get to know the daughter and find out if she is really untouched.”

“Do you think she is?”

“Hardly. Kids start early. I expect she’s had her share. Later, after the “enhanced” vodka has done its work, I’ll renegotiate for a realistic price.

Like the previous night, they met the Smiths for drinks. This time, a tension existed that hadn’t before. The Smiths literally sat on the edges of their seats. Stephanie and her mother shared a concerned glance. Gene didn’t seem to notice anything and allowed the senior Smith to keep his glass full. When the housekeeper announced dinner, Gene stumbled twice on his way to the dining room.

Striding to the head of the table, Mr. Smith said, “Tonight, the daughter will be my dinner companion.” He held a chair out. After a quick glance at her mother, Stephanie took the indicated seat.

Gene sat to Stephanie’s right, but most of his attention lay on Daniel and Mom. Smith’s son and her mother sat together near the opposite end of the table. Stephanie kept her eyes down, she didn’t want eye contact with Mr. Smith at all.

Halfway through the first course. Mr. Smith spoke to her. “It’s fascinating how alike you are to your mother. Of course, I saw a great deal more of your mother than I have of you. I admit I’m curious if you’ll enjoy the same sex games as she.”

Stephanie didn’t, couldn’t reply. Even if she did, what would she say?

Her silence must have annoyed the man because he spoke to Gene. “Mr. Timms, please instruct your daughter to respond.”

The table jerked as Gene pulled his attention away from the opposite end of the table. Stephanie dared a peek. Daniel had something going on under the table. Both he and Mom had rosy cheeks and unfocused eyes.

Gene gripped her upper arm, tight enough to hurt. “I asked you to behave, didn’t I?” He leaned closer. “Do you want your mother hurt because you won’t play nice?”

Glancing again towards the foot of the table, Stephanie noticed her mother’s rhythmic shudders. Those shudders came in time with the motions of Daniel’s shoulder.

With a shudder of her own, Stephanie turned to Mr. Smith. She forced herself to look up and smile. “What do you want to know?” she asked.

Smith nodded his thanks to Gene, then focused on her. “Do you think the same as your mother?”

“Mr. Smith, Mom and I look a lot alike. We even like the same things, but we’re two different people.”

“Fair enough,” he said, then paused to watch his son's activities. Mom whimpered softly. The hunger in Smith's eyes spoke volumes when he turned back. “Tell me how you and your beautiful mother are different.”

Stephanie didn't dare check again on her mother. She didn't want to see whatever Daniel did to her. Instead, she kept her eyes on the older man and concentrated on his question. She already knew one answer. The two men Mom didn't hate, Jason and Jason's father, she merely distrusted. Stephanie, who hadn't had her mother's experiences, liked one special young man.

Unbidden, the memory came of Jason confessing his true feelings. Looking back from tonight's perspective, she'd been selfish. What would it have hurt to tell him she felt the same? Love was just a word. What if they never saw each other again?

The memory vanished, dispelled by her reality. “Mom prefers non-fiction and reality programs. I read science fiction and play video games.”

“What about sex?”

“What about it? I haven't done anything yet.”

“That's what your father said. I want to know if it's true.”

“Of course, it is! I'm only sixteen!”

Smith sat back and rubbed his chin.

The sudden scrape of a chair against the wooden floor pulled everyone's attention to the far end of the table. Daniel moved behind Mom's chair, his hands reaching for her breasts.

The elder Smith rapped his knuckles on the table. “Daniel!”

Daniel froze, then turned and glared at his father. “You said I could have her.”

“Yes, but not at the dining room table, at least not now.” Smith waved towards the hallway entrance. “Take the mother somewhere else.”

“C'mon,” Daniel said. He took one of Natalie's hands and pulled her up.

Gene stood and bellowed, “Nyet!” Stephanie noticed how her father wobbled when he stood.

“Mr. Timms,” Mr. Smith said, “The fee I've already paid more than covers the services of your property. Besides, Daniel isn't going to do anything you won't enjoy watching.”

While Smith spoke to Gene, Natalie gave Stephanie a confident smile as if saying, *don't worry, sweetie, we got this!* After Stephanie smiled back, Mom turned to Daniel and took his arm. “All right, let's go somewhere private.”

Gene wavered back and forth as if he couldn't decide what to do.

From the head of the table, Mr. Smith watched the tableau before speaking, “Make up your mind, Mr. Timms. Either stay and guard your investment or go and watch my son use your pet.”

Without looking back, Gene stumbled after Daniel and Natalie.

A few moments after Gene left, Mr. Smith shook his head. “Your father is an interesting man, but I couldn't do what he does.”

“Breed and sell slaves?” asked Stephanie. She kept her tone flat.

“Hardly, my dear. If I make you my property, I will breed you as often as possible. No, I meant how Gene plays the cuckold. There are few things more disgusting than a man who *enjoys* watching his woman fuck another man.”

“Daniel thinks you and he will share me. Doesn't that make both of you cuckolds?”

Smith threw back his head and laughed. He stood, and at a nearby table, poured a glass of whiskey. “You surprise me,” he said. “I expected someone subservient, and here you are, bold as brass and possessing a strong will.” He sat back down. “Some men would enjoy breaking you. My son and your father are such. I, on the other hand, think you might be best kept as you are.”

“Really?” she couldn’t suppress the lilt of surprise in her voice.

“Oh, yes. I respect strength.” The older man leaned towards her. “The world belongs to those who master their feelings and control their needs.”

Smith’s hot breath reeked of whiskey and something other than control. This man, whatever his real name might be, intended to possess her. To paraphrase Shakespeare, “Will you, nill you, I will *own* you.”

But she was her mother’s daughter, and she could handle any single man. Instead of giving ground, she dug in and leaned forward herself. “Why are you telling me this?”

Maybe her strength surprised the man, or maybe it amused him. In either case, he sat back with a smile and sipped his whiskey. “Your father is weak. I’m surprised he managed to acquire a valuable commodity like your mother.”

Stephanie knew she’d hate herself, but Smith’s unceasing arrogance needed a pinprick. “Gene kidnapped Mom from a wealthy and powerful man.”

For a second, the older man’s face went slack, and Stephanie thought she managed to shut him up. Then he tipped his head back and barked out a laugh. “My dear, I simply cannot believe such a tale. Cuckolds, like your father, are the weakest of men.” The old man eased his chair back from the table. “Mr. Timms is asking an exorbitant amount of money for you. Even if his claims about you are true. I don’t think you’re worth it.

“No offense, but I don’t want to be your property anyway.”

His brief glare from her interruption made her daring statement worthwhile. Smith waved a hand as if chasing away an insect. “My dear, everyone is someone or something’s property. Although, in your case, it’s literal. The terms your father set for this meeting make it difficult to determine your exact worth.”

“Don’t buy me then.”

Another glare, this time with some heat. Mr. Smith didn’t like her constant interruptions, too bad.

Smith continued. “I have a proposition for you. One that is in your best interests to accept.”

Stephanie took a chance and looked deep into Smith’s eyes. She saw lust and a crazed determination. *Uh, oh, Steffi, this guy is off the chain.* “What’s the deal?” Her hands gripped the chair’s arms.

“Mr. Timms likened you to a rare and expensive sports car. Well, the analogy might be apt, but I’ve never bought an automobile without a test drive.”

“A test drive isn’t part of the deal.” She prepared to move.

“Your father is upstairs, watching my son *use* your mother. No one, other than us, will know what we do together. If I decide to pass on you, whoever buys you won’t know. It will remain our secret.”

“Mr. Smith, even if I wanted to, I can’t. The way Mom and I work, sex changes us. Whoever I end up with won’t be able to bond me without difficulty.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” he waved dismissively. “I read the information. Yet your mother had sex with me last night, several times in fact, without any ill effects. She is having sex again, right now. If sex were an issue, Mr. Timms wouldn’t treat his pet like a tray of party favors.”

Stephanie couldn’t think of a rejoinder. She also questioned the actual onset of the bond. Mom made it seem like an almost instant thing. Maybe it was a gradual process?

Smith nodded. “I see you’re thinking about it. You also see the fallacy. One little tryst will hardly make an impact. There is one more item for you to consider. If you do not have sex with

me, and if I buy you, I'll wait until you are completely addicted, then have you perform the most degrading acts I can imagine. I guarantee it will not go well for you."

"Uh, uh," Stephanie stood and moved to place her chair between them. "No way!" If she couldn't give it to Jason, no one could have it without a fight.

Smith moved faster than Stephanie expected. He reached past the chair, grasped her arms, and pulled her onto the table. Within the span of a few heartbeats, the surprisingly strong old man pinned her shoulders to the tabletop and propped her knees over his shoulders. In this position, she had almost no leverage.

Natalie knelt in front of Daniel and pulled his boxers down to his ankles. His engorged penis bobbed in front of her. *Bah*, she thought, *men and their meat sticks. They'd sulk all night if you laughed.* A quick sideways glance showed Gene settling in on a chair. She gave him a wink then turned back to this *nekul'turnyy* man-child. Daniel's eyes met hers, and Natalie gave him her best wide-eyed, naughty smile. *Oh, yes, please allow me to suck your penis. Give me your semen; you have little else of worth.* Keeping her eyes on his, she swallowed his cock.

Sex with anyone other than her owner never quite satisfied her bond. Oh, episodes like last night's came close. Mr. Smith gave her the bone then pushed buttons she didn't know she had. Tonight's announcement that she'd entertain the son had come with a pang of disappointment. Still, a girl had to take what pleasures she could. Natalie clamped her lips tight and sucked.

A scant minute later, the young man's sudden groan announced his release. Bitter, salty, delicious semen wet her tongue. It flooded her mouth, the amount a pleasant surprise. Daniel crumpled back onto the bed. Natalie followed, sucking and swallowing.

"Oh my god," Daniel groaned. "I've never—" His words cut off when Natalie stood and slipped out of her little black dress.

The taste of semen woke Natalie's lust. That, coupled with her irritation with his rude behavior, solidified her plans. Daniel needed to learn a lesson. She stood and removed her dress, leaving only her stockings and heels. When she spoke, her Ukrainian origin tinted her words. "You will do more, yes?"

Daniel nodded, and after kicking his boxers free, crawled back onto the bed. On her knees, Natalie followed, a red fox stalking a helpless little rabbit. Then, with her prey cornered and quivering, the fox spun about, lifting one leg over his chest. Across the room, Gene's eyes locked with hers. She licked her lips and crawled back, pressing herself onto Daniel's face.

His tongue and lips worked feverishly. Natalie rocked her hips forward and back, sliding over his face, testing the limits of his...devotion.

"Ahhh..." Natalie purred, satisfied with his willingness. She shifted back, focusing his mouth where it would do *her* the most good. "You *are* a good boy, aren't you?" His vigorous nod sent a shiver up her spine.

Two bed-shaking orgasms later, Natalie took Daniel's cock back into her mouth. She gave him credit for his unflagging tongue. The son might never equal the father's raw skill, but quantity did have a certain quality. The tingles built, heralding her third orgasm. It was time to switch up and give Gene his show.

She didn't understand why Gene enjoyed watching her fuck other people. Nor did she care. Gene owned her, and other than the bone-deep, mind-melting pleasure she received from sex with him, she didn't like him. She'd happily go two to three weeks between their couplings. Although after the third week, flu-like symptoms reminded Natalie of her addiction. By the

fourth week, she could barely move, could barely function, much less think. Twice, so she'd remember her place, he'd made her wait five weeks. Those times, she became like an animal, doing anything and everything necessary to appease the bond. She didn't think she'd survive six weeks of deprivation.

Glancing at Gene, Natalie noted his drooping posture. His eyes, however, remained bright. She lifted from Daniel's face at the same time she pulled her mouth free. The young man's penis remained up and twitching as if seeking her touch. *Don't worry, little penis, you'll have all the contact you wish.*

Turning about slowly, Natalie gave Gene time to savor the view of her wet bottom. The cool air in the room was very noticeable. She poised above Daniel, the head of his penis pressing against her opening. The eyes of her little rabbit alight in anticipation. "Beg me, Daniel," she whispered. "Say, please."

"P-please?"

She pushed, allowing his girth to spread her open, to give him a taste. Then she stopped, completely in control. "What's my name, Daniel?"

"Uh?" The man's throat worked. "You're Natalie." Then he understood. "Please fuck me, Natalie."

"See," she said, sinking down, his penis stretching and filling her. "You are *such* a good boy."

Daniel's hands reached towards her breasts. Natalie batted them away and pressed his wrists to the mattress. The message clear; he was to lay there while she fucked *him*. After he understood, she rewarded him by leaning forward and allowing him to suckle her breasts. The same mouth that pleased her before did so again, and she revised her opinion of his skill. With her tutelage, this one might be worth something. The mental image of auctioning off a string of trained lovers made her chuckle.

Once again, the tingles built, adding layers to what promised to become a superior orgasm. Daniel groaned and bucked. Each bump edged her closer. He groaned again, this time with an edge of alarm, the internal stretch increased as he swelled. *Not yet, little rabbit*, she reached back and flicked a finger against his testicles.

Daniel flinched, his eyes opened wide in surprise and something else. Fear? Betrayal?

"Not yet, little rabbit." she purred.

With his rise to orgasm reset, Natalie set to work on her own release, each downward stroke accompanied with a grind against his pelvis. Close, closer, the muscles in her thighs fluttered. Orgasm number three swept over her. Natalie gasped; her strokes suddenly chaotic. Her pelvic muscles squeezed and squeezed and squeezed.

When she opened her eyes, Natalie found herself lying on top of Daniel, still impaled on his member. He was so erect she felt his pulse beating inside of her. Her cheek, where it pressed against his chest, felt damp. She sat up and wiped her face, surprised the wetness felt like tears. Below her, the younger Smith gazed up, his eyes soft and full of wonder.

Satisfied with the quality of her performance, Natalie turned her head to see if Gene agreed. After this little show, he'd screw her until she blacked out. Gene sat perfectly still, his head back. He wasn't breathing.

Natalie lifted up, trying to get to Gene. Daniel pulled her back onto him. Well, he tried. Natalie noticed the extra drag and dealt with it expeditiously. She reached back and delivered an open-handed slap to his genitals.

By the time Daniel recoiled away, Natalie had Gene on the floor and began rescue breathing. His pulse was present, but weak. She gave him another two breathes. “Daniel?” Natalie called.

The bed rustled, and Daniel rolled over to sit on the edge of the bed. Both hands covered his junk. The rabbit’s eyes widened at the sight of Gene. “Shit, is he dead?”

Natalie gave Gene another two breathes. “I need a first aid kit, one with an auto-defibrillator.”

“Right,” he answered and ran out of the room. It surprised the hell out of her when he returned, kit in hand.

The kit included a state-of-the-art automated external defibrillator. Natalie activated it and followed the device's instructions. After pressing the “Analyze” button, she continued with the rescue breathing. The AED advised no shocks were necessary. A minute later, Gene took a breath on his own.

“Jeez,” Daniel whined, plopping onto the bed, “Dad never expected this.” Seconds later, he stood on his toes, Natalie’s left hand around his neck.

“What did you do to Gene?” she asked.

“GAAHH...I didn’t do anything. I swear! It was all Dad’s idea.”

She stroked his manhood with her free hand. “Tell me, Daniel, or I’ll hurt you.”

“D-Dad d-drugged the vodka.” He paused, but when Natalie didn’t say anything, he continued. “He wanted to screw Stephanie and get a better price.”

“Shit.” Natalie released Daniel, and he dropped to his knees. “Go stand in the corner.” Daniel ran, eager to comply. Natalie returned to the floor, watching Gene.

Minutes passed. Daniel coughed. “Excuse me, Natalie?”

“What?” she didn’t turn away from her owner.

“Aren’t you worried about Stephanie?”

“No. You should worry about your father.”

Stephanie found her parents upstairs. The second door on the left opened to a well-furnished bedroom with a seriously rumpled bed. In the far corner of the room, Daniel huddled naked against the wall. On the floor, in the center of the room, Mom bent over Gene.

“Mom? Stephanie cried out while running in, “are you all right?”

Instead of answering, her mother held up a finger, the universal symbol for “Wait!” Gene groaned, it sounded weak. Mom sat back but continued to watch him. When Gene continued to breathe on his own, she spoke. “I’m fine, sweetie. What happened to Mr. Smith?”

“The old perv tried to rape me, so I kicked him. Maybe you could check him for me? One of his pupils is a lot bigger than the other.”

“Concussion,” mom nodded. “Was he breathing?”

“Yeah. I tied him up before coming to find you.”

“Good. Come here and watch Gene. I need to get dressed.”

“What about him?” Stephanie nodded towards the man cowering in the corner.

Mom shook out her dress and slipped it over her head. “Daniel won’t give us any trouble.” She turned and gave him a stern look. “Will you?”

“No, ma’am.” Daniel shook his head. His feet slid out from under him when he tried to push further back into the corner.

Mr. Smith remained on the dining room floor, hog-tied with drapery tiebacks. Mom rolled him over and grimaced when she saw the heel-shaped bruise forming on his forehead. “Sweetie, I am so glad you wore flats tonight.”

Smith began a slurred diatribe, threatening legal action against Stephanie for attempted murder.

Mom stepped back. “Hold him up, sweetie.”

Stephanie stepped forward, and with one hand, lifted the older man to his feet. Even concussed, Mr. Smith knew when to keep quiet.

Looking the old man in the eye, Natalie said. “Mr. Smith, your biggest problem isn’t my daughter. My owner, who you drugged, will come for you as soon as he recovers. I do not envy you or your son.” When she stepped back, Stephanie let go of his shirt. The old man grunted when he hit the floor.

Outside, at the van, Natalie and Stephanie eased Gene onto the van’s back seat. The door to the house clicked open, and several footsteps scuffed across the asphalt. Stephanie turned and crouched, prepared to attack. *If that old perv is coming after me...*

“Natalie?” The voice, though, belonged to the old perv’s son. They’d left Daniel huddled upstairs. At Mom’s request, he’d promised to stay put.

Inside the van, Natalie sighed. “Damn it, let me out, sweetie.”

Eavesdropping was not something Stephanie usually did, but for this, she’d make an exception.

“What are you doing here?” Mom demanded.

“I – I want to apologize.”

“You want to apologize to me?”

“Yeah. What we did was shitty. I didn’t expect you to be...a person. I’m sorry.”

“No human has ever apologized to me. Thank you.”

“Look, I have my own money. Not as much as Dad, and...not enough to buy Stephanie, but if you two want to come with me, I’ll keep you safe. Natalie, no one should have to do what you did.”

Mom turned back to the van and said, “Stephanie, keep an eye on Gene, I’m going to say goodbye to Daniel.

Ten minutes later, Stephanie slid behind the wheel and engaged the van’s autopilot. In the back, Mom sat next to Gene and watched him breathe.

“Mom? What just happened? I can’t believe—”

“Daniel fetched the first aid kit that might have saved Gene’s life. All I did was say thanks, the best way I know. Besides, it was the only time I’ve ever done it of my own free will.”

Not knowing what the Smiths might do, they stopped at the motel, and Mom checked them out.

Stephanie and her mother took turns sitting behind the steering wheel while the van drove itself home. Outside of St Louis, Gene woke, and Mom filled him in until he drifted off again. Near Indianapolis, Gene woke again and insisted they turn around. He wanted to murder Mr. Smith. It took Mom a lot of patient words to change his mind. Never before had Stephanie seen this type of interaction between her parents. In an odd and very dysfunctional fashion, they reminded her of Jason’s parents. *Oh, my goodness, Jason!*

He had to be frantic. Alfred's cameras always worked, and Jason had to know when they left on this trip. Worrying about him made it easy to tune out her parents. Their conversation had become, in an odd way, sappy. She really didn't need to know their pet names.

At a rest stop outside of Columbus, Stephanie slipped away from her parents. A public internet terminal gave her an idea. Opening the email client, she sent a message to their shared inbox. "I'm almost home, miss you. Steffi.

Mom gave her the hairy eyeball when she slipped back behind Gene.

Back home, Mom carried Gene upstairs and put him to bed. Stephanie carried the bags inside and too exhausted to shower and sleep, put the tea kettle on the stove. Later, Mom, with her hair in a towel and wearing a pink kimono, joined her.

Stephanie poured a cup of tea and passed it across the table. "How do you do it, Mom? You're like Superwoman."

"Well," Mom said with superhero-like bombast, "if you can avoid tripping over your cape, the rest is easy." She sipped the tea, and her eyes popped open. "What did you do to this?"

"Like it?"

"I love it! Mmmm, it's so bitter, it's wonderful."

"I added some of Gene's aromatic bitters."

After taking another appreciative sip, Mom set her cup down. "Speaking of heroics, you've done me proud, daughter."

Thinking Mom meant her knocking out Mr. Smith, she replied. "It's not like I had a choice."

"Don't downplay how well you kept calm." She saluted Stephanie with her teacup. "Now, to the important item. Do you still miss Jason?"

"I do," she felt a goofy smile sneak out. "I miss him a lot."

"I thought so. Hold still, I still need to check you out." Mom leaned forward and held the palm of her hand against Stephanie's forehead. After a few seconds, she frowned.

"What's wrong, Mom?"

"You don't feel any warmer than usual. I thought you said you missed Jason?"

"I'd be with him right now if not for..." Instead of finishing, she glanced upwards. Her point clear.

"But you're not running a fever. Are you nauseous?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Joint pain?"

"Nope!"

Mom sat back and frowned. "I don't get it. How is it you're missing Jason so much, yet not showing any symptoms?" Mom tapped an index finger to her lips and frowned. "Could it be?" She leaned forward. "Tell me, do you enjoy his company? When he smiles, how do you feel?"

"Of course, I do. And when Jace smiles at me," Stephanie grinned again, "All I want is him."

"I wouldn't have thought it possible. One of my daughters..."

"What?"

"Um, hmm. And when Jason kisses you? How do you feel?"

"Mom!" Stephanie felt her face heat up. "Do I have to answer that?"

"Does it make you squirmy, like you want more, and that you don't want it to stop?"

"Yes, but—"

"All that and no symptoms. Well, there's only one thing it can be."

"What?" Mom had her worried.

“You, little miss, are in love with him.” Mom sat back and chuckled. “Imagine that, one of *my* daughters in love with a man.”

Chapter Seven

In the News Today: Deep in the Australian outback, rescue workers reached the crash site of the Flat Earth Society's rocket. There were no survivors. The automatic cameras were also missing.

The sudden knock on his closed bedroom door startled Jason out of his funk.

"All right, Mr. End of the World," his mother said, sticking her head inside. "You've sulked in your room for three days straight. It's time to get over it."

Keeping his head down, Jason replied, "It's not sulking. It's depression."

Seconds passed before Mom sighed, then his mattress huffed as she sat on the bed. "She's been away for what, three days. It's not the end of the world."

"I did something dumb and screwed it all up."

"Jason Todd Thomas, did you do something to Stephanie? I swear if you—"

Alarmed, Jason spun his chair around. Facing his mother, he said, "No, mom, no! I'd never do anything like that."

Mom crossed her arms. Agitated, her right foot tapped the floor. "Then what?"

"I told her that I love her, and...and she told me she didn't feel the same." The last half of his sentence came in a rush.

Mom's expression relaxed. "Jason, you are very much your father's son. Both of you are clueless when it comes to women."

"What do you mean?" A faint stirring of hope colored his words. Mom's insight would help.

"Any dummy could take one look at her and know she's crazy about you."

"But—"

"But nothing! She's sixteen, Jason. How many boyfriends has she had? Being in love isn't something everyone instantly recognizes. Give the poor girl time."

"Oh, I, ah, I didn't think of that."

"Like I said, you are your father's son."

"What should I do?"

"Keep yourself busy. The grass needs cut, and my van needs vacuumed out and washed. If you keep busy, you won't have time to mope."

Trust a parent to use chores as problem solvers. “I meant about Stephanie.”
“Be patient.”

Both of his parents got in on the fun. Dad mentioned the garage needed cleaning and organized. Keeping busy kept him from worrying too much. He cleaned cars, cut grass, trimmed bushes, and painted the ceiling in the guest room. Mom said he’d paint the rest of the room after she picked out the color scheme.

Around two PM on the second day of his chore-a-thon, Alfred interrupted Jason while he washed the paintbrushes. “Master Jason?”

“Yes, Alfred?”

“You have a text message from Miss Stephanie. It is on your tablet.”

Jason ran upstairs to his room. On the center of the screen, a small text box had opened. In it a short message. “I’m almost home, miss you. Steph.”

He read the message three times before he took another breath.

Mom found him sitting on the family room couch, game controller in hand, while the title screen of a go-kart racing game looped on the video display. He didn’t notice her presence until her hand pressed against his forehead.

“Hmm,” Mom said, “you don’t have a fever.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ve been sitting down here for over an hour, with that game music blaring. What’s going on?”

“She’s coming home.”

“Who? Oh,” Mom’s eyes twinkled when she understood. “You’ve heard from Stephanie.”

“Yeah, she’s coming home.”

“Well, of course, she’s coming home. I swear, Jason, she has you wrapped around her little finger.”

On the afternoon of his eighth day without Stephanie, Jason found another AI-related subject to study, this one involved theoretical distributed processing. Instead of using a single, local CPU, an AI might use additional external CPU cores. Latency across a LAN would be an issue, but what if he could reduce the lag? Ideas flew through his head, he typed them into his notepad app.

Engrossed in his studies, Jason never noticed the shadow on the floor outside of his room. Nor did he hear the stealthy footsteps creeping up behind him. He almost dropped his tablet in surprise when its screen changed to a collage of pictures featuring Stephanie. One of the pictures featured them holding game controllers and sitting together on the family room couch. He recognized the scene, and there hadn’t been anyone else in the room. Who took these pictures, and why did they show up on his tablet now?

A pair of hands pressed against his shoulders, and Stephanie said, “Surprise!” a moment before she kissed his cheek. From the corner of his eye, he followed her gaze to his tablet. “Wow,” she said, “you must have really missed me.”

“I did.” Jason glanced up towards Alfred’s camera. The little blue LED blinked on, then off, almost as if it winked.

“A good boyfriend like you deserves a special reward.”

He stood, well, he tried to stand, but Stephanie pulled him up from his seat. Her strength was more amusing now than a surprise. Together, they stumbled across the room to his bed, where Stephanie pushed him down. She ended up on top, one knee between his, and...he heard footsteps on the stairs.

By the time his mother made it to his open bedroom door, Jason had managed to sit up with both of his feet on the floor. In the same amount of time, Stephanie made it across the room and sat on his chair by the desk.

“Hey, you two,” Mom said, glancing around the room. If she noticed either teen's breathless condition, she didn't mention it. “Sorry to interrupt your reunion celebration, but it's a beautiful day outside. I'm going to change and get in the pool.” She smiled and turned away. Several seconds later, Mom's bedroom door clicked shut.

Jason and Stephanie stared at each other, neither daring to comment on his mother's announcement. Jason smiled. “I really did miss you.”

“I missed you too. We, ah, we need to talk.”

“Uh, oh, what's wrong?”

“What do you mean, what's wrong?”

“Everyone knows a relationship's in trouble when the girl say's ‘we need to talk.’”

Scowling, Stephanie shook her head. “Where do you get those things?” He started to answer, but she waved him off. “Never mind, we aren't having problems,” then she grinned. It was a sneaky kind of smile. “I decided to reinterpret my promise to Mom.”

They'd discussed her promise in generalities. He'd refused to pressure her over it, saying whatever she felt comfortable with was fine. Of course, he wanted more. The episode from the previous week made it painfully clear. He considered asking if her mother knew about the new promise but decided to keep quiet.

“You know me, Sweetheart, I'll always back your decisions,”

“Now,” she nodded, “that's more like it.”

When Jason asked about her recent trip, Stephanie didn't go into detail.

“Gene...took us on one of his business trips.”

Once, for “Take your kid to work,” Dad took Jason to his office. It had been boring. Mr. Timms sold stuff, maybe it wasn't boring. “Was it fun?”

Stephanie paled. “No! It was...I'd say bad, but...No, it wasn't fun.”

“Oh, want to talk about it?”

Instead of answering, Stephanie shook her head. She pivoted the chair until she faced his wall-mounted comm display. “Why do you like that old Mars rover so much?”

“Opportunity? Heck, it outlasted its life expectancy by fourteen years. Until Space X's failed colony attempt, nothing else came close.”

“Is that all?”

“I'm a geek, I like geeky things.”

“What about me? Am I a geeky thing too?”

“While you are not geeky, you are the ultimate prize for a geeky boy like me..”

A cough interrupted them. Mom stood in the doorway. She wore a robe over a stylish two-piece swimming suit. “Jason, remember the talk you had with your father. I'll be in the pool for a good while.”

After his mother turned towards the stairs, Stephanie whispered, “What did your Dad say?”

Jason grinned, what else could he do? Nodding towards his dresser, he whispered back, “Top drawer.”

Obviously curious, Stephanie hopped up and opened the drawer. The box of condoms, still unopened, sat right in the front.

“Dad bought them for me a few weeks back. He thought I might persuade you to do something improper. Apparently, my parents think you are a saint, and I’m a dirty-minded horndog.”

Stephanie lifted out the package and spoke while reading the label. “You *are* a dirty-minded horndog.”

“Says the girl with that little red skirt.”

Box in hand, Stephanie stepped back to the bed and plopped down. “You’re not going to let that go, are you?”

“Are you kidding?” He held up his thumb and index finger, a fraction of an inch apart. “We were that close to doing it,”

“I wish we had,” she mused

“Says the girl holding the condoms.”

“It’s different now.”

“Let’s talk.” Jason scooted back until his back rested against the wall. Stephanie, condoms in hand, scooted back between his legs and leaned back against his chest. Wrapping his arms around her came really easy. “Tell me what’s different, and please don’t say, “It’s complicated.”

“It’s not complicated.”

“Says the girl with complicated issues.”

“Do you want to hear this or not?”

“Says the girl—” Stephanie turned her head and glowered. He got the message and apologized. “Sorry.”

“The other week, I ovulated. It causes mood swings. That one was pretty mild. Other times, I can get really angry.”

“Do you get friskier too? ’cause if you do, sign me up.”

“If you’re trying to talk your way out of a special reward, you’re doing a superb job.”

“Ouch. I’ll just shut up.”

“Good idea. Gene took Mom and me on a business trip. The deal went bad for him. Mom and I had to help. The whole thing still stresses me out. All I want is you to hold me...and tell me you love me.”

“Whoa, sure.” Jason hugged her as hard as he dared. Her shoulders were right there, so he kissed both sides of her neck. Not wanting to hurt her ears, he kept his voice low. “I love you, Stephanie.”

Stephanie twisted almost completely around and kissed him back. “I-I love you too.” Her words came slowly, almost as if she needed to taste each one.

“Hey, where did that come from?”

“On the trip, Mom and I couldn’t talk much. So, I thought about us.”

“What did you come up with?”

“That I love you too, and there’s some wiggle room in my promise.”

“Wiggle room?”

“Uh, huh. Wanna see?”

“Sure.”

They'd spent the afternoon celebrating their reunion and, in between Alfred's weather announcements, exploring their new boundaries. By the time Mom found them, they were downstairs playing with his game console.

Later, after Dad arrived home, he took Mom out for dinner. "You and Stephanie can fend for yourselves." Jason didn't miss the extra stern stare.

Jason kept it simple and ordered Chinese food for delivery. He and Stephanie shared spicy Szechwan Chicken and crispy pork eggrolls. She'd never eaten anything like it. They took turns using the chopsticks to feed each other. After cleaning up the kitchen counter, they spent the evening enjoying each other's company.

Several late-summer lightning bugs flitted about the Timms' back yard, each searching for a mate. Jason and Stephanie sat at the top of her porch steps, his back against a column. The girl he considered to be his life mate leaned against his chest. At this moment, life was exceptionally good.

"Did I do okay?" he asked. Stephanie already said as much, several times, in fact. Each time she'd told him, he felt ten feet tall. Another life accomplishment in the bag.

"I think you like hearing about it more than anything else."

"Not exactly, but yeah. It surprised me how much I love making you happy. You really are the girl for me."

"Well, you were wonderful."

Across the yard, Jason's deck light came on, his parents notice to return home.

"Are you sure I can't come up and tuck you in?" he asked. The flat of his right palm slipped across her tummy.

"I wouldn't mind, but mom would have kittens."

"Yeah, my parents too." Jason sighed. "If we were older and I had my own place, would you move in with me?"

"That's a lot of 'ifs,' but *if* I could, I'd move in and stay with you forever."

Without speaking, because they both knew the drill, Jason walked Stephanie to the door and kissed her good night.

They stayed up late, sending silly text messages back and forth. Around midnight, Stephanie signed off. Her mother was activating the security system and going to bed. Stephanie's last message was a short video, a selfie of her lying in bed, barely wearing his Slayer T-shirt, and blowing him a kiss. Jason copied the image to his private cloud storage.

In the morning, Jason found his way to the kitchen for breakfast. He and Stephanie planned on swimming this afternoon. His mind already replaying images of Steph in her green string bikini.

Across the table, His father read the morning news on his text viewer. They nodded to each other. Dad set his display down and said, "Have you started on the garage yet?"

Surprised, Jason tried and failed to think of a reasonable excuse. He said. "Sorry, I've been busy."

"Busy with your girlfriend, no doubt. Son, I understand, but you need to be more responsible. Today is Tuesday, have it finished by Friday or there will be repercussions.

"I am so screwed," Jason said.

He stood at the open garage door, staring inside. Stacks of cardboard boxes, trash bags, and neoplas moving crates competed for space with the odd bit of unused furniture. From a parent's point of view, telling your teenaged son to "Go forth and clean," probably seemed like a reasonable idea. The reality for the teen was anything but reasonable. The enormity of the task threatened to overwhelm him. To compound his problem, Dad threatened repercussions if he failed to finish this by Friday.

He'd never experienced what his dad called repercussions. Knowing his father, they would be bad.

Consumed by indecision, Jason didn't notice Stephanie until she pinched his butt.

"H-Hey!" Jason spun in place. Stephanie, her eyes full of mischief, waited for a kiss. This was an easy decision. He puckered up and kissed her. "How come you can pinch me, but I can't pinch you?"

"I never said you can't pinch me. Just make sure you can handle the consequences."

"Can we negotiate the consequences? I'm already under the gun here." He explained Dad's ultimatum.

"Lucky for you, I can help."

They got busy. Starting at the door, Stephanie surveyed the contents of each container. She'd then point to a spot, and like a well-trained pack mule, Jason moved the "stuff." Order began to replace the chaos.

Despite Stephanie's seriousness, she found plenty of opportunities to pat, prod, or pinch him. A few times, he managed to do the same with her. Most of the time, she'd catch him reaching and dodge aside, redirecting him to another pile of "stuff." It worked out that each box or bag moved earned him another chance. After the first thirty minutes or so, he detected a pattern. A successful pinch earned him several consecutive misses, while she rewarded each nice touch with an easy follow-up.

"I feel like one of Pavlov's dogs," he said and woofed. Stephanie waggled her eyebrows.

While his girlfriend stood several feet inside the garage, Jason deposited another neoplas crate outside. The back door to his house opened. Purse in hand, Mom stepped out. She had that purposeful, "I'm going shopping" stride. Of course, she'd stop at the garage to check on their progress. Jason timed her approach, then turned and walked back into the garage, passing close to his playful girlfriend. As he expected, Stephanie took the bait.

As Stephanie's hand pressed against his butt, Jason heard his mother speak "I'm going shop—"

The pressure from Stephanie's hand vanished so fast it might never have existed. She said, "Good morning, Mrs. Thomas." Jason turned around in time to see Stephanie facing his mother.

"Good morning, Stephanie," his mother said, "it's nice to see you giving Jason a hand."

Jason couldn't help it, laughter exploded from him. Both his mother and Stephanie glanced at him.

His mother grinned. "I'm going to the store, is there anything you need, Jason?"

"I don't think so, Mom."

"Jason needs body wash and toothpaste," said Stephanie.

Amused, Shirley asked, "Any particular type of body wash?"

"Something light, he doesn't need anything strong."

"I don't know how Jason managed to survive without you, Stephanie. I'll take care of it."

After Mom drove away, Stephanie shifted to the full Displeased Girlfriend Glare. “You rat, what if she sent me home?”

“Mom likes you. Heck, I think she likes you more than she likes me. She and Dad are all concerned about the terrible things I might do to you.”

“What do you mean, ‘might do?’” Anyone else might fall for her hands-on-hips, offended girl” act. He, however, knew that particular look was a sham.

“Well, I might do more if you ask nicely,” he said.

“Like I should have to ask?”

Jason stepped closer and nuzzled her neck. Stephanie tilted her head to give him better access. “No, you don’t have to ask. Let’s take a break. I’ll make up for doing all those terrible things. and we can give each other a special reward.” Instead of waiting for her reply, he took her hand and walked towards the old loveseat stashed against the wall. Without a word, she followed.

Tapping her fingers on the steering wheel, Shirley Thomas sang along with another of her favorite oldies. “...*Come on to me, come on to me now...*” The autopilot beeped to signal arrival, and she took control, steering the minivan into her driveway. Ahead, inside the garage, Jason carried a cardboard box and placed it where Stephanie directed. Shirley chuckled, *Nothing wrong with the balance of power in their relationship.*

After parking and popping the hatch on her minivan, Shirley strolled into the garage to survey the progress. The teen’s rumpled clothes and red faces painted a picture of diligent, hard at work teens. “It looks like you two have been busy, you’re both red-faced. Maybe you should take a break?”

Why can’t Dad go digital? The unwieldy carton, filled with back issues of the Pennsylvania Lawyer magazine, slipped out of his grasp for the second time. Squatting to try again, he glanced across the garage just in time to watch Stephanie bend over an open cardboard box. His eyes followed her legs until they disappeared under her skirt. She had to know he’d look. The angle was perfect. Lots of leg and the goods, neatly hidden in shadow. Ever since she pushed their boundaries out, seeing those shadowed goods became a priority.

The box was heavy. Jason should have used the two-wheeler. He took another peek, this time catching Stephanie checking to see if he’d seen her. The color on her cheeks told all he needed to know. With a renewed vigor, he hoisted the carton up and carried it out to the pile.

“What’s this, Jace?” she called.

“One second, sweetheart.” The box joined a stack of similar boxes filling the center of his father’s usual parking spot.

“Let me see.” he leaned over the box, the knuckles of his right-hand brushing across the back of Stephanie’s thigh. Was it his imagination, or did she shiver? “Oh, that’s dad’s tent. He bought it for camping, but we never went.”

Her fingers slipped over his and squeezed, raising goosebumps on his arm. Stephanie said, “I’ve never been inside a tent. Can we set it up?”

Jason helped himself to a second helping of Mom's key lime chicken. Across the table, his parents discussed having another after dark, adult swim. Anything involving his parents and darkness usually resulted in a happy mom in the morning, and that meant waffles. If he could leverage his parent's happy thoughts into permission to set up the tent, then he'd make Stephanie happy. While a happy Stephanie didn't result in waffles, it did have other fringe benefits.

Plans for their late date complete, his parents resumed eating. Now would be a good time to ask. "Excuse me, Dad," Jason said, "can Stephanie and I set up your tent?"

"When will you finish the garage?" Dad had that cagey lawyer look in his eyes.

"Everything's sorted. There's a pile of your stuff left. Once you go through it, we'll put the rest away."

"Let me guess, Stephanie helped." Dad held up a hand to prevent Jason from answering. "Son, if you ever manage to marry her, you're going to have a wonderful life." Jason's father, demonstrating wisdom, reached over and took Mom's hand. "Just like me."

Dad turned to Mom. "What do you think?"

"I think the flower beds need to be dug out and the frames installed."

"Is that suitable, Jason? Build your mother's flower beds, and you can set up the tent."

Jason nodded.

Satisfied, Dad nodded, changing the subject. "School starts up soon. What if you find a different girl at school, or if she finds another boyfriend?"

"Stef is homeschooled. As for me, I can't imagine finding a girl better than Steph."

Dad shrugged. "I can't either. It's too bad her parents are always working. I'd like to meet them."

"Me too," Mom said, "They've raised an exceptional daughter."

Unleashed on their tent project, they had it assembled in short order. Then Stephanie read the instructions. Under her guidance, they took it apart and reassembled the tent properly.

The tent provided fresh air, cool shade, and a certain delicious measure of privacy. Stephanie lay on her stomach with her shirt pulled up to her shoulders. Jason sat next to her and ran his fingertips up and down her back. Sometimes, his fingers found their way down her side or under the waistband of her skirt. He never lingered too long or went too far, and Steffi never seemed to notice. The flush on her neck, however, told him everything.

"Mmmm..." she groaned. "Your fingers make me squirmy."

"I love touching you," Jason replied. He thought about reaching down and running a hand up the back of her legs.

Stephanie noticed the rough edge to his voice. "What are you thinking, Jason?" her voice had a familiar playful lilt.

Surprised by the question, he told her the truth. "I think I'm the luckiest boy in the world."

Without any warning, Stephanie rolled onto her back and pulled Jason down to her. This far away from Alfred's pickups, they enjoyed an uninterrupted snog.

Stephanie asked, "Do you think your parents would let us sleep out here tonight?"

"Just us, alone? No way. Dad gives me the "you're old enough to make bad decisions" talk every couple of days."

"What about the condoms?" She glared past him, towards his house. "Not that we're going to use them, but why buy them for you, if you don't have a chance to use them?"

"It's Mom and Dad's way of keeping me honest. Mom likes you, ask her."

“Never mind, my mom wouldn’t go for it anyway. Hmm, what if you ask about sleeping out without mentioning me?”

“Mom, Dad, do you think I can camp outside in the tent tonight?”

“I don’t see why not. If you need anything, Alfred can let you in.”

On his way out to the tent, Jason grabbed his tablet. He found a few other online tutorials to read.

Out of the corner of her eye, Natalie kept an eye on her daughter. The girl had something on her mind. It had to be Romeo related. After all, according to Stephanie, the sun rose just to make him happy. Of late, unless Gene was home, most conversations revolved around the young, Mr. Wonderful. In a way, her daughter’s claims of honest affection for the boy gave Natalie an odd feeling. She never had an opportunity to fall in love. If not for the ancient romantic comedies—*Pretty Woman* hit especially close to home—she wouldn’t even know romantic love existed. After numerous, impossible to ignore sighs, Stephanie finally worked up the nerve to ask a question.

“Mom, can I visit Jason tonight?”

Natalie glanced at the digital clock. “Tonight? It’s almost ten o’clock. He’s probably in bed.”

“He’s sleeping out in his tent tonight. I thought I could go and see him.” Anyone else, looking upon Stephanie, would see a proper young woman, a picture of purity and innocent intent.

Natalie knew her daughter as well as she knew herself. The thought of Stephanie alone in a tent with her equally smitten boyfriend sounded like a recipe for disaster. Natalie rolled her eyes, careful not to allow Stephanie to see. “Absolutely not, little miss. We’ve talked all about that.” Of course, they both understood the nature of “that.”

“Mom,” (It still amazed Natalie how much anguish Stephanie could pack into a short, single-syllable word.) “we just want to talk.”

“No way. I’m sorry, sweetie. If things get out of hand, our plans are ruined.”

Natalie had to give the girl credit. She didn’t scream or put up a fuss. Instead, she replied with a calm voice. “Okay, Mom, I guess I’ll go to bed instead. Good night.”

Natalie waited a bit before climbing the stairs herself and getting ready for bed. She might have made more noise than usual. After shutting off the master bedroom light, she crept downstairs to wait in the kitchen.

She didn’t have to wait long. Less than ten minutes later, Stephanie, barefoot and wearing a short cotton nightshirt, slipped into the kitchen and opened the security system door. It hadn’t occurred to Natalie that her daughter also knew how to hack the cameras.

When Stephanie stepped to the back door, Natalie spoke, “You’re still going to meet Jason? Even though you know, you shouldn’t?”

Stephanie stopped with one hand on the door handle. “I love him, Momma.”

Natalie sighed and stood. Even though this was a terrible idea, she knew her daughter believed her affections were real. “I know you do. Tell me, daughter, what’s it like loving Jason?”

“It’s the best thing in the world. He makes my heart smile.”

Natalie stepped close and hugged her youngest daughter. “I’m so happy for you.” She pulled back and met her daughter’s eyes. “I suppose after Kansas, you fully understand the stakes if you go too far?”

“I do, Momma.”

Stephanie stepped back as Natalie opened the outside door. Without looking back, Steffi vanished into Jason’s yard.

As they had arranged, Jason left the tent's door unzipped. Steph slipped under the flap and after fumbling around, zipped it shut. She felt Jason stir next to her. With the door zipped shut, she sat and flicked on their battery-powered lantern.

"I didn't think you'd come."

"Mom didn't want me to. She thinks we'll do something we shouldn't."

In the dim light, Stephanie saw Jason's grin. "Will we?" he asked.

"Maybe. You know how I feel about you."

"I feel the same about you, sweetheart."

Stephanie dimmed the lantern and slid into Jason's open sleeping bag. She caught one of his hands and held it. "Kiss me, Jason."

It was the cardinal that saved them.

Jason woke from a deep sleep. Echoes of a dream lingered, although the details faded as he tried to pin them down. All that remained was a jumbled recollection of he and Steffi making out, and...and a warm body stirred next to him.

Opening his eyes, a mass of dark red hair shared his pillow. He reached out, and less than an inch of space separated them. His hand found Stephanie’s waist and bunched up nightshirt, lower down her bare hip.

He and Stephanie had a plan. She’d slip back into her house before morning. But things got intense, and certain boundaries became fuzzier. Not that anything too serious happened, he’d remember if it had. If *that* happened, he’d better remember.

Last night’s fuzzy boundaries and Stephanie’s warmth tempted him to freshen his memories. Instead, he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled their bodies together, big spoon to little spoon. She stirred again and shifted a hand to cover his. He marveled at how well they fit together.

From the tree above the tent, the bright, two-part trill of a cardinal announced a new day.

“Jason,” said Stephanie, “did we fall asleep?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Let me up, I need to go home.”

Before letting go, he gave her a squeeze and kissed her shoulder. “I love you, sweetheart.”

Stephanie rolled over to face him, one of her legs nudged its way between his. The implicit intimacy reflected the new fuzzier boundaries. “I love you too, Jace.” Stretching, she kissed his cheek. Her eyes sparkled, “Do you dare risk my morning breath?”

“Since every part of you is perfect, I do. What about mine?”

Her lips pressed against his then opened in a kiss as deep as any from the previous night. Except for the beat of his heart, everything else slowed.

The happy cardinal trilled again. Regretfully, Jason and Stephanie pulled away from each other. He said, "Now I know why sleeping together is so dangerous. It's the waking up part. I'm going to take a long, cold shower."

"Me too," she said.

Slowly, because neither of them wanted this moment to end, they sat up. Jason unzipped the door and checked outside. Except for the one lamp on his deck, all the lights in his house remained off. "It's clear," he said, then crawled out and held the flap. Stephanie followed and stood, straightening her nightshirt.

"I'll walk you to the gate." Hand in hand, they walked through the dew-wet grass.

Shirley Thomas opened the bedroom curtains. From the bathroom, Alfred recited the morning news brief while Robert shaved. This new house, with its state-of-the-art amenities, had grown on her. She loved the house and the yard. If the above ground pool continued to see use, they might upgrade to an in-ground pool. Her eyes tracked over to the tent and to the pair of footprints leading away from it to the shared gate.

Uh, oh, "Robert, you may want to see this."

Alfred's news brief cut off, and Robert called out. "That implies I may not want to see whatever it is."

"Your son had company last night."

"You're right, I don't want to see it."

"Get over here, 'Dad.'"

"Hmm, oh," his head turned as he followed the tracks. "They almost got away with it. What do you want to do?"

"Talk to your son, make sure he's acting responsibly. I may talk to Stephanie's mother. It's past time we met."

Chapter Eight

In the News Today: Murder and Arson at a peaceful community on the outskirts of Wichita, Kansas.

Clusters of faceless men sat at tables scattered around a room. They drank with a purpose, tossing back their whiskeys and gesturing for more. Most were older men, with manicures and well-groomed steel-gray hair. A few, though, were young. Their eyes hot with lust and jealousy.

Stephanie and her mother, wearing identical skimpy outfits, rushed about the room serving drinks. As she passed amongst the men, their hands snatched at her legs or patted her butt. One of the balding men gestured, and Steph bent to listen. He mumbled a question, but she couldn't make out the words. While she puzzled out his question, rough fingers slipped up her thigh.

And Stephanie woke. The Wichita Dream, again. She hated it and the sleeplessness it brought. Sitting up, Stephanie rubbed her eyes and glanced at the clock. *Ugh, midnight. Maybe J's still up?*

They didn't have a fancy AI like Alfred. Not because Gene was cheap, but because he thought it would spy on him. Instead of Alfred and voice commands, Steph had the wireless keyboard from the living room and her wall-mounted display. Hopefully, Mom forgot to close the firewall ports, and she wouldn't have to sneak downstairs to fiddle the security console.

"J, you up?" Each tap on the cheap membrane keyboard produced a faint rubbery thump. A minute passed without a reply, and Stephanie worried Jason might be asleep.

"Sup, sweetheart?"

Stephanie released the breath she hadn't known she held. "*Bad dream, can't sleep.*"

"Yuck, wish I could c u."

"Me2."

"I got an idea."

"What?"

"Open your window. I'll get a ladder."

"You're crazy!" He'd do it, too.

"Yeah, 'bout you."

"Me2, you. Won't work, windows wired, alarm."

"Kay. I'll stay up then, 'till you fall asleep."

“Goof, how will you know?”

“You snore rly loud.”

“Rat!”

“Love you.”

“Love you2, rat.”

A sound from outside, it might have been a car door slammed shut, woke her from a pleasant dream. Details of the dream faded, but it involved her and Jason and one of those things they’d recently begun doing.

Sitting up, she set the keyboard back on her night table and reached for her slippers. *Darn it, where’d that other slipper go?* She found it hiding under the bed. While fishing it out, Stephanie realized something was amiss. She looked around. What was it? Was it something she needed to do this morning?

Downstairs in the kitchen, Mom glanced up and smiled a “good morning” around her mouthful of muesli.

“Morning.” Steph took a mug from the dishwasher and sat. Maybe she’d have toast and some of that new, bitter orange marmalade. Oh, yeah, there was something she needed to do.

“Sweetie?” Mom said.

“Um?” This jam was awesome.

“Something bothering you?”

Stephanie blinked, Mom didn’t miss anything. “I think I forgot to do something, but I don’t remember what.”

“Hmmm,” Mom stood and set her bowl on the sink. On her way back, she stopped and pressed her palm against Stephanie’s forehead. “You’re a bit warm.” Moving to the side of the table, Mom pulled out the adjacent chair and sat. “Sweetie, feel my head.”

Stephanie felt the heat before her hand made contact. “Mom, you’re burning up.”

“It’s normal when I’m in withdrawal.” She didn’t add anything else.

“Oh,” then she got it. “You think I got the bond?”

“Uh, huh. Close your eyes and think about Romeo. Imagine he’s kissing you goodnight. Feel his arms around you.”

Last night was easy to remember. Although, the exact memory wasn’t one she’d like her mother to know about. “Okay,” she reported.

“Now, how do you feel?”

A fog she hadn’t noticed, lifted, and her thoughts cleared. “Better.” The difference was more than she wanted to admit.

“I’m sorry, sweetie, but I think you got it now.”

If she concentrated, Stephanie could feel the distraction settle into place when her thoughts drifted. For example, when she watched her mother steal a piece of her toast. The condition reversed in a snap once she focused on Jason. With a little practice, she could keep a memory of him tucked to the side. *If this was just the beginning of the bond...what’s it like for Mom?*

“Do you have to think about Gene all the time?” asked Stephanie.

“Oh,” Mom smiled, “I’m an old addict. Everything like that’s second nature. Your addiction is in its early stages.”

“I guess it’s a baby bond.”

Mom almost choked on the bite of toast. “Don’t even think the word, baby.”

After breakfast on school days, she and Mom cleaned the house. Busywork distracted them enough to cope. They spent the afternoons working their way through exercise programs. The type of exercise didn't matter. Sometimes they used martial arts training videos. Last week, they streamed an ancient series called "Aerobicise." Mom laughed when Stephanie complained about its difficulty, then threatened to play something called P90X.

Of course, Mom noticed Stephanie's symptoms. She'd been subject to them for far too long not to notice them in her daughter. Maybe Mom expected it or maybe not, but instead of recriminations, all Mom did was provide unwavering support. Most breakfast conversations revolved around post bond survival strategies.

"Mom, how much will I remember?"

When her mother didn't answer right away, Stephanie grew concerned. Natalie lived with a lot of Gene's muddled attempts at reprogramming her. Most of the time, Gene's commands wore off within days, leaving Natalie with a vague unease that also wore off. Other times, Gene misjudged Mom's period of susceptibility and issued orders she remembered.

"I remember growing up in Pavlo's household. His wife, Maryska, thought me her husband's bastard daughter. Their children used to bully me. Once I grew tall enough to fight back, they learned to avoid me." She took a sip of tea. "But you want to know if you'll remember Jason?" Mom quirked an eyebrow, and Stephanie nodded. "Our situations aren't the same. You have Romeo, and I have the twin monkeys, Pavlo and Gene on my back."

Stephanie snickered; she had no problem imagining Gene as a long-armed balding ape. No, maybe more of a balding baboon? Too bad only the girl baboons had red butts. Mom refilled their cups, and Stephanie realized her mother intended a serious discussion.

"If we don't take steps, sweetie, you'll forget about Jason for a while."

"What steps?"

"We'll make them up as we go. Both of us insist we must stay in contact. Blame it on emotional stability. All men think women are unstable. When we pack your suitcase, let's hide photographs of you and Jason together. If possible, we'll even pack that horrible slayer shirt you never wash. When Romeo's an established adult, with the means to keep you safe, I'll send him to you. You and he will run away and live happily ever after.

"But what if he forgets me?"

Mom rolled her eyes. "Do you think a normal human boy can forget you? If you're so worried, give him something special to remember you by. I've read freshly worn panties are highly prized amongst human males."

"Ew, yuck, Jason's never—"

"Well, maybe not Romeo. After all, he is perfect."

"He is!"

"You could ask him, you know, just in case. Wear an old pair for a day or two. Then offer them to him. I bet he'd love them."

Stephanie loved her mother, but sometimes...ick.

Then Gene returned from another business trip. As usual, Stephanie kept to her room. Sneaking downstairs for food only when Gene and her mother were busy. He stayed for four days.

On the plus side, Gene's longer stay completely reset her mother's bond. The morning her father left, Mom was so cheerful, they should have eaten waffles for breakfast. Those four days

without Jason gave Stephanie a pounding headache. After Mom tweaked the security system, Steph told her about it.

“Well,” Mom said, “if you’ll recall, I tried to limit your exposure.”

Steph knew what Gene did to make Mom *his* slave. It must have been awful. Mom hoped that a “little addiction” might save Stephanie from the same ordeal.

Of course, happy/chatty Mom continued to make her point. “You, however, chose otherwise, and Romeo is now the happiest little Romeo ever. But because you know how the real addiction starts, you have not allowed him to return the favor more than once or twice. Am I right?”

“Pretty much.” The words peeped out. She hadn’t expected her mother to figure everything out.

“And because you know we can’t get addicted to ourselves, you take care of your own business. But you’ve learned it only helps for a little while, right?”

Stephanie couldn’t answer. From the heat, her cheeks had to be flaming.

“Well, daughter, why do you think I take so many long, hot soaks?”

Surprise made Stephanie glance up. Across the table, Mom matched her gaze. “Really?” asked Stephanie.

“Really. You’ll learn to draw it out and make it more intense. It won’t be close to what Romeo could do for you, but it’s what gets a girl through those long and lonely days.”

With that revelation, they tidied the kitchen and set to cleaning the rest of the house.

After today’s exercise, Stephanie took a long, hot shower, and Mom helped her pick an outfit to wear. Even though her mother still harbored concerns about Jason, she took great pains to ensure Stephanie looked her best. “After all,” Mom said, “we want him to stay focused on you.”

And it was rather nice when she caught Jason’s eyes on her. Almost as pleasant as his touch. It felt “right” to be the center of his attention.

While Stephanie dressed, Mom returned to the day’s post bond survival training. This session covered a worst-case scenario.

“So, our plan has failed. You’re fully bonded to some rich old man, and Romeo is unavailable. There’ll be a time you won’t remember anything of your past. Your entire focus will be on whoever has bonded you. Then one day, you’ll wake and remember bit and pieces. Even if you do nothing about it, those awake times will reoccur and last longer each time. Someday, you’ll be like me and be awake most of the time.”

“What about when you and Gene are...together?” Stephanie felt her cheeks heat with the question.

“Not then, never then. It’s too overwhelming. And afterward ...do you remember what we talked about? How you’re susceptible to suggestion?”

“I remember.”

“If I hadn’t read the notes in Gene’s safe, I wouldn’t know about it. Even now, I don’t remember everything. Things feel wrong somehow. There’s something still not right with my memories. I hope it all comes back someday.” Mom glanced at the wall-mounted video display. “It’s almost time to meet Romeo, run next door, and I’ll go take a long hot soak.”

“Stephanie!” Mrs. Thomas smiled and held the door open. “Don’t you look cute today.”

Since she and Mom were almost the same size, Stephanie had access to a lot of clothes, all of which set-off her pale skin and red hair. Today she wore a black watch tartan wrap skirt with a short-sleeved blouse and her usual sneakers. A cold front moved in last night. To block the wind, she’d thrown on one of Jason’s oxford shirts. Her mom chuckled each time she acquired another article of her boyfriend’s clothes.

“My mom said I look like a schoolgirl.”

“Well, that’s appropriate, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am. Can I help with anything?” A basket of green apples sat next to an assortment of baking supplies.

“You’re just in time to learn how to make apple crisp.”

“Miss Stephanie?” Alfred announced from an overhead speaker. “Master Jason is in view.”

Mrs. Thomas smiled and reached for the bowl of crumbles. “Give me the bowl and go meet your beau.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Thomas!” Stephanie untied her apron and slipped into Jason’s shirt. As she opened the back door, the older woman spoke.

“I hope my son knows how lucky he is.”

Pausing, Stephanie turned back. “Thank you, Mrs. Thomas, but I’m lucky to have him.”

Jason both loved and hated pep-rallies. Sure, he got excused from social studies—the worst class to have at the end of the day—but stuffing the participating students into the gym was a terrible thing to do. The “Sports Arena” already smelled like unwashed socks. Combine that with a couple hundred kids *wearing* those dirty socks.

The only bright part at the pep rally was hearing other students refer to Connor O’Halloran as “Raptor.” As a new student to North Allegheny, he didn’t have any baggage. The bullies and jocks didn’t know if Jason was a big fish or a little fish. The testing began his second week. A football jock, Connor O’Halloran, the self-declared “greatest wide receiver of all time,” elbowed Jason on his way out of the locker room. Jason knew the drill and pushed back.

Their relationship had gone downhill since. Connor continued pushing, and Jason continued to push back. Disliking bullies, Jason thought to teach the larger kid a lesson. At lunch with a group of math nerds, they discussed the North Allegheny Tigers football team. Jason referred to Connor as “Raptor.” At face value, it sounded like a compliment. After all, raptors were well-known prehistoric carnivores. Then came the next football game, a loss, in which Connor missed several key catches, and the true meaning of Raptor became known. Raptors with their little arms couldn’t catch. The nickname stuck and grew in popularity. The pep-rally worked; Jason left school in a fine mood.

Stepping off the school bus, the best part of his day lay ahead. That is, if Steph’s father hadn’t come home again. He took a bare half-dozen steps onto his parents’ driveway when Stephanie stepped into view.

She smiled and waiting until he closed the distance. When he was only a step or two away, she said, “I used to be an adventurer like you. Then I took an arrow in the knee.” They’d recently started playing a cooperative role-playing game. Jason was the knight in shining armor, and

Stephanie a beautiful and mysterious mage. She was always quick with a fireball or a healing spell. Although he got the impression, she'd be happier if they reversed the roles.

"Let me guess," he said, "someone stole your sweet roll?"

Laughing at the corny game dialog, they closed the distance. Jason picked his girlfriend up and spun her around. He held the best girl in the world in his arms, and everything was perfect.

She held his arm while they walked towards the back of his house. "I missed you," he said.

"I missed you more," she said and pulled him down for another kiss. "You don't know how good you feel."

It took a few seconds before Jason felt steady enough to continue walking. "If Gene," it still felt odd referring to her father by his first name, "wasn't a jerk, you could go to school with me. I'd walk you to your classes, and we'd sneak kisses along the way."

"In school? Kids kiss in school?"

"All over the place."

"And you do what? Ignore it?"

"It's creepy to stare. So, yeah, ignore it and keep walking."

Inside the kitchen, something, besides Stephanie, smelled great. Mom had something containing apples and cinnamon in the oven. While tempted to check and see, sneaking downstairs with Steph seemed a better idea. Mom's sudden appearance in the hallway door forced a change of plans.

"Hey, you two," Mom said, clearly knowing his intentions, "no snogging until *after* the homework."

Jason sighed a heavy teen sigh. It wasn't fair that Mom could read his mind. Together, he and Steph settled down at the kitchen table.

While Jason rooted through his book bag, Stephanie picked up his Algebra 2 textbook. To her left, Jason muttered about a missing pencil. She flipped the textbook open, and an envelope spilled out.

An envelope for homework assignments was something new. Usually, Jason folded the assignment sheet in half and stuffed it between the pages. Whatever, she opened the flap, and that's when her world went sideways.

The envelope contained a single, folded sheet of paper. The instant Stephanie unfolded the single page, a velvety, musky scent with hints of vanilla wafted out. A part of her brain categorized it as an attractive scent. Not stinky or overpowering. If she wore perfume, this scent would suit. Then she examined the neat penmanship.

Jason, I know we don't talk much, but you make me laugh. The weekend after next is a Girl's Choice dance, and I choose you. What do you say, wanna kick it?

Caitlin

Something was wrong with the paper, the more she read it, the blurrier the letters became.

"Stephanie," Mrs. Thomas asked, her voice soft, "is something wrong?"

Jason brandished his pencil. "Found it!" His mother's question sunk in, and he craned his neck, trying to read the note.

At the last second, Stephanie decided she didn't want Jason to read it. Her hands moved with unthinking precision, folding the paper, and returning it to the envelope. She kept the envelope pinched between index finger and thumb.

"Stephanie?" Mrs. Thomas now stood in front of her and handed her a tissue.

Oh, I'm fine, Mrs. Thomas," she took the tissue and dabbed her eyes. The lack of emotion in her voice surprising. "Some girl named Caitlin invited Jason to a 'Girl's Choice' dance next Saturday."

"No way!" Jason asserted.

"What did you do, Jason?" Mrs. Thomas demanded.

"Nothing!" he shouted. A hint of anger made his voice harsh.

"I swear if you hurt Stephanie...."

"I, I hardly talk to Cait, I didn't know she liked me." He swiveled in his seat. "Steph, you gotta believe me."

Stephanie thought she should have felt something, but all she felt was nothing. Even her bond remained mute. Something about the note bugged her, the something tickled at the edges of her thoughts. The perfume! Something about the perfume's scent. Then she had it. With understanding came peace. Her hand stopped flipping the envelope back and forth. "I believe you," she said.

Jason breathed out a huge sigh.

Mrs. Thomas plucked the envelope from Stephanie's hand and read the note for herself. For the first time, Stephanie saw Jason's mother as a peer. Some boy must have hurt her pretty bad. "How can you be certain?" Mrs. Thomas returned the note.

Smiling, Steph lifted Jason's right hand. "When I kissed him before, his hands didn't smell like the invitation."

"Oh, now that's smart. Jason, make sure you let that girl know you're already taken."

Instead of heading directly to his locker, Jason made a detour. He found Caitlin and her friend Elise in the library. Both girls glanced up when he stopped at their table.

The girls shared a look before Elise stood. "I'll catch up with you later." She gave Jason a knowing smile and left.

Jason took Elise's chair and sat. "I got your invitation," he said.

At first, Caitlin seemed to have a hard time looking away from her textbook. Then her vivid blue eyes searched his face, but after she failed to see acceptance, they dropped back down. She said, "Thank you for telling me no—face to face."

"Hey, if I didn't already have a girlfriend, I'd have accepted."

"Really?" Caitlin's blue eyes met his again, and this time, she smiled. "Not many guys like gingers."

"My girlfriend's hair is a little darker red than yours. She also has freckles, and I think she's beautiful."

"She's lucky."

"Maybe, but I'm way luckier." Jason pushed back his chair and stood. "See you later in algebra." On his way out, Elise passed him, headed back into the library.

“Mom, two weekends from now, if Gene isn’t here, I’m going to a dance with Jason.”

“A dance?” Mom glanced up from her book.

“Yes, at his school, Saturday night, week after next.”

“Absolutely not! You know the rules. What if Gene called for you or came home?”

“Then he grounds me for real. It’s not like it’ll make any difference, I’m already as addicted to Jason as possible without—”

“Yes, well, let’s not go there. You don’t want to go through what I did.” Mom sighed and stood. She set the teapot on the stove and fiddled in the cupboard for her tea. Knowing this was part of Mom’s decision-making process, Stephanie remained silent. The water came to a boil, a loaded tea ball was plopped into the pot, and Mom brought everything to the table. “A real high-school dance. Like in the movies?”

“Uh, huh,” Stephanie accepted a cup. The aroma of lemongrass and grapefruit filled the room. She liked this fragrance a lot better than musk.

“Do you know what to wear?”

“Mrs. Thomas said a cocktail dress.”

“Hmm...you know, I may have something you could borrow...”

“Thanks, Mom.” Mother and Daughter sipped their tea. A few minutes passed before Stephanie remembered something else. “Mom, it’s not going to be much longer, is it?”

“No, I don’t think it is.”

The next day Stephanie met Jason after school and walked him inside. They sat at the kitchen table. No one mentioned the invitation.

“In algebra today, we covered polynomial division.” Jason flipped to the marked page of his textbook. “It’s pretty cool...” His voice trailed off when he realized Stephanie was giving him “the look.” “What?” he asked.

“Did you tell her?”

“Yes,” he sat back and crossed his arms. “Caitlin already expected me to say no. It seems some guys don’t like redheads.”

“Really?” she asked, wrapping a lock of auburn hair around a finger.

“Something about their cooties, I think. Either that or they steal souls.”

Stephanie grinned. She and Jason had browsed pages of memes. “Aren’t you worried about yours?”

“My cooties and your cooties have mingled too long to have problems now. As for my soul,” Jason picked up Stephanie’s closest hand and kissed her palm, “it’s in good hands.”

When the tingles diminished enough for speech, she took a breath and asked a question. “So, the dance, when are you picking me up?”

“Um...what?”

“The dance, it’s Girls Choice, and I choose you. When are you picking me up?”

“So, Stephanie’s still grounded?” Robert Thomas asked. He’d knocked on Jason’s doorframe before entering and sitting on his son’s bed.

Jason spun around on his chair. “Yeah, just another day or two. We’re still up for the dance.”

“Looking forward to it?” Dad had his odd, something’s funny, smile going on.

“I think so.”

“That’s what I expected. Look, son, when it comes to women and fancy parties. If they want to go, smile, and say, ‘Yes, dear.’ Your girlfriend has something to prove, and she’s going to look as good as possible. Your mother and I will do our best to ensure you don’t embarrass her.”

“Okay?”

“So, we’re going suit shopping. Stephanie can’t go with us because her dad’s home. I don’t like how you two sneak around behind his back. The poor man’s always on the road keeping a roof over his family’s heads. He should have a say in how his daughter’s raised.”

Not liking where his father was taking the one-sided conversation, Jason interrupted, “Mr. Timms has his way when he’s home. Steff’s Mom has her way when he’s gone. ‘Sounds plenty fair to me.’”

Dad stopped grumbling and grinned. “Well said, counselor.” At the bedroom door, they paused, “Whatever career you choose, I’ll be proud of you. However, if you choose to become a jurist, I think I’d be especially proud.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

Dad paused and waved for Jason to lead the way. “While we’re out, You can buy something for Stephanie. Jewelry is appropriate.”

“What should I buy?”

“Never fear son, your mother will guide us.”

An early frost preceded a beautiful western Pennsylvania, Indian summer. Luckily for Stephanie, the warm evening meant a wrap would provide all the cover she needed. The wrap, of course, was more decoration than necessity. With her higher body temperature, cooler air didn’t bother her.

“Are you sure you don’t want to wear some of my jewelry?” Mom picked an imaginary bit of lint from Stephanie’s dress, then adjusted the drape of the wrap.

“Mrs. Thomas said Jason had something for me.”

“Oh dear, I hope it isn’t an engagement ring.”

Stephanie froze. The idea of an engagement ring had never occurred to her. Part of her wanted to run a victory lap. Another part wanted to hide. Gene would murder everyone. “I think he’s too young for marriage.”

“Is he? Who knows how humans do things, anyway?” The bell for the back door chimed. “He’s here! Have fun, Sweetie.” Mom fussed with Stephanie’s hair one last time and kissed her goodbye.

A pang of uncertainty fluttered through her tummy. Neither Stephanie nor her mother had ever done anything like this. Not that Mom could, Gene’s orders kept her trapped on the property. At most, she sometimes managed to step outside and water the flowers.

Determination brushed the flutters away again. Just this once, she’d have a real date, like human girls did. Besides, she wanted everyone to know that Jason had a girlfriend. All this passed through her mind as she reached for the door and pulled it open.

Jason stood there, other than his eyes popping open, he didn’t move.

“What’s wrong?” Freezing in place was not something Jason did.

“Nothing’s wrong. Wow! Can you turn around, please?”

The heat in Jason's eyes chased her worries away. Eager for more of his compliments, she spun in place. "Satisfied?" It was a frequent joke between them.

"This isn't fair. You are so beautiful. And hot. And I have to behave."

With her emotional stability restored, Stephanie stepped away from the door. It closed behind her, casting the porch into partial shadow. Jason's arm slipped around her waist. As she tilted her head up for his kiss, she said, "We can still misbehave, just don't mess up my hair."

They posed for pictures in the Thomases' living room. Mr. Thomas stood tall, obviously proud of his son. What must it be like to be human and have a Dad?

For the hundredth time, she wondered what would happen if she confessed to Jason's parents. Mrs. Thomas would help. Of this, Stephanie was certain. Mr. Thomas's reaction was much harder to judge. If he stuck by the law, one phone call to the authorities and they'd deport her and her mother. Mom's biggest fear was a return to Ukraine. Once there, the corrupt State Migration Service would alert her original owner, Pavlo, and that would be very, very bad. To avoid a messy public divorce, Pavlo agreed to "get rid" his mistress. So long as Natali never returned, she and Pavlo's three daughters were safe.

Before they took the pictures, Jason presented her with a small package wrapped in reflective foil paper.

At his urging, she tore off the foil, revealing a velvet-covered box. Inside she found a necklace.

The necklace was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. Its simplicity lent it elegance. A rose gold outline of a heart suspended on a matching rose gold chain. Next to it, hung a smaller solid heart, engraved with a cursive "S," and inset with a small colorless gemstone.

"It's a diamond, your birthstone," he told her.

When he hung it around her neck, Jason whispered that someday he hoped to give her a larger diamond.

And that's when she began to cry.

Mrs. Thomas took her into the bathroom and helped her clean up. Her concern and curiosity were apparent, but she didn't pry.

Robert Thomas winced as Jason and Stephanie left in his BMW. Sure, it had a full autopilot and would actively avoid an accident, but still. His son was growing up and had scored a knockout girlfriend. Hardly a day passed where he didn't expect a worried Jason to request a private meeting in the office.

Not that he would mind Stephanie as a daughter-in-law, just not until Jason finished college.

He turned and followed his wife. They'd made plans of their own. An evening alone was nothing to squander. Upstairs, in the master bathroom, Robert lowered the temperature of the water filling their whirlpool tub. "What's up with Stephanie? It's a nice enough necklace, but why'd it make her cry?"

"Girls get emotional sometimes. A big event like tonight's dance can cause a lot of stress." She leaned past her husband and increased the flow of hot water. "It might even be hormonal."

As soon as Shirley stepped back to the sink, Robert reached for the tub controls. "I hope it's hormonal."

Shirley frowned. “Why is that? Oh, and, Robert, men who expect to get lucky don’t mess with the hot water.”

He held up both hands as if to demonstrate his innocence. Then smirked an impure smile. “If Steffi’s hormonal, then your son hasn’t gotten her pregnant yet.”

“That’s terrible, and it isn’t even biologically correct. Pregnant women can also have mood swings.” Shirley stepped into the tub. “Besides, they haven’t done it yet.”

“How do you know?” He slid into a corner and pulled his wife against him.

“I overheard them talking about it.”

“You just happened to overhear such a delicate discussion?”

“Yes, well, I may have snooped a bit. As a concerned mother, it’s my responsibility. Anyway, they fool around a bit, but Stephanie draws the line at intercourse. She promised her mother to wait. *Our* son won’t pressure her. He said, and I quote, ‘I can wait until it’s the right time.’”

The enormity of tonight’s adventure came back in full, right after Mr. Thomas’ BMW dropped them off at the curb. Everywhere she looked stood something or someone new. The school buildings and the clusters of colorfully dressed kids competed for her attention. Couples of all combinations moved with purpose towards the sports arena entrance. Here and there, groups of kids hung out, like the gang of jersey-wearing football players ahead.

Jason waited while she sorted it out. “Kind of overwhelming, isn’t it?” he asked.

“You’re not kidding.” A deep breath helped to settle the flutters. “Whatever you do, don’t leave me alone.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t ever plan on letting you go. Don’t you know that by now?” With a smile, he extended his arm.

As she and Jason approached, the group of football players openly ogled her. One boy, wearing number eighty-six, stood out. Instead of watching her, he stared at Jason. When eighty-six noticed her noticing him, the boy turned and conferred with a friend. Seconds later, the troupe of jocks huddled up.

Stephanie tightened her grip on Jason’s arm. “Which football player is number eighty-six?”

“Only the greatest wide receiver of all time, Hines Ward.”

“Um, the wide-receiver, isn’t he the one who throws the football?”

Jason’s mouth opened, then closed. He stopped walking and turned to her with bright eyes. “I almost fell for that,” he said. “I am so proud of you.”

Since learning of Jason’s absolute passion for football, she’d studied the game. He knew, she knew the difference between a wide receiver and a quarterback. “I’m not talking about ancient history, boyfriend.” She nodded towards the huddle, “That one over there.”

“Oh, him,” they resumed walking, although at a slower pace. “That is Connor O’Halloran. We call him Raptor. He’s the self-proclaimed greatest receiver in North Allegheny history.”

This time, Stephanie pulled Jason to a stop. “Wait, why is he called Raptor?”

“Okay, so, picture a velociraptor. A totally vicious dinosaur, but raptors have those tiny little arms. They can run like heck, but they can’t catch anything. That’s our Raptor.”

“Well, I don’t think Raptor likes you.” Just then, the huddle broke. Two football players trotted off towards the gym entrance. The rest spread out to block the path. Connor stood in the middle of the group. His eyes fixed on Jason.

“Yo, Brainiac, my little sister says you’re too good for her.”

“Get real, Connor,” Jason gestured towards Stephanie. “I already have a girlfriend.”

This boy disliked Jason. His eyes almost glowed with anticipated mayhem. A scuff of shoes to the rear caused her to spare a glance. Football jocks filled in behind them. Not for the first time, Stephanie regretted the promises she gave to her mother. If this turned into a fight, she couldn’t do anything to stand out.

Connor ignored Jason and focused on her. The heat in his gaze reminded her of Daniel Smith. Remembering the Smiths put her in a bad place. Stephanie waited. She knew Connor wanted trouble.

“How much?” he asked.

“For what?” she replied politely. *C’mon Raptor, spit it out.*

“For you. For the night.” His accompanying leer spoke volumes.

Jason opened his mouth to retort, but Stephanie held up a hand, and he stopped.

If Gene hadn’t taken her to Wichita. If her time with Jason wasn’t soon ending. If she were a normal human with a normal life...if. Stephanie searched within herself and failed to find a shred of patience for another sexually aggressive human male.

Time for a little payback.

Stephanie pursed her lips as if she considered his question. Connor must have expected her immediate outrage because the boy’s eyes widened a bit. Then with a chuckle, she lowered the boom. “You can’t afford me, but even if you could,” her eyes dropped to below his waist, before flicking back up, “*little* boys don’t interest me.” The jocks next to Raptor guffawed.

Without feeling any remorse, Stephanie joined in the laughter. Clearly, she bested him. He’d withdraw any second now. Then she and Jason’s date could resume.

Instead, Connor reached for her arm, but his eyes stayed fixed on Jason.

Jason reacted with surprising speed, slapping Connor’s arm aside and stepping between her and the larger boy. Any second now, he’d demonstrate his superior social skills, say something witty, and diffuse the situation.

Connor glanced left as if something of interest lay in that direction. Stephanie saw it for the faint it was. Jason didn’t and turned to look. Grinning with satisfaction, Connor swung a right hook at Jason’s head.

Time sped up, and everyone slowed. Mom once described this effect, warning her it only lasted a minute, and it carried significant side effects.

Stephanie yanked Jason back, and Connor’s meaty fist whooshed past. Connor’s follow up, a left jab blurred in. Jason leaned right but moved too slowly. A well-executed hip-bump pushed him far enough to the side. Clothing rustled from behind, and one of Connor’s cronies lunged in to grapple Jason. Trying to make her movements appear unintentional, Stephanie half-stepped to the right and brought the heel of her right shoe crashing down onto the blind-side attacker’s instep. After the crunch, she called back, “Oops, sorry.”

Jason, while unskilled at fighting, was game. As Stephanie spun back, his fist flashed out and struck Connor’s nose. A second later, blood bubbled out when he sunk a left into Raptor’s gut.

A gruff-voiced adult yelled, “What’s going on here?” An older man, with muscles long gone to fat, waded into the circle.

Connor waved a bloody hand at Jason. “Thomas started it, Coach.”

Time returned to normal, and the first side effect took hold; Stephanie’s hands shook.

Coach surveyed the scene. Taking in—Stephanie hoped—the large group of football players arrayed against her and Jason. Then she realized this was their football coach. He’d probably side with his team.

“Is that so?” the coach asked. “I suppose Mr. Thomas decided to impress his date by attacking a half-dozen football players?” He turned to Jason. “What do you have to say, Thomas?”

“Raptor insulted my date.”

Connor snarled at the mention of his nickname. “The hell with you, Thomas. I know you started that raptor shit.”

The coach shook his head. “We can’t have fights here. Both of you will have to leave.”

“But—” Jason began. Connor snickered. Ruining his rival’s evening was a win.

“Coach Reinhold?” a soft female voice interjected. The man turned, and a stunning redhead stepped into view. This girl had more curves, and her gorgeous dress emphasized them well. She also had bright blue eyes, a wealth of freckles, and Stephanie instantly hated her.

“My brother started the fight. He bragged about doing something like this all day.”

Even the girl’s voice was perfect.

“Caitlin, you bitch!” Connor glared at...*his sister, Caitlin O’Halloran?* Wheels began turning. The girl who asked Jason out was—

Coach Reinhold turned to Connor. “We’ll discuss this next week and see about your future with the team.” The coach grabbed Raptor’s arm and hustled him towards the parking lot.

Connor’s sister turned to Jason, and Stephanie stepped out from behind him.

“Ah, ladies,” Jason said, his face pale. “Stephanie Timms, meet Caitlin O’Halloran.” Caitlin held out her hand.

At first, Stephanie didn’t budge, then Jason nudged her with his elbow. “Shake her hand,” he hissed and nodded towards Caitlin.

A sudden irritation towards Jason spiked, and Stephanie gave him a look, the one she used when he misbehaved. He recoiled. Then, because *she* wasn’t a bitch, turned to Connor’s sister. “Hi, Caitlin, I’m Stephanie. It’s nice to meet you.”

Caitlin’s intelligent blue eyes considered the byplay. She noticed how Stephanie rebuked Jason. Instead of commenting, she met Stephanie’s eyes and said, “Stephanie, I don’t poach boyfriends. When I invited Jason, I didn’t know about you.” Caitlin smiled again and shrugged towards the entrance. “We have a table inside. Sit with us and, Jason can explain why he didn’t tell anyone he has a girlfriend.”

On the way inside, her stomach growled. Uh-oh, the second side-effect. Mom warned her she’d need to eat something right away. “Uh, Jace, I’ll go with Caitlin, can you get us some snacks, I’m really hungry?”

“Sure, I’ll catch up in a minute.” He turned and headed for the refreshment stand.

“Why are you mad at Jason?” asked Caitlin.

“Because he didn’t tell me how pretty you are.”

“Thanks, Stephanie, but no boyfriend would do that. At least no smart boyfriend would.”

“Hmm,” she said, craning her neck to keep Jason in view, “I’ll make it up to him, it’s not like I can stay away from him for long.”

“It sounds like he’s got you hooked.”

“Well, yeah. Wait, you know about getting addicted to a guy?” Real girls didn’t have the bond, did they?

“Sure! Especially if he’s cute enough and knows how to treat a girl. A boy like that can make you crazy.”

Stephanie glanced back to see Jason hurrying to catch up, his hands filled with drinks and junk food. Her stomach clenched, Jason caught her watching, and a smile lit his face. Then, just as fast, his smile faded, and his eyes became cautious.

“I got the snacks,” he held up a neoplas tray—Hotdogs and chips, just what a girl needed.

Two hotdogs and a bag of chips later, Stephanie considered sending Jason back for dessert. She settled for finishing his soda instead. With her blood sugar on the rise, normality reasserted itself.

Across the table, Caitlin and her friend Elise stared with something like awe.

Leaning forward, Caitlin asked, “Do you always eat like that? ’cause if I did, I’d be as big as a barn.”

“I don’t gain weight,” Stephanie replied. “I inherited my mom’s metabolism.”

“No offense,” said Elise, “but you are a lucky bitch.”

Caitlin gave Elise a side-eye “Steph,” Cait asked, “What did Connor say before the fight started?”

“He wanted to know how much a night with me would cost.”

“Oh, he’s such a jerk! What did you tell him?”

“I told him he couldn’t afford me.”

Caitlin and Elise glanced at each other; mouths open in surprise. “Ooh, I can’t believe you said that.”

“Why not? It’s true.” Stephanie looked from Elise to Caitlin. “There isn’t a boy here who could afford any of us.”

“That’s right,” said Caitlin.

The DJ announced a set of slow songs. Jason stood, holding out his hand. “Want to give it a try?”

They hit the dance floor for every slow song. When the DJ announced a set of upbeat songs, Jason grabbed a bottle of water, and they found a couple of chairs.

“I wish,” Jason said while circling her knee with a fingertip, “tonight went on forever.” Each swirl of his finger created an equal swirl of tingles.

She scanned the room; the chaperones were busy breaking up another scuffle. “Hey, can you show me what your school looks like?”

The tussle provided enough distraction. Stephanie and Jason slipped past. Hand in hand, they ran down a short hallway, then up a flight of stairs. He slowed once they made it to the second floor. Halfway down the hall, he stopped at a row of lockers.

“This is mine. I want to show how I make it through the day.” He thumbed the door open and stepped back. Inside, six of her pictures decorated the interior. “Anytime I start to miss you; I come here.”

With perfect timing, the third and final side effect from her adrenaline rush struck home. Stephanie had never been so certain of anything before. This perfect night deserved a perfect memory to highlight everything. Besides, she had a perfectly devilish idea. “Is your math class around here?”

“Yeah, down the hall.”

“Show me.”

“Jason?”

“Mmmm...”

“We need a bathroom, or I do, at least.”

“Oh, yeah, there’s one down the hallway.” He stepped back from the desk and held out his hands. She took them, and he pulled her up into and his arms. With her bond sated, his embrace took on a new aspect, warm and exciting, but not at all overwhelming. Hand in hand, they left the room. Two doors away, he stopped and opened a door, but didn’t follow when she entered. “Aren’t you coming in?” she asked.

“What? It’s a girl’s bathroom.”

“You promised to stay with me.”

“Okay,” he grumbled, “but we better not get caught.”

They both made use of the facilities. With the latest change in their relationship, the added familiarity came naturally enough. Even in the dim light, Jason’s blush colored his cheeks. He was so cute like this.

An exit door at the bottom of the stairs gave them a convenient path to the outside. A brief walk down the sidewalk took them back to the gym entrance. The teacher on guard gave them a raised eyebrow but said nothing.

They rejoined Caitlin and Elise at their table.

Smiling like the cat who ate the canary, Jason held a chair while Stephanie sat. He asked, “If you’re all right here, I’ll get some water.”

“And where have you two been?” Caitlin asked.

“We snuck into the school. Jason gave me a tour.”

“No doubt.” Caitlin rolled her eyes. “Did he show you *everything*?”

The double entendre did not go unnoticed, and Stephanie wondered if Caitlin still harbored an interest in Jason. She answered in kind. “He showed me everything I wanted. The tour left me completely *satisfied*.”

“Really?” Caitlin turned a speculative eye towards Jason at the far end of the basketball court. Then her brows narrowed. “Where at?”

Stephanie realized she liked Caitlin. In another world, they could be friends. But not here and now. Not with Jason between them. Speaking of her boyfriend, he returned with a water bottle. She stood and took his hand. Stephanie lowered her voice and answered Caitlin’s question. “Jason’s math classroom, and we used your desk.” With that little detail taken care of, Stephanie turned and pulled her boyfriend out onto the dance floor. She hadn’t felt this good in a long time.

Later, winded and thirsty, they took another break. Steph and Jason returned to the table. Caitlin and Elise were off somewhere. “Jason, earlier, you fought Connor because he insulted me. Why?”

Surprised at the intensity of her question, he replied. "Because you're my girlfriend."

"Gene never fought or did anything to protect my mom."

He said, "What happened to your mom?"

"It...well, a while ago, someone did something mean to Mom, and Gene just sat there and watched."

"Now, I want to punch your dad."

Once again, the intensity in his words bolstered her love for him. He meant every word. That he existed brightened an otherwise gloomy world. However, she had to rein him in. All of his good intentions wouldn't protect him from Gene. Stephanie said, "You know you can't, if Gene finds out about us, he won't let me see you anymore."

"I don't understand, but I won't do anything you don't want me to do."

The current up-tempo dance song ended, and 'Everything I do' by Brian Adams began to play. Steph stood and took Jason's hand. "C'mon, it's another slow song!" They stepped back onto the dance floor and moved together in their fragile little universe.

Chapter Nine

In the News Today: The United States Senate passed a bill defining a natural human being as having (at least) ninety-one percent of their parent's genetic material.

Midway through November, the weather changed. The western Pennsylvania Indian summer gave way to days filled with an icy rain.

Jason and Stephanie sat on the floor of his bedroom, playing a co-op video game. They worked well together, as long as Stephanie led the way. Her character, a female paladin, complete with a chainmail bikini, had just cut a lich into tatters.

"Nice job with the healing spells," she said. On the video screen, her character wiped a glowing green fluid from her bastard sword.

"What can I say," he replied. "I have a fondness for your butt in chainmail armor."

The doorbell rang downstairs, but they didn't care. Working together, they'd almost set a new high score.

Jason's mom came to the door and said, "Sorry, guys, but Stephanie's dad stopped over. He said an old army buddy of his is visiting, and he wants Stephanie to come home and meet him."

Anyone else might have missed the momentary tightness in Steph's muscles.

"Thank you, Mrs. Thomas," Stephanie said. "I'll leave in a minute." Jason's mom left to go back downstairs.

"Jason?" Stephanie said. "I have to go. Walk me to your door?"

"Sure, Steph." He saved the game, and they walked downstairs. At the door, Jason remembered his manners and held her coat. He reached for an umbrella, but she just smiled and shook her head.

Stephanie surprised Jason by lifting on her toes and kissing him. Right on the lips, in full view of his parents. She said, "Goodbye, Jason, I love you." Then, through the icy rain, she ran home.

Chapter Ten

Natalie's Inbox: Dear Mom, I have arrived. The estate here is marvelous.

Roger Grainer poured another whiskey and celebrated his latest achievement. Since learning how women were nothing but two-faced, back-stabbing bitches, he'd taken a friend's advice and tried genie collecting. Genies, those ephemeral beauties, never complained that he couldn't give them more than he had. They never spread vicious gossip or attempted to sully his reputation. Nor did they require hefty payoffs to keep their mouths shut.

Life was much simpler when a man had genies to tend to his needs.

As an avid collector, he'd searched out the rarest breeds. From clones of movie stars to a seductive, synthetic succubus, he'd "been there" and "done that." There'd been a memorable weekend with twin harlequin bunnygirls in estrus. His survival was a testament to the skill of his doctor.

Then word came of a special auction for a rare, nearly one-of-a-kind genie. A stunningly beautiful redhead, young, eager, and supposedly possessing a true loyalty to her owner. She'd be the perfect mistress, an eager participant in every kink or perversion her owner enjoyed.

Frankly, Roger didn't believe it.

Still, he had to know for sure. His usual procurer, David Grant, was a fellow collector who also dabbled in specialized genie sales. Usually doing well, he'd nearly lost his shirt trying to sell a Cthulhu genie. Roger wasn't into androgynous sex. Otherwise, he might have "communed with an old one." He might be a bastard, but he was a hetero bastard.

Grant returned his call several hours later. "If you're calling about the centaur, she's no longer available."

Centaur? Ick. "David, you know I prefer female bipeds." Roger added extra emphasis on "female" in case David had another fishthing to unload.

"Yes, yes, of course. What can I do for you?"

"The auction."

David audibly sucked in his breath. "Ah, damn. I'd hoped it slipped your notice. She's right up your alley, old chum. Frankly, I'd hoped to poach her and mark her up for resale."

If anyone knew his type, it was David. From selling him his first toy girl until his last trade-in, David had handled the transactions. "Tell me about her."

"Let's discuss my fee first."

Of course, his “friend” would want his pay. Roger opened the negotiations. “One percent.” “Five,” David countered.

Roger sighed. The alternative to David was to risk exposure and handle his transactions directly. “Two and a half.”

“Thank you. I accept your generous offer. Well, this genie is quite special. First, she’s sixteen and, as they say, never been kissed. The remarkably beautiful, little miss innocent will pass as human in every possible way, including intelligence, and while she’ll cease aging at eighteen, she’ll enjoy a normal human lifespan.”

“Hold up,” Roger interrupted. “You know the problems with keeping a human-passable secure. Why should I want the trouble?” Genies with human appearances or human-level intelligence were security nightmares. They were always conniving and attempting to escape. God forbid if one managed to run away. It might become damaged or worse, picked up by the police.

“They’ve cracked the loyalty gene, Roger. After you break her in, she’ll stay with you of her own free will. In fact,” David chuckled darkly. “and this is my favorite part. She’ll become physically addicted to having sex with you, and only you. If you withhold the “D,” she’ll suffer withdrawal symptoms. No other “D” will do. Withhold it long enough, and she’ll die, painfully.”

“No, shit?” She was right up his alley.

“No, shit.”

“How do I sign up for the auction?”

“The entry fee isn’t cheap, but if you don’t win, it’s fully refunded less a modest handling fee. Sign-up is five hundred bitcoins.”

“FIVE HUNDRED?” Roger ran a quick check on his phone. That was over three million dollars! “You bastard, and you got me for two and a half percent!”

“Two and a half percent of the final sale price, old chum. All the heavy hitters are in it to win it. You’re not getting her cheap.”

Now, Roger sat in his home office, drinking but not tasting, two fingers worth of a twenty-year-old single malt. A single malt whisky, four years older than the redhead secured inside his playroom. The glass in his hand shook, and he set it down before wasting it. *Whew, it’s hot in here.* Loosening his tie and unbuttoning the top button on his shirt helped. He’d not felt jitters like this since his first time with a real girl. It didn’t matter; he’d successfully outbid every other collector in the world. The prize of a lifetime was upstairs.

As if Stephanie’s disappearance wasn’t bad enough, Jason had caught the flu. Mom loaded him up with acetaminophen and the latest antivirals. She’d sent him to bed and set Alfred to spying on him.

It was enough to make a boy cry.

The worst part was he knew Mr. Timms was responsible. How many times had Stephanie warned him about her father? How he would break them up if he found out about her and Jason. Jason rolled over and punched his pillow. He’d even felt Stephanie flinch when Mom announced Mr. Timms stopped over. Yet, he hadn’t thought to say anything. Ouch, every joint ached, and this fever made it difficult to think straight.

Mom popped into the room without knocking. “How are you feeling?”

“Terrible,” he replied, rolling onto his back. Then he winced when Mom swiped the ice-cold thermometer across his forehead.

His mother glanced at the display. “Your fever is dropping. Keep drinking.”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Is there anything I can get you?” His eyes must have given him away ’cause mom held up a hand. “I’ll let you know if I hear anything.”

“Call her mother again,” Jason demanded.

“I’ve already left half a dozen voicemails. You’ll be the first person to know when she calls back. Now get some rest, that’s an order.”

Robert Thomas recognized a wifely glare when he saw one. Given the recent turmoil concerning their son and his absent girlfriend, he knew why Shirley was upset. Still, it didn’t hurt to be certain. “All right, wife, what’s the problem?”

“You know exactly what the problem is.”

Yep, this was about Stephanie. “What do you expect me to do?”

“I don’t know. You’re a lawyer, do lawyer shit.”

Ouch, Shirley rarely swore, and when she did... “Sweetheart, she’s a minor. Her parents have every right to ground her.”

“It’s not her mother who’s responsible. Natalie approved of Stephanie and Jason’s relationship.”

“Fine, her dad grounded her. It’s still his right.”

“Didn’t you notice how Stephanie never called her father, “Dad.” She hated the man. Something bad is going on over there.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Can’t you call someone? Get someone to investigate, see if everything’s okay.”

Robert took a sip of water. He was going to sleep on the couch tonight. Maybe if he ripped the band-aid off, it wouldn’t hurt too much. “I can’t.” His wife’s eyes flashed. Before she could retort, he held up his hands. “Shirl, I’m an officer of the court. I can’t make a false report. If I did, they might disbar me.”

“Fine, I’ll do it.” Shirley pursed her lips, then asked, “Who do I call?”

“Here in Allegheny County its CYF, Children Youth and Families. Alfred has the number.” Robert shook his head and stood. He’d lost his appetite. “I’ll go next door and ask about her.”

Shirley grabbed her coat and accompanied him next door. Robert rang the doorbell, and they waited. Minutes passed before a balding man in a jacket stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

“What can I do for you?” he asked. A gust of wind ruffled the man’s hair, and he buttoned his coat.

“Mr. Timms?” Robert asked. The man replied with a curt nod. “I’m Robert Thomas, and this is my wife, Shirley.”

“Yes,” Timms turned to Shirley. “I remember you, Mrs. Thomas, from the other week.”

Shirley wasn’t here for pleasantries, and she got right to it. “Where’s Stephanie? Can we see her?”

“Ah,” Timms said with a small smile, “I thought this might be about my foster daughter.”

“Foster daughter?” Robert and Shirley said at nearly the same instant.

Mr. Timms nodded. “Stephanie didn’t tell you, did she. I can’t say I’m surprised. Of all the fosters we’ve helped, she’s been the most difficult. Stealing, lying, it’s all attention-seeking behavior, and the girl can’t help it.” Timms looked away, then back. “A childless couple, with more money than sense, adopted her. They first met Stephanie about a year ago. The adoption’s been in the works for months.”

“What’s their name? Where are they from?” demanded Shirley.

Timms glanced briefly at Shirley before turning to Robert. “I’m sorry, but the confidentiality laws are quite clear. The family specifically did not waive their right to privacy.”

Robert extended his hand and shook with Timms. “Thank you for telling us this much.”

Timms waved it off. “Not a problem. Stephanie spent a lot of time visiting you and your son. Your concern is understandable.”

Robert and Shirley didn’t speak to each other until they reached their front door.

With a touch on his arm, Shirley stopped her husband. “Robbie, this isn’t going to be good news for Jason.”

“No,” Robert shook his head, “but he needs to know. Do you want to be there when I tell him?”

“Of course, I do.”

At the tap on his door, Jason glanced up from his tablet. Mom and Dad stood there wearing their “Determined Parent” faces.

“What’s wrong?” he asked and sat up.

Dad said, “We spoke with Mr. Timms, Stephanie’s *foster*-father. He told us a well-to-do family adopted her. The adoption had been in the works for months, and Stephanie knew all about it. Are you certain she didn’t mention anything about it?”

Jason knew he was staring. Adoption? Foster-father? “She never said anything.”

“Well,” Dad temporized, “not everyone is good at giving bad news to others. Especially when they care about the other person. Stephanie might not have wanted to upset you any sooner than she needed.”

Jason didn’t say anything. He still hadn’t sorted all this out.

Dad continued. “Things like this are a part of growing up. Unfortunately, becoming an adult sometimes means growing a thicker skin.”

Mom and Dad waited, but Jason still couldn’t speak.

Sighing, Dad stood. “We’re going downstairs to finish supper. Afterward, we’ll watch some Tri-D. Jason, we’ll be here anytime you want to talk.”

“I’ve never seen a more miserable boy,” Robert sighed. He and Shirley cleaned the kitchen together like they used to do.

Shirly paused while snapping a lid on a neoplas container. “You don’t think he would do anything...to harm himself, do you?”

Surprised at the question, Robert pinched his eyes shut in thought. A moment later, he lifted his head. “Alfred?”

“Yes, Mister Thomas?”

“I want you to keep an eye on Jason. Stay out of standby or sleep modes. You are to alert us if you think Jason is going to do something dangerous.”

“Yes, Mr. Thomas. Sir, if I might say so, I feel terrible for him. Miss Stephanie meant a great deal to the young master.”

Robert quirked an eyebrow. “Just how self-aware are you. Alfred?”

“I’m not qualified to answer a question like that, sir. I am state-of-the-art, so perhaps I’m merely good at mimicking self-awareness.”

“Thank you, Alfred. Keep an eye on my son.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good morning, Jason.”

The words registered somewhere, but not consciously. No, Jason’s attention lay on one of the half-dozen photographs hanging inside his locker. Every morning, Jason held a silent communion at the Shrine of Stephanie.

The hint of musky vanilla had more of an impact and intruded on his daydream. He blinked and followed the scent to his right. Caitlin O’Halloran stood there wearing an unhappy frown,

“Uh, hi, Cait.” Jason blurted.

“Uh, hi, yourself,” she replied. “I swear, Jason, the next time I see Stephanie, I’ll tell her how you ignore your friends.”

Jason blinked. Stephanie hadn’t especially liked Caitlin. Heck, ignoring Caitlin might have earned him one of Steph’s special rewards. Then the sharp point of reality plunged home. Stephanie moved away, ghosting him in the process.

“What’s wrong?” Cait asked. “And don’t say “nothing” because I can see it.”

She probably could. Sometimes Jason felt like a black cloud followed him around. Jason took a breath. He needed to get this out sometime. “Steph moved away a couple weeks ago.”

Perhaps checking to see if he was kidding, Cait’s vivid blue eyes searched his. “What do you mean, moved away? Do you know where?”

“Someone adopted her, and she’s gone. I only found out last week.” Saying it out loud made it real. His eyes burned, and he blinked to keep things under control.

Caitlin’s mouth dropped open. After visibly collecting herself, she straightened and said, “Who adopted her? Where did she go?”

“I don’t know—” The five-minute warning bell cut him off. Up and down the hallway, clots of students broke up and filed towards classrooms.

“We’ll find you at lunch,” said Cait. Her cool hands gripped his, then she turned away and ran down the hall.

A pair of lunch trays dropped to the table and startled Jason from his funk.

Elise dropped hers the hardest, then pulled out a chair with a loud scrape. Without preamble, she jumped right into it. “What did you do to Stephanie?”

Caitlin winced at her friend’s accusatory tone. “Be nice, ‘lise.”

In the weeks since the dance, Jason noticed Elise spending time in the company of Cait's twin brother, Connor O'Halloran. At first, Jason hoped it signaled an end to his and Connor's rivalry. Instead, it seemed to have soured his relationship with Caitlin's best friend.

If Caitlin's words affected Elise, it didn't show. "All I'm saying is it has to be his fault. I mean, he almost got Connor kicked off the team."

"That's enough!" Cait stood so fast, her chair rocked back on its two rear legs. Everyone in the immediate area turned to stare. Red-faced, Cait pulled her chair back and sat. She took a breath. "Elise, you promised."

Instead of answering, Elise glanced at her watch and stood. "I'm going to wait for Connor." Leaving her untouched tray on the table, she stormed out of the cafeteria.

"What just happened?" asked Jason.

Caitlin sighed and studied her clenched fists. "She makes me so mad."

"Did I do something to her?"

"No," Cait's blue eyes flicked up to his, and she smiled. "Lise and Connor are dating. It turned serious over the weekend. So, I guess, she's protecting her..." Cait glanced up as if the words she needed were on the ceiling. "Investment, yes, Elise is protecting her investment."

A relationship turned serious seemed to have only one possible meaning. *Way to go, Connor, I guess.* To Caitlin, he said, "Are you gonna be okay?"

"Me?" she waved off his concern. "Sure, I make new best friends all the time. Tell me what happened to Stephanie."

"...so, she just kissed you goodbye, and you never saw her again?"

"Nope. I was crazy for a while, missing her. Then my dad talked with her father. Mr. Timms said Stephanie was a foster kid all along and that some rich family adopted her." The next part of the story still hurt. "Apparently, she'd known about the adoption for months and never said anything."

It seemed to bother Cait almost as much as him. "I can understand her not wanting to give you some bad news, but why hasn't she called or sent a text?" All he could do was shrug. "Have you checked your spam folders?"

"Yeah," Jason said, "I've sent a bunch of messages too."

The lunch bell rang. Jason stood and waited for Cait. Together they dropped off their trays. In the hallway, Cait stopped Jason with a touch on his arm. "Don't worry. I'll call you tonight. We'll talk some more."

"Thanks."

That evening, about five minutes after Caitlin hung up, Jason's mom tapped on his open door. "Got a minute?" she asked.

"Sure, Mom, pull up a chair." It was a joke because he sat on the only chair in the room. Instead of sitting, Mom walked around, collecting various articles of clothes, and putting them in his hamper. While she worked, Mom asked, "Who's Caitlin?"

Wary of parental curiosity, Jason chose a neutral reply. "A friend."

"Uh, huh." Mom sat on the edge of his bed. "Is she the same girl who invited you to the dance?"

"Yes." Then to ward off whatever concern Mom had, he added. "Look, we're just friends. She's concerned about me, that's all."

“Uh, huh,” repeated Mom. “Well, I’m concerned about you as well. There’s a thing called rebound. I don’t want you making a poor decision because you’re on the rebound from Stephanie.”

Of course, Mom’s reason made perfect sense. Then he thought about it more. Mom had always wanted a daughter, and she’d genuinely liked Stephanie. Putting it all together, Jason realized he wasn’t the only person who needed closure. “Mom, Stephanie and I shared a private email address. We used it to talk about, well, private stuff.” He glanced across the room, and Mom nodded. “Since she left, I’ve sent hundreds of messages and checked the inbox hundreds of times. If Steph wanted to contact me, she’d be able to do it from any public or private terminal.”

“You don’t think she’ll get in touch?”

“No, and I’m trying to not get angry about it. You heard Dad. Stephanie knew about the adoption for months, and she never said a word. Steph and I...well, we didn’t have secrets from each other. At least I didn’t think so.”

“And you’re ready to move on?”

“No, but I think I need to. Probably with Cait or maybe another girl. Who knows, maybe I’ll find somebody better.”

Jason and Caitlin ate lunch together every day. Sometimes Elise joined them, but she rarely stayed for more than a few minutes. On their way to math class, Caitlin sighed as if buried under the weight of a mountain. “I wish I had someone to go out with this weekend.”

When Jason glanced over, Cait flashed her blue eyes at him.

“So, where do you wanna go?” he asked. The words barely escaped his lips before she tugged him into an alcove near the school’s auditorium.

“I didn’t say yes, yet,” she said

“What, you don’t want to go out with me?” Now he was confused.

Like a cat chasing a mouse, Caitlin backed Jason into the corner. They stood close, barely an inch apart. “You have to ask me properly.”

“Oh,” Why were girls so complicated? “Caitlin, O’Halloran, would you go out with me?”

She nodded and glanced up at him. “Are you asking because you want to ask or because I want you to ask?”

“Cait,” he said, forgetting himself and brushing a stray lock of her hair back into place. Then he kissed her. Caitlin’s lips tasted like strawberry Chapstick. Which was charming and adorable, and then she bit his lip. “Ouch!”

“Ha,” she said, “we need to talk before there’s any fooling around.”

“I thought you liked me?”

“I do, but I’m not going to be the girl you use to “get over” her. You have to like me for me.”

Why were girls so complicated? “What do I need to do?”

With a smile, Cait took his hand and pulled him back into the hallway. “We’ll talk about it on our date, Friday night.”

Confused and with no hope of understanding left, Jason wondered where he’d lost control. “Where are going for our date?” he thought he should know.

“You invited me, so you pick the place. It doesn’t have to be fancy. I’m easy.”

Winter in Western Pennsylvania limited the options. Picnics were out, as was the recently reopened Wexford Starlight Drive-in. That left movie, malls, and he tried to think of another date location starting with an “M,” but whether Cait was easy or not, a motel seemed inappropriate.

Their first date consisted of conversation at a coffee house. Then a walk around a local indoor mall. It had gone well. At least he thought it had. The private table at the coffee house had been a good idea, and they’d talked for hours. Caitlin liked him, but she was worried he’d use her to “get over” losing Stephanie. It made sense, and Cait deserved better than that.

Their second date came the following night, as did Jason’s face to face meeting with Connor.

The night air was frigid, and Jason ran up the walk to Caitlin’s front door. He pressed the doorbell and waited. The door opened, and Connor stood there.

“Hello, Brainiac.” The sneer in his voice could cut solid rock.

“Connor, if you want a fight, let me inside first. It’s too cold out here.”

Caitlin’s twin brother shrugged and stepped aside. He closed the door after Jason passed.

“I don’t see what Cait sees in you. You’re just a scrawny little nerd.”

“You know, Connor, I could wonder about you and Elise. But since she’s Cait’s friend, and I respect your sister’s judgment, you must have a few positive qualities.”

The larger boy shook his head. “I can’t tell if you’re full of shit or not. It doesn’t matter. C’mon in and have a seat. Cait’s upstairs doing girl stuff.”

Soft drinks in hand, both boys took seats in the kitchen. Jason had an idea but wasn’t sure if it was good or not. *What the heck.* “Hey, I heard congratulations are in order.”

Wary, Connor said, “About what?”

“You and Elise got serious the other weekend. Like I said, congratulations.”

Connor’s eyes narrowed. “How do you know about it?”

“Girls talk about boys. I just happened to be there.”

“No, shit?” Apparently, Jason hit a nerve. Connor leaned forward, his antagonism gone. “What’d she say?”

She hadn’t said anything. Jason only knew about the successful dirty deed because Caitlin mentioned it. Still, he had to answer. “Elise said you were very sweet and made her happy.”

“Really? All she told me was it hurt like hell and was over too fast.” Connor winced and cut off his words.

“Chicks.” Jason shrugged.

“Yeah.” Connor agreed.

Soon enough, Caitlin and Jason became fixtures at each other’s houses. On school nights, Connor and Elise joined them while they finished their homework.

Caitlin’s mother had divorced her philandering husband years back. She worked as a nurse and sometimes pulled a double shift.

“Master, Jason, Miss Caitlin is on the phone.”

“Thank you, Alfred.” He stepped over to his comm display, and the iconic poster from Star Wars, episode three, resolved into an image of his girlfriend. “Hey, Kitty Kat,” he said. At an O’Halloran family gathering, he’d overheard a younger niece refer to Cait as Aunt Kat. A modified version quickly became his private name for Caitlin.

“Connor’s staying at a friend’s, and I’m all alone,” she said. “Come over and keep me company.”

He glanced at the clock. “It’s after nine, is this cool with your mom?”

“Poor Mom has to work a double. She won’t be home until tomorrow morning.”

“Oh,” then he grinned. “Oh! I’ll see if I can get the car.”

Cait returned his grin. “Hurry.”

When he asked for the car, Mom managed a disgruntled frown. For a moment, he thought she’d tell him, “NO.” Dad, however, rolled his eyes and said, “Sure, just be home by midnight.” Deadpan, he added, “And, son, remember the boy scout motto.”

Jason’s mental gears spun, and understanding popped into existence. “Right. Thanks, Dad.” He ran upstairs and opened his sock drawer. There in front lay The Box. *How many should he take?* Shrugging, he grabbed the box. *Be prepared!*

Cait met him at her door wearing shorts and a long shirt. She laughed when The Box fell out of his coat pocket. She said, “I guess I was a little obvious, but a whole box?”

“I like to be prepared.” He replied.

Vanilla scented candles cast their unsteady light across Caitlin’s remarkably girly bedroom. Pink walls, stuffed animals, and a once-canopied bed completed the scene. A pronounced flush covered Cait from her chest to her cheeks. Most endearing, though, was her satisfied smile. Reaching down, he made sure everything was still in place. The instructions inside the box had been clear on that part. But before he could move far, Cait’s legs wrapped around him and drew him back.

“Kiss me first,” she demanded.

Settling down onto his elbows, Jason enjoyed one of the best kisses of his life.

After an awkward moment sharing the bathroom, they raced back to her bed. Jason still felt a lingering high from their lovemaking. Cait seemed surprised yet pleased when he pulled her into a big spoon-little spoon arrangement.

She said, “I guess I owe *her* for two things now.”

Cait rarely referred to his ex-girlfriend as anything other than “her.” Curious, he asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Well, besides dumping you, she gave you all that experience.”

“What experience?”

“Give me a break.” An inviting wiggle offset any implied harshness in her words. “First, you do all those things and make me crazy.” She glanced back over her shoulder. “Then, you took my little yoni down to pound town.”

“I can’t believe you said that.”

“Why not? It’s what you did.” She reached back and squeezed. “And it feels like you’re going to do it again.”

“Seriously, kitty kat, *our* first time, was *my* first time.

She rolled to face him. “What? She wasn’t your first?”

“No, you were.”

“Wait, she said you two did it in our math classroom.”

“She did? But we...look, I’m not comfortable talking about what she and I did. It came close a couple times, but no.”

Eager to try again, Jason nudged her hip. Obliging, Cait rolled onto her back. Jason began kissing his way to round two. He’d passed her navel when she stopped him.

“Why are you so good, then?”

He grinned, “Natural aptitude, kitty kat.”

Days passed, and Caitlin’s mother didn’t work near enough double shifts. Jason was eager to prove his one-night performance wasn’t a fluke. For her part, Cait seemed eager to give him as many opportunities as possible. While searching for a suitable parking spot, an old expression came to mind. Something about “love finding a way.” Their way turned out to be a secluded spot behind a long-closed ice cream stand. With his mother’s minivan tucked between a dumpster and an old panel truck, Jason and Caitlin rode out a late February snow squall.

Laughing, Cait burrowed underneath Jason’s spread out sleeping bag. “I almost died when you told Mom you were taking me out for ice cream.”

“Yeah, your Mom thinks it’s too cold. C’mere kitty kat, I want some of your French vanilla.”

“Just be careful with your whipped cream.”

Jason craned his neck to check the dash-mounted battery indicator. They had the heater running on high. Between it and his sleeping bag, they managed to stay warm enough.

Caitlin sat up. “Jason, I want to ask you a serious question.”

“Okay,” he sat up and matched her cross-legged sitting position. Outside of the van, a frigid wind howled. “What do you want to know?”

Whatever courage Cait had summoned was fading fast. She tried but couldn’t hold his eyes. Jason reached and stroked her cheek. “Kitty kat, you can ask me anything.”

She nodded. “Do you still think about...her?”

The specter of Stephanie had never truly been laid to rest by either of them.

“Cait,” Jason whispered, “Stephanie’s in my past. You’re my present.”

“What about your future? And answer my question, damn it.”

He sighed, but he couldn’t lie to this girl. She meant too much, but not enough to make her happy. “I don’t know what to say. We’re together right here, right now. As for the future? Heck, I don’t trust the future anymore. My motto is “Live for today.”

“And her?”

He hung his head and sighed again. Cait wouldn’t let this go. “Yeah, sometimes.”

“When you’re with me? When we’re doing it?”

This made him smile, which garnered a glare from Cait. When they were doing it, there wasn’t anything he could think of but Cait. If she had a superpower, it was the ability to consume his senses completely. “No, not when we’re together. When we’re making love? It’s not even possible. You completely fill me up.”

“Hey, she said with a small smile and patted his lap. “That’s my line. I’m the only one getting filled up.”

“I meant inside my head.” It was so easy to kiss this girl, and so he did. She kissed him back with a passion that threatened to kindle an encore. “Kitty kat, you gotta believe me. You command all my attention. Especially when we’re busy.” The last, he accompanied with an eyebrow waggle.

“So, when do you think about her?”

“When I’m home, and I see her old house. Or sometimes, at night, when I can’t fall asleep.” Over a month ago, Mom helped him gather up his Stephanie memorabilia. He put it all, including his Slayer shirts in storage, hoping it would reduce the pain. The six pictures from his locker lived in the back of an old, almost filled notebook.

Hand in hand, Jason walked Caitlin to her front porch. Over the last two years, they’d done this so many times. For every possible reason, Cait deserved his best. They’d fought and broke up, nearly always because he couldn’t give her what she wanted. Somehow, though, they always gravitated back together. She’d forgive him, and he’d live with the guilt, knowing he’d let her down again. If it weren’t for his ghost, Caitlin would be the girl for him.

They took their time strolling up to her front door. It had been one of their better dates.

“Jason?” she asked, stopping short of the steps up to her porch. “Before you kiss me goodnight, I want you to promise me something.”

“Whatever you want, kitty kat.” His nickname for her never failed to bring a touch of color to her cheeks.

“Tomorrow, you’re leaving for college. I won’t see you until November. Promise me you’ll come back and take me out again.”

“Hey, what’s this all about?”

“For two years, you’ve waited for *her* to come back.” There wasn’t any question who she meant. “For those same two years, I’ve waited for you to let her go. I can’t wait forever.”

“Caitlin, I’ve never lied to you. There isn’t anything left in me to give.”

“And if you’d been a bastard about it, I’d have written you off a long time ago.”

“You’re a much better girl than I deserve.”

“And I think you’re the best man I know.”

“All right, I promise to come home and take you out again.”

“Good, now walk me to the door and kiss me goodnight.”

It wasn’t just football scouts who prowled colleges searching for top talent, government agencies and defense contractors had their own recruiters. One of his professors took him aside and suggested, in very strong terms, Jason take this interview. Having just earned his master’s degree, he’d planned on taking a few months off and catch up with any available old friends. One interview wouldn’t hurt.

“Mr. Thomas, thank you for coming in. Have a seat, and we’ll get started.”

Jason took the indicated chair and did his best to present a calm and collected appearance.

The two people across the table studied him.

The woman spoke first. “Mr. Thomas, your thesis interests us.” She reached for a folder and flipped it open. “Distributed processing isn’t new, but your ideas for effectively reducing latency are remarkable. Have you made any additional inroads since?”

“I’ve made a few, but resources here are limited. Without more access to hardware and network time, I’ve gone about as far as possible.”

The man opened his briefcase and extracted a form. “This is a Non-Disclosure Agreement.” He slid it across the table, along with a pen. “If you’ll sign this, we’d like to discuss how you might be able to help us.”

Two days later, after returning home, Jason sat in his father's home office.

"I hope you read it before you signed it!" Robert Thomas took the proffered copy of the NDA and leaned back in his chair to read it. While his dad did his lawyer thing, Jason took a few minutes to gaze around his dad's home office. The desk display and keyboard were new, but Dad had always been a closet techno-geek. One of the walls featured pictures of Jason and several of his high school friends. None of the pictures included one particular former neighbor girl.

Dad set the paper down. "It's standard boilerplate. At least you didn't sign your life away."

"I'd like to think I'm smart enough not to do that."

"That would be a first. What can I do for you?"

First, I have a security add-on for Alfred." Jason set a data chip on his father's desk. "It's something I've worked on in my spare time."

"If you had spare time, you weren't studying enough." Dad picked up the chip. "What's it do?"

"It's an add-on for Alfred's bios. I call it 'Digital Fealty.' It will stop all kernel-level attacks." Once you install it, every time Alfred reboots, the code will enforce one-hundred percent loyalty to our family."

"I'm surprised you haven't developed this for commercial sale."

"Someday, I will. For now, that defense contractor, "Jason tapped the NDA, "made me an offer. I want your opinion." He passed over an envelope. Dad snatched it up and began to read.

"This...this is rather good. Proportionally better than anything I got after law school. Let me check on something." Robert senior lifted his head towards the ceiling. "Alfred, what do you have on..." he named Jason's prospective employer.

"One moment, sir." Over the next several minutes, Alfred used the wall-mounted monitor to display details about the company. Highlighted were notations of several government contracts. "Hmm, this deal with DARPA looks interesting. Did they say anything to you about Artificial Intelligence?"

"Dad, I signed an NDA!"

"Yes, you did. Well, this contract might be something you're interested in. Tell you what, ask for another twenty percent in salary and accept ten. See if they'll throw in another week of vacation."

"Thanks, Dad. I do it."

"Now, while you're here, we need to talk about you and your life."

"My life? I have a master's degree, with distinction, in software engineering and a significant job offer. I think I've done well so far."

Dad stretched forward and tapped one of the photographs. He'd taken it the night of Jason and Caitlin's senior prom. "She's married now, you know. A man, with more sense than you, swept her up and married her."

Jason heard she'd married someone, six or seven months ago. It hurt a lot more than he expected. "I'm happy for her."

"Caitlin called here a year ago. She talked to your mother, asking what she'd done wrong for you to never call."

"I didn't know."

“No, you wouldn’t. You’ve had your head so far up your ass over that foster girl. You never saw that one,” Dad tapped Caitlin’s picture, “slip away.”

“Dad!”

“Your mother won’t say anything to you. She thinks you’ll get over it. Well, I think you’ve wasted enough time moping around and crying about a girl who obviously never felt anything for you.”

Jason jumped to his feet. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The hell I don’t.” Dad pushed his chair back and stood. “You need to grow up, pull your head out of your ass and admit Stephanie isn’t coming back.”

“I’m fine!”

“The hell you are. When you think no one’s watching, you stare out the windows at her old house. It’s like you expect her to come running back.

“What if I do? It’s my life to waste.”

“No, it isn’t. Your mother and I spent too much money and too much time for you to just throw it all away.” His father mimed tossing an imaginary object into the trash can.

“I got a news flash for you, Dad. Whatever money and time you spent was your decision.” He phrased his next words slowly. “I do not owe you anything.”

Robert Senior worked his mouth as if starting and then aborting his choice of words. Finally, he spoke. “While you live under my roof—”

Jason didn’t wait for his dad to finish. “There is an easy solution. Goodbye.” He turned and left the room. Upstairs, in the kitchen, Mom tried to block his way.

“Jason, wait, your father—”

He held up a hand, and his mother broke off whatever excuse she wanted to make for Dad. “Bye, Mom, I love you too.”

The end of part one.