

A Random Act of Blindness



Kelli Jae Baeli

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Summary:

A professor struggles with her sexual identity
after crossing paths with a clever young lesbian.

1. Fiction-Erotica 2. Lesbian

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GRAMERCY

Thanks to Emily C. Jones for her photographer's discerning feedback on the cover design, which inspired me to create the new one.

Also by Kelli Jae Baeli

Also Known As DNA
Random Act of Blindness

Baggage

Crossing Paths

Plethora

As You Were

Armchair Detective

Achilles Forjan

ISO (In Search Of):

*The Art of Dating, Relationships, & Sex
for the Discerning Lesbian*

Brainmatter: Essays, Narrative & Short Fiction

Yin & Yang: Poetry From Both Sides of My Disposition

Soaking The Pillow:

Erotica for Women Who Love Women

Strictly Academic

The Unbearable Lightness of Being UNBEARABLE:

Essays, Articles & Blogs

COMING IN 2010

Quintessence

Chewing Pencils:

Writing, Editing & Publishing in the Digital Age.

Somewhere Else

Another Justice

Sour Milk From the Cyber Teat (Screenplay)

Supernatural Hypocrisy:

The Cognitive Dissonance of a God Cosmology

Falling Through the Cracks:

The Misadventures of No One Famous

*For the woman who will offer me the best
random acts of blindness.*

"To be a teacher was to be a student anew, to relive the intoxication of insight, and to be a prophet, to sketch the world down to its very foundation—not simply to tease sight from blindness, but to demand that another see."

~R. Scott Bakker


1

I f I still like dick, does that mean I cannot be a lesbian? Rachel struggled with that question.

She shifted the Jaguar, relishing the feel of the gear knob in her hand, and imagined how it would feel inside her. *Was the only discerning element strictly about who the dick was attached to? To WHOM the dick was attached*, she corrected herself. *Damn*. Even in her erotic musings, she could not deny the academic portions of her identity.

As a professor approaching tenure, her position at the university afforded certain luxuries, like being able to choose whether to be addressed as Doctor Leeds or Professor Leeds. But her perks never allowed her the ability to own a car like this one. That liberty was reserved for those who had invested wisely in hot properties like Google or foreign oil; or in the case of this particular car, Italian antiquities.

She down-shifted for the curve on Country Club Lane, and felt the power of the Jag under her. The creamy XJ8 interior sported Burl Walnut trim, and smelled always of fine leather. She reveled in the

sheer luxury of the machine, slipping easily into her fantasy of being a spy, on her way to a clandestine meeting. *Bond. Jane Bond*, her inner voice intoned; sharing titillating conversation with the stunning and moneyed elite; her only concern, how dry her martini was, how wet her current conquest.

Often, these reveries would include tying a woman up, rendering her helpless, and then doing delicious, naughty, teasing things to her; hearing her whimper and beg for more; straining against her tethers. *Bondage, Jane Bondage*, came the corrected moniker.

Rachel Leeds had spent her entire adult life wishing for things she could never have, craving sensations that continued to elude her, and cursing the decisions along the way that kept her hands off things like Jaguar gearshifts.

Pulling into the lot that joined the tennis courts, she braked and watched the thirty-something socialite move through her backhand with the tennis pro holding her wrist. She imagined that later, the two would be in a passionate clench in a dark corner of the sauna, the socialite's hands bound behind her with the tie from her robe, the tennis pro fucking her over the bench. Afterward, the two would return to their predictable lives, having freed the demon of lust for another week.

Rachel came out of her steamy reverie and revved the cat's engine. It sounded like something dangerous. Like the guttural intonations of its namesake—swift, powerful, deadly.

Her hand dropped to the passenger seat to caress the leather. She'd never be able to afford a car like this. The closest she came was stolen moments

allowed her by a generous wealthy neighbor, who often took trips to Europe and left her to water his plants, and warm the engine of this luxurious and omnipotent cat.

Armondo was an Italian antiquities dealer, and had told her she could take the Jag for a spin anytime she wished. He enjoyed the nonchalance that money brought him, never fearing irreparable damage, since money was no object, and everything could be replaced with a no-limit credit card and a smile.

It wasn't long before she allowed herself that spicy tidbit of fantasy the vehicle could offer. And always, she was Jane Bond, or Jane Bondage—depending on the fantasy—feminine world traveler and master spy, her long chestnut hair whipping in the wind.

She imagined what she would do to the socialite, once she got her into the passenger seat. There, at the edge of the tennis courts, under the canopy of oak trees in the quiet parking lot, her reverie began...*lifting her leg over the center console, peering out the front window.* Already lubricated enough by her fantasy, she imagined lowering herself on the stick, its slight protuberance shaped just right to niggle her G-spot. In her fantasy, she fucked herself with the elegant apparatus, still watching the socialite play slap and giggle with the tennis pro.

Someone could discover her there, impaling herself on the luxurious knob atop the console, and she furtively glanced around the area, insuring that this would not happen. Her orgasm was building as she rubbed her clit, still imagining the sensation of the gearshift. Then she saw herself *with the phallic shifter in her*

hand, swirled by the balmy water of the hot tub, fucking the bound and blindfolded socialite, unwilling to allow the woman release, yet "shifting" her, over and over, stopping to let the sensations fade just enough to avoid orgasm...then demanding that she implore her for absolution—forgiveness of her sin...the sin of lust, the sin of need, the sin of beauty that stirs the most rigid heart. "Beg me. You have to beg me...do you understand that I have control over you?" She thrusts the shift into her again, hears her moan like a beast. "Beg me, naughty girl..."

Waves of pleasure crash throughout her pussy and her juices drizzle down the gearshift, jolting her back to herself again...Rachel pulled her hand out of her pants, felt the wetness through her slacks. She clenched herself, not wanting it to escape; as much to cling to the memory, as to keep herself from bathing the fine leather seats.

Lifting her eyes, she saw the socialite heading for the locker room with the tennis pro in tow. Perhaps she really would be engaging in debauchery; though not with Rachel. Feeling a twinge of shame, she regretfully dismissed the fantasy, and backed out of the space.

A short time later, she returned the machine to its slot in the triple garage, glad she wouldn't have to clean a debased gearshift, and locked the exit door behind her as she made her way across the lawn to the sidewalk, and two houses down to her own front door.

Her first destination was the bath, where she could have a glass of wine to a Pachelbel CD, cleanse herself, and think back over her fantasy while the hot water cradled her.



2

Saving the Word document on her laptop, Professor Leeds looked over at the literary magazine where her latest article had just been published. As the only instructor qualified to teach British Literature, as well as Shakespeare, Milton, and other major writers like Poe and Twain, she had carved out a place for herself at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

While deciding between the offers she'd received after attaining her Ph.D., she visited the campus and the surrounding Rocky Mountain region, drawn to the mountains and trees and bucolic environment. Arts and entertainment was thriving, here, and she could always find something of interest when she allowed herself a break from her work. She often attended shows at the Boulder's Dinner Theater on Arapahoe, near the college, though rarely, if ever, with a date. She felt wholly uninterested in the waltz of romance, and preferred her own company to that of most other people, other than a few casual female friends. A good book, a glass of wine and Pachelbel or Gagnon on the stereo was all she required for her

contentment; the sensual excursions in the Jaguar notwithstanding.

Now, she picked up the tear-tab taken from the flyer that caught her eye at the kiosk on the way to her office. 'Specializing in gay and lesbian counseling' it had announced at the bottom. Perhaps she just needed insight into same-gender attraction, from someone qualified to offer an opinion.

Glancing at her watch, she saw it was time to leave for that appointment.



"Why do you think you do that?" Dr. René Bass set the coffee down on the table in front of Rachel's chair, and returned to her seat.

"Thank you." She picked up the mug and blew on the steaming liquid, hoping that her decision to seek professional counsel was a wise one. "I don't know...I don't know why I began to even think of it, but I was always so frustrated, and the idea just came to me one day, and it was so exciting."

"What was most exciting about it? The taboo of the gearshift? That it was someone else's car? Or that you had so much power?"

Rachel noticed a stray coffee ground swirling in her cup. She watched it spin for a moment. "All of the above, I suppose." She set her cup down and leaned back against the chair, toying with the top button of her blouse, pushing the button through the hole, and releasing it again. "Is there something wrong with me?"

"Why would you think there was something wrong with you?"

"Well, I'm acting like a teenaged boy. I'm having fantasies about women and dominating them. You know, tying them up and teasing them...and I'm thinking about impaling myself on gearshifts, for God's sake."

Doctor Bass pushed a wayward tendril of her light brown hair away from one eye. "Have you ever acted on any of these lesbian fantasies?"

"Am I a lesbian? I mean, I like penetration, so—"

"So?"

"Well if I like penetration, I can't be a lesbian, right?"

"Who says?"

She studied the doctor. Her curly locks, barely touching her shoulders, her thin frame, clothed in a linen pantsuit, her brown loafers. "Lesbians like penetration?"

"Do you think a woman identifies with being a lesbian because she *doesn't* like penetration?"

"I guess..."

Bass shifted in the armchair across from her. "Lesbians are human beings, first. Humans need, among other things, intimacy. It isn't about the act, it's about the person."

"Really?"

"People like what they like. But when you are speaking of sexual orientation, the only delineation is to whom you are attracted. The expression of that attraction is—or should be—limited only by what those two people enjoy."

Rachel remembered having that exact thought the other day. Maybe it **was** about to whom it was attached, after all. Yet, all this time, she thought being lesbian was about having been abused, hating

men or hating penetration. Now, according to verification from Doctor Bass, it wasn't about that at all. "So, I could be a lesbian who just likes penetration."

"Precisely."

"That's a new idea."

"To many, it is."

"How do you know so much about this? Are you a lesbian?"

One corner of the doctor's mouth lifted, but she suppressed the oncoming smile. "It's inappropriate for me to share my personal life with clients."

"But your clients are expected to share theirs with you?"

The doctor's slight smile revealed respect for the professor's acuity. "That's why they come to me. I offer a service they need, and that service does not include, nor have any relation to, my personal life."

"Seems like a double standard."

"It is." She allowed the smile, then. "But those boundaries are in place for a reason. Counselors must remain objective. Objectivity requires us to omit any personal involvement, to include the discussion of our own lives."

"But don't you see, that that level of personal interaction is exactly what is needed here?"

"That's what friends are for."

"Then why am I paying to talk to you if I can get this more completely by talking to a friend?"

"Because I'm trained and qualified to give advise based on an understanding of what is psychologically healthy and what is not."

Rachel suspected that she didn't really have a friend to talk to; certainly no best friend. So talking

to a friend was moot. She watched the doctor click her ink pen. "So what you're saying is, if I just want to vent or discuss, I can do that with a friend, but if I need some actual help or reliable recommendations, I should seek a professional?"

"Essentially, yes." Bass wrote something on her notepad. "Look at it this way: if you wanted some insight about a particular piece of literature, you could ask one of your students who took the class, or you could ask a colleague. Which person would you ask?"

"The colleague."

"Why?"

"Because, while the student may have taken the class, the colleague has a degree in it. The colleague would be more qualified to give the insight."

Bass grinned at her, silent.

"Okay. Good point." Rachel smoothed a hand over the chenille upholstery fabric of her armchair. She liked the symbolism in the doctor having two matching armchairs facing each other. That way there was no perceived imbalance. The doctor didn't have a better one, or a softer one, or one of a prettier color. She wondered if this decorating detail was intentional. "I realize this is a conflict of interest, but as far as friend or professional, which do you think I need?"

Doctor Bass moistened her lips, pressed them together for a moment. "You might need both."

"But of course you would say that, because paying clients are your livelihood."

"That's true. But there are plenty of people out there who need real professional help. I have no interest in milking the ones who don't. I think once

you work through this initial stage, you just need a good friend. I'm only here to provide that initial guidance."

"Fair enough." Rachel scooted forward and picked up the coffee mug, having a sip.

"So...getting back to the subject at hand...tell me, have you had any experiences you would define as lesbian?"

"Well, I had a few encounters years ago, but nothing like my fantasies. I've never...never gone beyond kissing."

"But you have always fantasized about dominating women?"

"Pretty much."

"Do you think it might be a way for you to feel you have regained some control?"

"Control?"

"Have you felt out of control where your sexual relationships are concerned?"

Rachel thought about it. Her sex life had always left a lot to be desired, and she had felt trapped in her previous marriage. "Maybe."

"It might be a good idea to just play this out, and let yourself experiment a little. Do something you've not been able to do." Dr. Bass removed her bifocals, and put her notepad down to cross to her desk. Retrieving a key from one drawer, she used it to open another. She brought the tabloid sized paper over and handed it to Rachel. *BDSM Quarterly*, the masthead read.

Rachel lifted her gaze to the doctor. "What's this?"

"You ought to consider placing an ad in that."

"An ad for what?"

"For a Sub."

"What's a Sub?"

"Short for Submissive." Bass returned to her chair. "Are you familiar with this alternative lifestyle?"

She looked at the paper, and opened it, viewing the photos of women on their knees with dog collars, and leather-clad women standing over them. "Um... I've heard about this of course, but I didn't know they had their own magazine."

"It's more prevalent than you realize."

Then it occurred to her. "How do you know about this?"

Dr. Bass smiled demurely. "I am not at liberty to share that information."

"Right. Yeah. I forgot," she chided. Rachel considered the doctor in a whole new light, then. She might be a lesbian, and might also be into BDSM. She received an odd, invasive image of Dr. Bass in a Dominatrix outfit, inflicting punishment on another woman with a tiny leather whip.

"Anyway," Bass slid her reading glasses back on. "if you place an ad in that, I think you will be able to explore this side of yourself. It's perfectly natural."

Rachel felt her face flush. *Place an ad? A sex ad?* Was she even capable of such daring behavior? "I don't know if I can do such a thing—"

"Rachel. You fantasized about impaling yourself on a gearshift, then tying a woman up and fucking her with it."

She closed her eyes on a sigh. *Point taken.*



3

After her appointment, Rachel had a quiet dinner for one at Sushi Zanmai, and as evening descended, she left her car parked to continue her stroll around the area, finding herself several streets over on Pearl, amid the bustle of Friday night activity.

Through the Now & Zen storefront window, a Zen clock revealed the hour at which she usually found herself in bed with a book. But she was restless; her brain still toyed with possibilities and fears and confusion.

A few doors down, across from the darkened gift shop, she saw several women open a glass door, the thumping of dance music escaping in a blast, until the door fell closed again. Approaching the establishment, she saw that it was a women's bar. She had overheard students talking about it. It was reportedly the only women's bar in the area. Rachel's singular experience with a gay bar had been a year ago, when she drove into Denver to a popular gay bar named *Nobody's Business*, hoping that distance, as well as the name, would quell her fears

of being recognized. But that experience had not answered her questions. Her fear kept her from approaching anyone.

Now, at this door to a local lesbian bar, she wondered if she had given it a real chance. Glancing at the logo, *The Cellar*, she hesitated only a moment, before pulling the door and stepping inside. *Just for a cocktail. Just to relax before going home. Back to her books.*

Intercepted by the door-person, she paid the five dollar cover, and moved toward the small bar, glancing to the left to see a drag show in progress in the adjacent room. It was not what she had wished for. She just wanted a quiet drink.

Ordering an Amaretto Sour, she paid and swiveled on the bar stool to watch the show going on beyond the half-wall. Most of the patrons were in that room, whooping, hollering and tipping the drag queens. The display made little sense to her. Here was a bar that catered to gay women. And there was a show being performed for them that consisted of men, pretending to be women. It would have made more sense if there had been women performing, as women. Then she could have understood the excitement that seemed to permeate the crowd.

The other disturbing factor was that the performers weren't actually singing, but lip-synching. And yet, when each dramatic note was hit by the vocalist on the recording, the crowd would cheer as if it were really being performed by the drag queen. Did they not see past the nonsensical nature of their admiration? Did they not want to titillate themselves with the beauty or talent of a real woman? What was this all about? She found it

curious and disconcerting.

As she finished the last of her small drink, the bartender approached and set another down in front of her. "From the woman at the end of the bar," he said.

She turned to see an entirely mannish woman, waving at her briefly, and smiling. The woman moved over and sat on the stool next to her. "Hi," she said simply. "Haven't seen you here before."

"I've never been here," she explained, lifting the glass to her lips. "Thanks for the drink."

"My pleasure, darlin'."

The woman wore a navy blue button-down shirt, tucked into jeans that accentuated the eighty or so pounds she needed to lose. Her hair was cropped short, and she wore no makeup. She wasn't ugly, she just wasn't womanly.

As the woman prattled about the show, Rachel again struggled with confusion. *If I really am a lesbian and I want to be with a woman, why would I choose one who looked like a man? And why did so many of the women in this room seem a cliché about the lesbian community?* Embracing womanhood, and the love and attraction for women, seemed incongruous to behaving in a manly fashion. She could have gone to a straight bar and just picked up an average man. *So why are so many like that, and why do they assume you'll find them alluring?*

She strained to be polite, and hoped that the woman would wander off. Eventually, she did, saying, "Have a good time, catch ya later."

Her attention back on the show, Rachel watched as merry lesbians poked dollars in the gown of the drag queen on the stage. She decided to just finish

her drink and go. Lesbian life was obviously not what she was looking for.

"Ohhhhh myyyy..."

Rachel turned at the voice and smiled.

"Busted," the woman accused.

"Oh! Dr. Bass—Hello..."

"Here, you can just call me René." She chuckled.

"Are you dipping your toe in the pool?"

"Well I thought I was. I'm not so sure it's a pool I want to swim in."

A short, boyish woman squeezed Dr. Bass's shoulder on the way by. "Hi, Rennie."

"Hey, honey," she said to the departing woman.

"Rennie?"

"Nickname."

"Oh...is this where you troll for clients?"

She smiled. "They can be had here, yes. But I'm just having a drink before I head home. It's kind of a dive, but convenient." She noticed Rachel's discomfort with the scene in the other room. "Not your cup of tea, eh?"

"Well, it's confusing," she explained. "Why do so many of them seem to want to be men?"

"Identity and gender confusion. Most of us were steeped in a hetero culture, and so some of us feel we have to adhere to the prototype."

She nodded slowly. "But it still doesn't make sense."

"No. So are you doubting your attraction to women?"

"No. I am attracted to women. When they look like women."

"Understood. I'm the same way."

The volume of the music lowered a notch as the

drag MC talked to the crowd. Rachel turned to face René. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Yes. Been together for 15 years."

"Wow." The space along the bar began to crowd with bodies wanting refills. The one next to her was actually attractive. Her hair was short and dark, but feminized by a trim body, a pixie face, and a movie-star smile.

"Buy her a drink," René coaxed, noticing her looking the young woman over.

"Oh no," she whispered back. "I couldn't—"

"Why not?"

Blinking, she glanced back at her and then back at Bass. "I've never...I don't..." The pixie-girl paid for her drink and moved away, the opportunity lost.

René shook her head. "You're a great big chicken."

"I am not chicken," she defended. "I'm just...I'm just new at this and—"

"You have to start somewhere, Rachel."

Rachel considered this for a moment, taking a drink of her Amaretto Sour.

"Let me ask you a question." René leaned closer, so she could speak more quietly. "Can you see yourself with a woman? I mean, in a relationship, day in day out? Can you imagine playing a wife role for another woman? Caring for her? Cooking her dinner?"

Rachel sighed. "Maybe. But I'm not very good in the chicken." Her eyes bulged in self-surprise. "I mean kitchen."

René cackled. "You know, in my profession, they call that a Freudian slip."



When Rachel began to suspect that some of the young faces were familiar to her, she became uncomfortable. The last thing she needed was to be seen by one of her students. No telling what that could lead to. She was not willing to damage her reputation at the university. So when René Bass headed home, she accompanied her out the door.

"I'm a block away, walk with me," René said.

Rachel obliged, and the two began to stroll past the glowing streetlamps.

"So, do you think you're going to place that ad?"

"I'm considering it."

"I really do think it's a good idea. As long as you make your intentions clear in the ad, there should be no problem."

"What are my intentions?"

René chuckled. "You have to answer that for yourself, I'm afraid."

"Well I'm absolutely clueless about how to compose such a thing."

"Just say you are seeking a female playmate Sub who needs to be disciplined."

"That's all?"

"That ought to do it."

As Rachel's features were alternately illuminated and darkened by the streetlamps they passed, she thought about the specifics. "How do I...meet her?"

René pulled a tin from the pocket of her blazer, and pulled out a round piece of peppermint gum, popping it into her mouth. "Set up an alternate email and give her that address, and choose among the respondents. Have her meet you at some public

place...a bar. Maybe the one we just came from." She held the tin out to her. "Gum?"

Rachel took a piece. "Okay...and then?"

"Then have her follow you to a motel and get a room."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

It didn't seem complicated, to hear René tell it, but emotionally, the idea of it made Rachel apprehensive. "What do I do, once we're—"

"You act out your fantasy. Remain dominate, and control her and the situation. Blindfolding her and tying her to the bed would be a good place to start."

Rachel released a humorous huff. "I can't believe I'm actually going to do something like this."

"How does that make you feel?"

"Fearful...but...excited, too..."

"Perfectly natural." René pointed at the green SUV. "Here I am." Pressing the unlock button on her keychain, the doctor paused by the vehicle. Turning to Rachel, she said, "I can't see you anymore."

"What?"

"As a client."

"Why?"

"Because now I feel like my professional objectivity has been compromised. We've been talking like friends."

"I could pay you," Rachel offered, half-smiling.

René laughed. "Let's just say we're friends, now, and leave it at that."

"So, are you going to be that friend I talk to about my sexual angst?"

"I suppose so. If that's something you feel comfortable with."

Rachel took a long breath and looked around at the city square, landscaped with dogwood trees, wooden park benches and rock gardens with fountains in the middle. She looked back at Doctor Bass. "I think I rather like the idea. God knows I've been friendless long enough."

Bass smiled. "Give me a call and let me know how it went. Maybe we can meet for dinner, and I'll introduce you to my partner."

She nodded, and then surprised herself by giving René a quick hug. Doctor Bass winked at her and got in the SUV.



She sat on the edge of the sofa, leaning forward to see the BDSM Quarterly open on the coffee table. To the serenade of aching beautiful compositions by André Gagnon, made somewhat incongruous by the material in front of her, Rachel read every word, turning the pages slowly. She was rapt by a world she had not only been unaware of, but failed to consider as a possible choice in her life. Overall, her impression was that a majority of the activities incited repulsion. She had no desire to inflict any authentic pain on anyone; nor was she attracted to the concept of humiliation. Yet, the bondage portions of the lifestyle still held some merit in the more sensual portions of her psyche.

An hour passed before she thought of her laptop. Fetching it from her case, she stretched out on the bed with a glass of Lambrusco, and typed "BDSM" into the Google bar. The first page revealed the statistic of 42,200,000 hits on the term. Shocked that

such a burgeoning underground existed without her knowledge, she clicked on a link for the Wikipedia page under that heading.

"The term 'BDSM' is an abbreviation derived from the terms bondage and discipline, domination and submission, sadism and masochism. It defines a spectrum of behaviors, including dominance, submission, punishment, masochism, bondage, role play, and a large variety of other activities, frequently sexual in nature," the first paragraph informed her. Reading further, she discovered that the lifestyle was mostly about exchange of power. She recently identified her own need for personal power through discussion with Doctor Bass about her recent fantasies.

When she explored other web pages, cringing at the vivid and risqué photographs found throughout the listings and profiles, she understood that not everyone took part in the entire spectrum of the BDSM lifestyle. Thus, she decided her only interest was in bondage and domination, and resolved to keep it simple by pursuing only that aspect.

Searching for the BDSM Quarterly publication online, she saw that she could place the ad immediately, and pay with her credit card. With lingering trepidation about privacy, she filled in the details, spending almost as much time editing the text of the ad, as she had the first page of her Master's thesis. Finally, she sent the form, and printed out her receipt, shoving it in her laptop bag, since it was the only place near her that was out of sight. She didn't really want to look at it.

Too late to turn back, now.



Monday morning found Rachel at her desk, dividing the assigned papers into piles of great, not so great and unacceptable. She'd make her marks on them, hand them back out and then go over the more common errors she came across during the next class. Rachel also made a point to schedule a one-on-one meeting with those students who turned in work that was sub-standard, to see what could be done to help them improve. She couldn't afford to neglect her attention to those details, now that she was up for tenure. She expected to speak to the Provost sometime today about her standing in that regard, and was anxious to have this portion of her career behind her, so she could enjoy the job security tenure would offer.

To that end, Rachel had presented material from her book on Milton at conferences, and received excellent academic accolades which resulted in publication; one of the more important aspects of the tenure track. "Publish or Perish" was a mantra that had not yet dissolved into antiquity.

Likewise, she enjoyed praise for her research in British Literature, and received consistently good student evaluations. She'd published three articles this year, and as many in each previous year. She'd also started a successful literacy program in the city. She worked long hours, primarily chose working lunches at her desk, and was never involved in any impropriety.

Now in her sixth year of teaching as a Ph.D. at the university, she was up for a tenured position. She had done everything right. If her excursions into

an alternate lifestyle were to be leaked to anyone, all that could be ruined.

With these thoughts reeling through her mind, she remembered the receipt.

Reaching into her laptop bag, she pulled out the machine, and the BDSM ad receipt fell to the floor. She snatched it up as though it were a naked picture of herself. Having forgotten to leave the evidence of her scandalous endeavor at home, she quickly transferred it to her private drawer, as a knock sounded at her door. She closed the drawer. "Come in."

A blonde young woman peeked in. "Professor Leeds?"

"Yes?" She pushed the key into the drawer and turned it, awkwardly, feeling a sudden heat in her cheeks.

The young woman smiled. "Can you tell me if you are teaching any more classes aside from Brit Lit next semester?"

The half-shut door swung open again and the department secretary leaned in. "Rachel? Sorry to interrupt, but the Provost is ready to see you."

Rachel stood, addressing the student. "I'm sorry, I have to go...there's a schedule over there on that shelf," she pointed. "If you have any questions, you can drop by in an hour, and I should be here."

"Sure," the student said.

"Excuse me." Rachel followed the secretary out into the hall, nervous excitement niggling her that the provost might give her tenure a nod.



4

Some decisions look a little less informed and cogent, even in the dim light of a bar. She stirred her Amaretto Sour and sucked the liquid off the straw, discarding it on the napkin. Her eyes fluttered again to the Michelob clock over the rank and file of liquor bottles. Then she saw herself in the mirror behind the bottles. Long chestnut hair, hazel eyes. No wrinkles to speak of, yet. She hoped she would be perceived as an attractive woman.

She always had trouble seeing herself as beautiful, and would only look in a mirror to decide whether or not she was presentable for work each day. But she never could get to that section of self esteem where she regarded herself as necessarily alluring.

After being summarily dismissed as a sexual creature at almost every social function she attended, unless it was some drunk taking liberties with his hands, she began to wonder if there was something inherently repulsive about herself. Was there something potential suitors saw, that she could not see?

Doubly disturbing, was the knowledge that men were so easy. Few, if any, would turn down a chance at any woman even vaguely appealing—driven, as they were, by the hormones surging through their brains and bodies. Thus, she must indeed be some version of dreadful, since none of them approached her, asked to buy her a drink, offered to dance with her.

Women, though...she didn't have any difficulty relating to them, and they were often more affectionate than men were to her. Was that where this whole idea came from? Was she drawn to women because they were the only ones to acknowledge her in any physical way?

Rachel glanced up at the beer clock over the liquor bottles again. *Five-fourteen. Maybe she's just fashionably late...or maybe she had misgivings, too, and changed her mind.*

"Gambit?"

The whispered query had come from a slight young woman, perhaps in her early to mid-twenties, shoulder-length ebon hair, eyes the color of cappuccino. Though approximately the same height as herself, the girl seemed smaller, somehow. Maybe she small bones. Did that mean Rachel was big-boned? Was that why men seemed uninterested?

Gambit was the name Rachel had signed in the ad. *Mistress Gambit*, to be precise—an idea that seemed to keep with the terminology of the other ads she'd surfed online. She had chosen it in a most scientific manner: by opening the dictionary and dropping her finger down on the page. It seemed suitable. *Gambit: in chess, an opening in which a player risks or sacrifices a piece to gain a favorable position.*

Her risk was in placing that ad. Her sacrifice could be a number of things: lost integrity, physical injury, endangering her tenure, or perhaps forever tainting the purity of her previous vanilla sex life, now slipped unceremoniously into celibacy. She hoped it wouldn't lead her into a checkmate. "You must be Patrice." Gambit clasped her hand in greeting. A small hand, soft, almost frail. *This fragile creature wanted me to spank and dominate her?* She was afraid the girl might break in two. "Drink?"

Patrice looked up at the liquor bottles, and then at the bartender, who approached, towel in hand, eyebrows lifted in reception. "Beer. No—a Rum and Coke."

She needed something stronger than beer, then. She was a striking young woman. *Was that important?* Rachel was unsure. At 41, she couldn't be as selective as she had been in her twenties, svelte and tight and toned. And it wasn't as if she was looking for a lifemate.

It had been years since she left the marriage that did little more than constrain her explorations of the lesbian fantasies that always vexed her. Eventually, they became so overpowering, and her dissatisfaction with her husband so profound, that she wasn't the least resistant to his announcement that he was leaving her. He had merely done the dirty work by filing the papers.

The divorce went through without fanfare, and Rachel then found herself a stranger in a strange land. She never possessed the moral turpitude to cruise the lesbian bars for a meaningless sex partner, telling herself it was because she didn't want to endanger her career. But truth be told, she was a

coward.

So this excursion into the very heart of her own hesitation was an exercise in personal and sexual resolve. She was taking the advice of her doctor. *Medical advice*. It was perfectly healthy to explore her own sexuality, the doctor had said. *Perfectly natural*. She wanted to quench the long curiosity that often intruded upon her hetero sex life during those sessions colloquially invented by missionaries; the random musings that interrupted her lectures on Beowulf when she would see a ripe young co-ed take her seat in the front row and peer up at her expectantly...

She asked herself, during those clandestine moments, why a younger woman always became the object of her desire. Was she somehow stunted in her own maturity, to want intimacies with women who could have been friends with a daughter she never had? Or was it more a question of the comfort zone they represented—a subtle awareness that her knowledge and her years gave her some supposed supremacy over them? Again, perhaps, a control issue, just as the doctor had said.

Now, in this shadowy pub in Denver, the answer to her ad and to her riddle, was about to be provided. Gambit's eyes wandered down to the black Lycra camisole clenching firm, perky breasts; and further down to the leather skirt the girl wore, bunched up high on her thighs. "You've...have you ever done this before?"

Patrice opened her mouth to speak, but the bartender arrived with her drink, and she waited for him to move down to the other end of the bar, to refocus on the television as it played a music video

of Fergie. Patrice's eyes darted around them furtively. "Um...well, you mean outside my own head?" A smile erupted on her face and was gone just as quickly.

Gambit nodded.

The young woman shook her head in response, glancing over at the professor-cum-mistress for a few beats before taking a deep drink of her Rum and Coke. "You?"

Was a real Domme supposed to admit a weakness like that? Like, *I've never been a Domme?* This was feeling complicated already. Gambit responded cryptically, opting for a bit of mystery rather than candor, "Does it matter to you?"

The girl shrugged. "I guess not. I mean, it would be nice if you knew what you were doing...but then, it's a little frightening if you do."

The Professor fought the urge to reassure her; to release maternal components of her psyche and tell her she would be gentle, not to be afraid, and pat her hand or some shit like that. That was not Domme-like behavior, obviously. "I want you to be frightened."

The Professor was surprised by her own response, but the real reaction was to be had from Patrice, who was reaching for her glass, but promptly knocked it over on the slick surface of the bar, the ice hydroplaning in the dark liquid.

The Professor snatched an ice cube and slipped her hand below the bar to the girl's bare thigh, rubbing it on her skin.

Patrice jumped upward and almost fell off her stool, leaving the Professor feeling awkward, foolish. *What the hell did I think I was doing,*

pretending to be this masterful goddess of domination?

Patrice's face flooded pink. "Let's get out of here."

Did she say "Let's?" Is that arousal I see in her eyes? Perhaps I am pretty good at this stuff, after all.

She dropped a twenty on the bar and they made for the door, as the bartender mopped up the spill, happy to trade a little mess for a big tip.



The name Comfort Inn did not necessarily create the right ambience. She did not intend to comfort the girl; but the hotel was nearby and she didn't want to drive around like the Village Idiot. Maybe she should have gone to the Village Idiot Motel. Surely there must be a place like that for fools like her.

Armondo had returned from Europe, so she wasn't able to drive the Jag to make herself look more Domme-like. Alas, she was at heart a utilitarian individual and she thought it silly to rent a different vehicle just for this one meeting.

The mini-van was one of the spoils of divorce. They had anticipated having children, and succumbed to the usual spiel from the salesman about how every couple who intended to have kids, needed a van. Recently, when the excursions in the Jag developed into full-fledged fantasy sprees, it mattered little to her what she drove—those moments of fantasy were enough. Until now. She suspected that a dominatrix did not ordinarily drive a mini-van.

She checked her rearview mirror to see if the girl was still following her. Did Patrice likewise think

her Hyundai was not Sub-like?

Mistress Gambit parked up front while Patrice took a slot to the side and waited. She went in and paid, and came out, dangling the key toward the rearview mirror of the Hyundai. Back in the minivan, she pulled around to the back and parked, making sure Patrice saw her go into room 66. *Almost the Mark of the Beast...*she wanted to do beastly things to the young woman, but wasn't sure she was up to it, so perhaps two six's was more appropriate than three.

She left the door ajar, and a moment later Patrice slipped in and locked it behind her. They stood awkwardly between the dresser and the bed, the distance between them fraught with question. "Lay down on the bed," Professor Gambit ordered.

The young woman did so.

"No, I mean, take off your clothes first."

Patrice got back up and stripped naked, lying down again, stiffly, looking up at her like that blond co-ed in the Lit class she taught. She looked like a Barbie doll, complete with unbendable legs and no pubic hair, except for a tuft at the very top. She would have preferred to make eye contact, but she didn't think she wanted to see those cappuccino orbs just yet. "Turn over on your stomach."

Patrice obeyed dutifully, and Gambit went to her purse and pulled out the blindfold and the strips of yellow nylon rope left over from her last relocation. She hadn't used the blindfold during relocation, but the rope had come in handy.

She placed the cloth around the girl's head and tied it, making sure it was snug. The girl made a tiny moaning sound. *So far, so good*, Gambit congratulated

herself. She then lifted the young woman's wrists toward the headboard, wrapped the rope around them and cinched her up against two of the wooden rails.

Her heart began to pump wildly. *I am in control of this woman.* She could probably do whatever she wanted, and that thought made her moist. Grabbing the girl's left ankle, she pulled it toward the edge and secured it to the frame at the foot of the bed, doing the same with the girl's other leg. She stood up again, admiring the splayed presentation before her.

The girl's pale, flawless skin, was interrupted only by the small yin-yang tattoo on the right shoulder blade. Trailing her vision downward, she admired the shaved lips, with only the tuft of hair...like a little mustache...Gambit thought of the joke about free mustache rides, and grinned, but then shook that thought off. *This is serious. This is it.* The opportunity she had fantasized about so many times...

Now, her eyes were devouring the pink exposed lips, the luscious curve of the girl's ass...she imagined her fingers inside her. Something stirred again, deep in her own groin; perhaps the stirrings of the beast? *Six-Six. The Mark of the Almost-Beast...*

A warmth rushed to her face. A hot flash? Was she having a damn hot flash? She preferred the phrase Power Surge, at the moment. This was too delicious; she'd have to save the thoughts of pre-menopausal temperature changes until later.

"Are you going to spank me, Mistress?"

Am I? I guess I am. "Maybe I will, maybe I won't." Mistress Gambit moved closer to the bed, and

smacked the palm of her hand on one ass cheek, losing her balance and nearly falling on top of the girl. She was thankful for the blindfold. *How absurd. A Mistress who falls down when inflicting punishment.* The answering moan, however, made her forget the failing. This was searingly sweet. This was exciting. She was feeling the burn in her own clit, now. That was a good sign.

"Do you have a whip? Are you going to whip me?"

—again, the embarrassment of having come ill-prepared to do the job. "I might." She remembered the hardware store next door. "You must lie still and think about it first...I'm going outside to smoke a cigarette." Gambit grabbed her purse and the room key, hurrying out, crossing the lot toward the hardware store.

Never, in all her days, had she imagined herself in a position like this. Vivid fantasies aside, Rachel had never considered acting on the impulses that invaded her thoughts throughout the day, until her session with Dr. Bass. They were private affairs stored only in some scurrilous alcove of her mind. Yet her mind interacted with other minds, and often, there were fragments of information to be had in decidedly ironic ways. René Bass, for instance, listened to her confession of the scandalous gearshift penetration mirage, and fantasy bondage scenarios and produced a copy of the bondage magazine. While not something Professor Rachel Leeds believed would qualify as a "literary device," it was nonetheless pivotal in the events in which she was now participating. Namely, being on her way to a hardware store to find something to use as a whip

on the girl who was naked and bound in a hotel room number 66, the *Mark-of-the-Almost-Beast*.

Entering the store, she swept the visible stock quickly. *A whip. Did hardware stores sell whips?* Only if they were the western ones that served a clientele of horse-persons, she supposed.

Perusing the aisles, she stopped in front of a canister of plastic fly-swatters. *Ah. Perfect. I'm saved.* The only ones in stock were red and the business end was shaped like a fat hand. *How divine.* She paid for the item, feeling a bit uncomfortable and muttering "Damn flies," to the clerk before escaping back outside.



Back at the room, Patrice squirmed against her restraints, wondering how long the Mistress would make her lie there helpless. She heard the door lock disengage and open and sensed someone in the room. "Have you come to give me my spanking, Mistress?"

The maid stood gawking at the naked girl, tied to the bed, and realized that although she had seen a great deal of odd behavior working there over the years, this was a new one.

"Am I a bad girl, Mistress?" the girl on the bed was mewling.

"Yes you are," the maid said softly, backing out of the room.


5

Mistress Gambit almost collided with the maid who was closing the door labeled 66 behind her, and they stood for a moment, neither of them quite clear on the appropriate response. The maid pretended to tidy the items on her cart.

Gambit knew she had gone in the room. She knew she had seen. Did the maid have a child at the college who might recognize her? Did the child attend one of her classes? Was the child, perhaps that hot little blond co-ed from the front row?

The maid picked up some extra towels and handed them to her. "You might be needing these," she said, and pushed her cart away. The professor wondered if she should have tipped her. *What would that be, hush money?*

Gambit carried the towels inside, and hoped that Patrice had not been aware of the maid.

"Mistress? Is that you?"

"I didn't tell you to speak!" she barked.

"I'm sorry, Mistress."

"Then shut your pie-hole." ...*pie-hole. Bloody Hell.* That's the sort of thing she'd say to a nephew! She must do some research on the Internet about the

proper terminology to use. Sure she heard a humorous sound escape the young woman's throat, she found herself stepping forward quickly to smack the girl's ass with the red, fat-hand-shaped fly swatter.

A sharp intake of breath, and the girl was silent, but moaned a little. *That's more like it*, Gambit thought. She smacked her again, on the other cheek. "Do you like that, you bad girl?"

"Yes, Mistress. Hit me harder." Another harder smack. "Mmmmm...that hurts so good, Mistress!" A weal appeared on the pink skin that looked like a hot waffle had been placed there. Gambit wished for a little syrup...She reached out and caressed the assaulted skin, and the girl moaned again. She let her hand tease at the girl's crack, and a deeper sound came from the young woman's throat...almost animalistic. She dragged the tip of her thumb down the crevice, descending to massage the young woman's lips and press a finger to her clit. More moaning, and Gambit felt the burn intensify between her own legs.

"Are you gonna rape me now with your big cock?"

I was supposed to bring a big cock? She looked around the room. There on the television...*remote control?* She grabbed the contraption and, with a quick thought toward sanitation, went to the bathroom to wash it with soap before returning. She climbed onto the bed, smacking the girl again, rubbing the remote along her ass crack.

Moaning...a bit of writhing, then: "Put it in me...I want it, please, Mistress—"

The professor felt a little strange about that.

She'd have to stall. "You want it, bad girl? Maybe I won't give it to you today..."

"Please Mistress...please...I want to feel your big cock inside me..."

A big remote cock. Wouldn't that be a cock that wasn't there? Just like the one she didn't have? Semantics could be so much fun.

The girl was wiggling her ass again, offering it up, her pussy glistening with excitement, turning pinker. It was so wild. So taboo. *A remote control!* Gambit was starkly aware of the hammering in her chest. This was so exciting! Nothing like the lectures on Beowulf, even when he was battling a fire dragon on the barrow.

She turned the remote around to the smoother end and pushed it inside the girl, and she groaned, a primitive, guttural sound that enveloped Gambit like a warm blanket covered with needles. She pushed it in further and pulled it back out slowly as the girl writhed and groaned and begged her for more. She pumped her with it, and a loud sound sliced through the room—a voice.

Startled, Gambit looked over her shoulder and saw that the television was on. The volume went up and down each time she pumped the young woman; the channels changed periodically. "Oh, Mistress, what's happening? What are you doing?"

"It's not a cock, Patrice, it's a remote control I have inside you! I am controlling you, you see?"

The girl moaned and wiggled and pushed her ass high, pumping back into the remote; channels changing, volume rising and falling.

The Professor was really into it, now. "Make it go to CNN, you bad girl! I want to see the news!"

"Yes Mistress!"

...and the Professor fucked her with the remote, over and over, television blaring, channels flipping, the sweet, young animal-girl growling and humping at it.



Long moments later, Gambit smoked her cigarette and leaned back on pillows as she watched Patrice in front of the dressing mirror, freshening her makeup, applying lipstick.

"So..." Gambit said, releasing a lungful of smoke. "How was it for your first time?"

Patrice wiped a stray smudge of Coral Passion from the corner of her lips. "Oh, it wasn't my first time."

"What? I thought—"

"That was just a role I played. Part of the game."

Mistress Gambit was flabbergasted. She had been conned by this young woman and it had never occurred to her that she was not as green as herself at it. She had been very convincing. "I see. Will we...see each other again?"

"I'm sure we will..." The girl straightened and turned. "...Professor."

Gambit thought her heart would stop.

Then the girl pulled at her hair and the wig came off to reveal blond tresses.

The co-ed from the front row.



6

Professor Rachel Leeds made the call from her desk before class. She told René about her encounter with Patrice at the Comfort Inn, where she had dismissed her inclination to be comforting.

Regaling her with the whole sordid story, she suffered through gentle laughter from the doctor, and eventually managed to see the humor in it, though became serious when she thought of what the big shock at the end might mean.

"What if she's up to something? I mean, she could destroy my tenure if she made this public."

"Why would she do that?" René asked.

"Why does anyone do anything? I don't know her. I don't know what her motives might be."

"Well, don't create demons for yourself, Rachel. It was probably just a ruse. She probably had a crush on you and thought this was a clever way to get her jollies. Just don't engage her on a personal level. If she shows up in class, treat her as you would anyone else. That will let her know where you stand."

"Or maybe it will just make her mad. Hell hath no fury, and all that—"

"From what you told me of her reaction when she revealed her identity, it didn't seem to me that she wanted any more from you than what you gave her."

Rachel considered this. Patrice had been patently glib after taking the wig off. And she had smiled casually, and left the hotel without another word. Maybe René was right and she was just being an alarmist. She glanced at the clock on the wall. "I have to get to my class. I'll talk to you later."

"Yes, keep me posted. I'd hate to miss any of your adventures on the dark side." René laughed.



In the classroom, Rachel was placing a new transparency on the transmissive projector, her mind wandering to the phrase *submissive projector*, when a swath of outdoor sunlight shot across her face. *Another late student*. Why did they all think they could disappear near the end of every semester?

As the girl traversed the stairs toward the lower seats of the lecture hall, she saw that it was not just any late student, but the blond co-ed. *Patrice*. Sultry, in a tight mini-skirt and white blouse that accentuated her perky and generous bosom.

Professor Leeds quashed the immediate stirrings in her groin by thinking of the unmitigated nerve Patrice must have, to appear in her classroom.

Rachel had checked her roll book that very morning, and seen that the co-ed's last name was there, but only her first initial. *P. Mann*. It explained why she didn't make the connection when she introduced herself as "Patrice" at the pub. And there

was the wig. That had fooled her, too. *Clever girl.*

As Patrice came down the steps, now, Rachel was slightly irritated at her own sweat-palmed response to the arrival of the vixen. She glanced up and Patrice caught her eyes as she took her seat on the front row, bold as lime green neon.

Professor Leeds was fearful that all secrets were now exposed, and allowed herself a cursory glance around the class to see if any face held a knowing expression. Had Patrice spent the rest of the weekend telling about her adventure to other students?

But the only sagacious expression was perched upon the features of Patrice, who opened her notebook without moving her eyes away from the professor's. *So she thinks that just because she tricked me into an intimate encounter, she now has special privileges.* That idea would soon be placed in file thirteen.

"Patrice, see me after class," she said in her best authoritative voice. Her inner voice added, *Now, you've done it. She thinks the tryst is going to continue in some darkened corner of the lecture hall later.*

Patrice grinned at her. *Grinned.* Rachel Leeds took a deep breath to quell the anger rising in her chest like mercury on an August thermometer.

"As I was saying..." the professor continued, her attention back on the transmissive-submissive projector. "...the themes inherent in Beowulf are generally believed to have sprung from oral tradition..." Rachel winced at the innocent turn of the phrase, and refused to look at Patrice, whom she was sure still had a salacious grin plastered on her lips.



Twenty minutes later, the afternoon British Literature class dismissed, and Rachel Leeds gathered her materials as Patrice lingered in her seat, awaiting her dubious punishment.

"You wanted to see me, Professor?" Patrice asked sweetly.

She jammed her satchel full, and met the girl's eyes. "Yes...I..." The echo of her own voice in the now-empty hall caused some discomfort. This was not a conversation to be shared with whomever might be passing by. "Can you follow me to my office?"

"Sure." Patrice stood and slung her book bag over one shoulder, tossing her head to move the blond tresses from her face.

The book bag was made of leather. Not the usual vinyl fare. Perhaps Patrice was one of those bored rich kids, getting her jollies by manipulating a professor, gaining some supposed leverage for future manipulations. The Hyundai she drove might have been rented for the motel tryst. Patrice probably drove a sports car. Maybe a Jag.

Despite her growing irritation, Rachel flashed on the image of the girl, face down on the hotel bed, offering herself up as some erotic sacrifice. Seeing again, with stark clarity, the remote control plunging into her sweet, hot pinkness.

She shoved the visage from her mind's eye and started toward the side door, Patrice behind her. She could feel the young woman's attention on her ass.



Rachel waited for the co-ed to pass through, then shut the office door behind her, moving to her desk. She wanted to keep some furniture between them. Just to be safe. For the sake of prudence.

Patrice stood with her back to the professor, examining the collections of books on the shelf. Rachel's attention wandered to the girl's ass, and images again invaded her mind. *Ass. Remote control. Writhing. Whimpering.* She cleared her throat. "Have a seat, Patrice."

The girl obliged, crossing one leonine leg over the other, her short skirt hiked up to the point of impropriety on her hips.

Professor Leeds placed her arms on the desk and joined her fingers, perhaps to keep them still. "This is...very awkward...we need to discuss how we're going to handle it..."

"Handle what?" she said innocently.

A frown momentarily controlled Rachel's features. *More games?* "Let's just—Patrice. You should know that I seriously didn't realize you were one of my students when I...when I met with you..."

"I'm looking forward to your class on Milton next semester. I read your book. It's brilliant."

"Pardon?"

"Your book. Milton. I'd love to audit that class too. I love your teaching style."

Was that sarcasm? Gathering her senses, she closed a file on her desk. "Patrice. Do you understand—"

"I understand that you are an excellent

instructor."

How did she mean that? "Well, thank you, but—"

"I'm auditing several subjects, getting a feel for the university's curriculum. I know that thirty is a little late to be scoping colleges, but that's the situation."

Thirty? She's thirty? Rachel felt relieved that the girl—woman—only looked younger, but was not. It made the whole situation a bit more palatable.

"So, I'll check back with you on next semester."

So this was how it was going to be. Perhaps it was best. While Rachel Leeds was not fond of games, other than chess, she would play along. It was a game of chess, really. And Patrice was a formidable opponent. The thought of playing a real game of chess with her was appealing. "Very well, then. I'll circulate the final schedule of next semester's courses at the end of this class..."

"Great." Patrice stood, lifting her backpack to her dainty shoulder.

The professor pushed away from the desk and moved to the door, opening it to allow Patrice to exit.

In one fluid movement, Patrice slammed the door closed, locked it, and spun the professor toward the bookshelf, pinning her against it and locking her lips on Rachel's. Her hand shot down Rachel's slacks, and found the prize before the professor could find the use of her defensive muscles.

In lieu of clamping her other hand over the professor's mouth, which she couldn't have, because it was engaged in pinning her to the bookshelf, Patrice instead kept her mouth clamped over the

Rachel's.

Swirling in the growing wetness with two fingers, Patrice plunged them inside her, eliciting a gasp that was not at all academic. Pumping in and out with her slender digits, her mouth still covering Rachel's, she bent away to avoid a falling book. As her thrusting hand became more ferocious, more books fell, and she brought the professor to orgasm, remaining inside her as Rachel rode the clonic spasms against the shelf.

Breathless, Rachel grasped the shelf behind her for support, her knees unable to support her, and Patrice withdrew her hand and her mouth, unlocked the door, pulled it open, and disappeared into the hallway.

Professor Rachel Leeds placed a hand to her sweat-glistening chest, feeling the thrumming of her own pulse, and unsure of whether she would be able to remain on her feet. She stretched to slap her palm against the door to close it.

Squatting, she retrieved one of the books that had fallen. *Dante's Inferno*. It was exactly what was happening to the swollen bud at the apex of her nether lips at this moment, although somewhat doused by the amount of liquid seeping over onto one thigh.



On the drive home, ensconced in her less-sexy-than-a-Jaguar mini-van, Rachel relived the sensations that had been brought upon her by the delicious Patrice. She discovered that, unwittingly, she was touching herself at a red light, when a horn blasted her back

into reality.

Pulling into her own driveway, she wanted only to cleanse, change her panties, and have a glass of wine while grading papers, get her mind off the intoxicating memory of the woman who had turned her office into a den of iniquity. She might never be able to concentrate in that room again. Indeed, each time she glanced at any bookshelf she would remember. This promised to be a recurring distraction, as books were plentiful in her vocation.

Rachel settled on the sofa and picked up the remote, tuning the satellite to a classical music channel. She fingered the buttons on the device and thought of Patrice in that hotel room. The stack of ungraded papers lay on the coffee table, her red pen across the pages, awaiting her proofing and direction. It took only a moment for her plans to change.

She pushed her slacks down and kicked them off. Leaning back against the cushions, she allowed her hand to slip down to the place of aching. Her clit was already engorged, and she rubbed in slow circles around it, while Bach's "Air on a G-String" accompanied her. She worked at the swollen bulb, and slid her fingers into herself for lubrication. Confounded by the degree of moisture she found there, Rachel recalled the scene earlier in her office; the frantic, aggressive way in which Patrice had her completely in her control before Rachel could respond in any way other than primitively. Was this her way of telling Rachel that control could be taken? That mastery could be had by either?

She could feel the woman's slender fingers pushing inside her, massaging her G-spot and

forcing her toward climax. Rachel felt her sex-liquid drizzling in her palm and opened her eyes. The remote lay on the coffee table.

She leaned forward and retrieved it, rubbing herself with it, remembering Patrice. Remembering the sounds that had raked out of her throat. Slowly, she pushed the remote inside herself, gasping. She fucked herself with the device, knowing now, what Patrice had been feeling. Understanding the wildness of it, the taboo. Her fingers gripped the remote as she came, and the TV switched to snow. She listened to the white noise coming from the screen as the waves of orgasm subsided. Climax never happened for Rachel as swiftly as it did with Patrice at the helm, or when Rachel merely conjured the visage of Patrice in her mind.

Reaching for her wine, she drank it down and replaced the goblet on the coffee table. She had left gooey fingerprints on the glass.



7

Pulling the business card out of her back pocket to check the address again, she looked up at the marquee. *Dr. René Bass, 3rd floor, Ste 307.* Punching the elevator button, she stepped in.

Snatching the card from the professor's desk had been easy enough, but she was unclear about why she felt a compulsion to make an appointment. Perhaps to peek into Rachel's world. Why had Rachel been seeing Dr. Bass? Was it because she was trying to understand her own sexual orientation? She had obviously never dommed anyone before, that much was clear to Patrice from the experience in the hotel room. She had played along, though.

Clearly, Patrice would not be asking the doctor directly about Professor Leeds, but she could at least talk about her own sexuality, and see what sort of answers she might have given the professor. She felt fortunate that the doctor could see her so quickly. Probably because she thought she might be getting a new client.

She only had to wait fifteen minutes before the client preceding her came out. The young woman

was thin, had short-cropped hair, wore no jewelry except the ring piercing an eyebrow, and was dressed in baggy jeans and a T-shirt. She was the epitome of what was colloquially referred to as a "boi." Patrice never could understand why women who loved women, thought they had to look like men.

Doctor Bass opened the door to her office and glanced into the waiting room. Patrice was the only one there. She smiled. "Patrice?"

"Yes," Patrice said, rising and sweeping past her. She caught a whiff of Pi by Givenchy. Patrice had always liked the scent of that perfume.

René welcomed her with an invitation to help herself to the coffee. Patrice did so, and took a seat in the plush chair facing the woman.

"So, what brings you here today?"

Patrice stirred the coffee with one of the plastic sticks adorned with a tiny brain on the top. No doubt the psychologist had ordered them from some eclectic website, and found them amusing.

Patrice considered her options. The direct approach had always worked well for her. She wanted to know how the counselor would respond to a woman having sexual orientation issues. "I've always been attracted to women, and I wondered if that means I am a lesbian." She sucked the coffee moisture off the stick.

Dr. Bass smiled, perhaps, Patrice thought, because she had heard the same from the professor. "Are you attracted to men?"

"I've had relationships with them. But I never felt satisfied. No, I guess I've never really been attracted to men."

"Have you acted on your attractions to women?"

She had to stifle a laugh at the understatement that was. "Yes. A few times."

René tried to keep a poker-face; this had to be Rachel's Patrice. "And how was that?"

"How was that, as in, how did I like it? Or how was that as in how did I act on my attractions?"

Oh she's a sharp one. "Both."

"Well..." She tried to imagine how Rachel might have answered this question. "A woman once picked me up at a bar, and I went to a hotel with her. I liked it, it was exciting..."

Oh what a coincidence. Now she was certain. "Does it trouble you that you enjoyed the experience?"

"A little, maybe...I wasn't raised to dabble in those areas of sexuality. I wasn't raised to be a sexual creature at all."

She's guessing about Rachel, now. Pretty close, too.

"How did it make you feel?"

"The hotel experience?"

The doctor nodded.

"A little ashamed. Awkward. But also...sort of... happy."

"Then where's the problem?"

She hadn't expected that response. "I'm sorry?"

"You came here because of some confusion about your feelings for women, and yet you say you've had positive experiences and that it even made you happy. So why is it a problem?"

"Well...I guess I feel like it's wrong on some level."

"Who says?"

"Religion, Society...parents..."

"Do your parents know about these experiences?"

The closer she stuck to the truth, the better she'd get through this little adventure. "For a long time, I didn't think they knew, but then my status as the black sheep of the family was explained in one of my grandmother's senile moments. The entire family hated the fact that I was a *deviant queer*, destined to burn in hell for my *unnatural acts*."

Okay, now we're talking about you, aren't we, Patrice? "You think that was the reason you were the black sheep?"

"Yeah. Nothing else made sense. And it explained my discomfort at family gatherings during holidays, and a generalized but pervasive sense that I was not exactly loved."

On some level, Patrice had recognized the mindless tradition of Christmas and Thanksgiving for what they were: obligatory gestures her mother hoped would win her passage through the Pearly Gates. It really had little to do with the fact that her mother had brought Patrice into the world, and should have loved her regardless of their differences in philosophy or sexual orientation.

"How did this change your interaction with your family, after you discovered how they felt?"

"It went on the same for a while. During that time, when I went off to college, my mother and father divorced. But the status quo continued even after the divorce, when I would spend the breaks or holidays with my mother and her latest boyfriend or husband. I knew that she only wanted me to be there so she could play the part of loving, proud mom."

Now we're getting somewhere, René mused. *You*

intended to talk about Rachel, somehow, but now you've completely forgotten that. "You think it was an act?"

"Oh, completely. She was so transparent. She never breathed a word about my orientation, but was sure to present herself in a certain way in relation to me. She was really affectionate toward me as long as the man in her life was around. And her boyfriends and husbands seemed to buy it. And they also bought her all these nice things, including vehicles and new stoves, and \$800 rocking chairs." *Marjorie did not want to upset the money cart by being perceived as a deadbeat parent, which, in truth, she was.* Patrice had tried to be supportive of her mother when her parents got divorced, but was continually reminded that her familial loyalty fell on apathetic genes. She had long since embraced her own identity as a woman who loved women, but the irony became her inability to love her own mother. It wasn't for lack of trying.

"Do you have any siblings?"

"One brother, Blake. He's almost two years older than me." Patrice twirled the brain-stick in her fingers.

"How was your relationship with him?"

"He was a bully. And also the golden boy." Aside from his tormenting, her memories of Blake were largely centered on his status as favored son. He could do no wrong, especially in the eyes of her mother.

"Was he a bully to you?"

"Especially to me," she confirmed. When they were pre-teens, he would pull Patrice down the staircase by her ankles, with no regard for having injured her. And when she would cry to her mother,

she'd tell Patrice not to be a baby.

Patrice related another story that typified this behavior. Once, when Patrice was twelve, she was sitting in front of the television, cross-legged on the floor, her mother and father on the sofa across the room. Blake had come in and sat directly behind her in a chair, and had commanded, "Move."

She had turned to look at him, saying, "No."

"Move!" he'd said again, with more authority.

"I was here first, you move."

He had picked up the TV Guide and flung it at her, and it struck her in the eye, drawing blood from one corner. She had looked over at her parents, cupping her eye. "Mom! Did you see what he did?"

Her mother only said, "Don't make a scene, Patrice, just move."

She looked at her father for support. "Dad?!"

"Drop it," he'd say, in his usual non-confrontational way. The man was pathologically incapable of dealing with conflict.

She refocused on Doctor Bass. "Blake and I were never close. I avoided him completely after he left home, which was an easy task, since I only saw him on holidays, and in the months in between, he never returned my calls or emails." Blake would show up for the holidays and behave like all was normal between them.

Another time, during Patrice's recovery from severe injuries, her brother had come to Christmas dinner with his new wife. Patrice had not received an invitation to this wedding, and he handed out gifts that Christmas to everyone but Patrice. It was the last time she scraped together pennies to buy him something. In fact, it was the last time she

joined her family for the holidays at all.

The doctor wrote something on her notepad.

"What about your father?"

"My father was utterly non-confrontational. There were times when I felt I didn't know him at all. He was unfamiliar." Patrice appreciated that to some degree, her father, Doyle, was a bit easier to deal with, as he was gregarious with most people, but patently unavailable emotionally.

Her most vivid memory of him from childhood was of being in the cab of his truck while relocating the family. She was slightly afraid of him, but had no reason to feel that way. He had never been violent, nor physically harmed her in any way. As she grew older, she realized her discomfort on that long trip with him in the truck sprang from an overall sensation that he was foreign. Her own father felt like a stranger to her.

"What was your parent's marriage like?" René inquired.

"They...were married for 23 years before divorcing when I headed off to college."

"Yes, but that's about their divorce. What was their marriage like?"

"I don't know...I wasn't a part of their marriage ...all I saw was what they let me see."

"And what was that?"

"My mother always seemed unhappy about everything, very critical and demanding, and my father seemed to resent what she asked of him. They were never openly affectionate in front of me."

Dredging up the past, though, was not what Patrice had gone to Doctor Bass for. She was more interested in Rachel. Maybe it was not the best

method for getting to know her. And all this was quickly leading toward the *fait accompli* of her final contact with her parents and her brother. She wasn't willing to get into that with the doctor.

"So you didn't have a good example to go on... marital bliss didn't seem so blissful."

"Well no, but my being gay wasn't some rebellion, either. I am what I am, regardless of the examples I was shown."

Gotcha. "You don't sound confused about your sexual orientation, now..."

Patrice realized she had slipped up. "Maybe I'm not."

"Then why are you here?"

Patrice tried not to tip her hand. "Maybe I need to think about that and get back to you..."

"Or maybe you don't need to get back to me."

Patrice exchanged a smile with the doctor. "Could be."

She had, at that point, redirected the exchange toward her own sexual activities, and felt an unusual support coming from the doctor. That was probably because Doctor Bass had a decidedly gay vibe. Patrice was relatively certain the therapist was, herself, a lesbian. Had she come across her in the gym a few years ago, she would have snagged her as one of her conquests. Though she sensed that Doctor Bass was not quite snaggable. Patrice quickly feigned a new understanding of herself as a gay woman, so that the therapist wouldn't question the point of her visit. She said her goodbyes and left the office.

René grinned in collusive satisfaction. She wondered if she should tell Rachel what the vixen

was up to. Maybe it didn't matter. She didn't get any sense of malice from Patrice. In fact, she suspected that Patrice was intrigued by Rachel, and wanted to know more. Seeking out Rachel's therapist wasn't the way to go about it, of course, but Patrice had probably figured that out, by now.

She closed her office door, started on paperwork.



Passing through the front pneumatic doors of the office building, Patrice thought about the demise of her parents' marriage.

Her father had deemed it necessary to continue appearances with the union until Patrice went off to college, though his fidelity didn't suffer from such restrictions. He had been having an affair for the last two years of the marriage.

Patrice hadn't discovered this until she came home during her freshman year in college, and found her mother distraught. Contrary to Marjorie's strategy, Doyle Mann had not contested the divorce, but had not filed it either. He didn't want to be the bad guy, though he probably was. His greatest shortcoming remained his skill at avoiding confrontation.

Her father continued to be emotionally unavailable until her mother couldn't take it anymore, and filed for divorce herself, more as a means of leverage and manipulation, than as an admission of a failed marriage. When Doyle didn't contest it, she found herself caught in the paperwork of finality. This had been her father's intention all along. Marjorie had to start a dog grooming business

to sustain herself.

Now, crossing the parking lot to her car, disconcerted by the reanimation of those old wounds, Patrice wondered if they had anything to do with her interest in Rachel. It had occurred to her before, that her love of older women, especially authority figures, might have had some relation to her troubled relationship with her mother.

In Freudian psychology, the Oedipus Complex referred to a stage in psychosexual development wherein children of either gender saw their fathers as adversaries in the quest for the exclusive love of their mothers. The Electra Complex, put forth by Jungian theory, stated that female children saw the mother as a threat against the exclusive love of their fathers. If a female child was a lesbian, how would all that play into psychosexual development? The point was likely moot, since Patrice considered Freud a lunatic who superimposed his own sickness onto others.

Besides, she never saw her father as an adversary. Adversary would imply participation, and Doyle Mann was nothing if not an absentee parent, even if only emotionally. Perhaps there needed to be an entirely new branch of psychoanalysis where those who felt romantically inclined toward their own gender, were addressed in some way other than judgment and ridicule. Patrice suspected that Doctor Bass was one of the blessed exceptions to this mindset.

Yet, it was plausible, in a simplified way, that her attraction to older female authority figures was somehow an attempt to regain maternal love. It was equally plausible that there was no connection to be

had at all, but merely a simultaneous set of events, unrelated; the memories of her parents appearing only because she knew her mother's birthday was only a few days away. As usual, she would give the dubious date a nod, merely to acknowledge that the woman brought her into this world, and go on with her life.

Patrice unlocked her car and got in. She had all but ignored the date of her father's birthday last month. Perhaps her parents were forefront in her mind more than usual because of those two dates. *Fuck 'em*, she thought. *I'd rather think about Rachel.*

Swinging out of the lot, she retrieved the memory of the encounter in the professor's office. Rachel wanted what she gave her, as sure as Patrice wanted to offer it.

And there would be more, between them. She wanted to live out other fantasies with this woman who had vexed her so thoroughly.



8

The following morning, as Rachel made her way down the corridor to her office, she tried to block the replay of erotic dreams that had filled her slumber the night before. Had she ever been so obsessed? Had she ever thought about sex as much as in the last week? What had become of her status as a proper lady of academia?

After her first round of self-pleasuring last night, she had remained ravenous, and had brought herself to orgasm two more times. Guilt about her withering work ethic forced her to stay up late, for another quick scan of her grading.

She stepped into her office and closed the door. Dropping her satchel on the floor, she plopped the stack of graded papers on the desktop calendar, and started some Folgers Hazelnut in the small coffeemaker on a cart in the corner. Caffeine would be a prerequisite today, after her fitful night of sleep.

While the coffee brewed, she sat down at the desk and pulled the papers toward her. Without warning, she responded to some stimuli that did not

have a chance to register in her brain for long seconds, until she recognized the sensation as intuition...she felt a presence so strongly...the presence then touched her legs with two hands.

Pushing her chair back suddenly, her pulse hammered at her throat, as if she had just taken the first slope of a giant roller coaster. The blood rushed to her face, causing a feverish sensation. She gawked at the woman beneath the desk. "What the hell?!"

As the coffeemaker gurgled across the room, hands held her fast at the back of her knees and pulled the chair on its castors back under the desk. Patrice caressed Rachel's thighs, and her fingers found the button of her slacks, the clasp, the zipper.

Why am I not stopping her?

Patrice was pulling the slacks and panties free of the professor's legs. She was parting her knees, kissing her inner thighs. Soon, she was pulling the chair closer, dragging her by the back of her knees to the edge of the seat, her breath warming the folds of Rachel's outer lips. Patrice eased the woman's legs apart, wider, to gain access.

Kissing the velvety skin of the professor's intimate lips, she licked her in one long stroke from bottom to top. Rachel moaned, and melted into her chair, aware that she could not possibly offer an objection now; aware that she longed for whatever glorious things this young woman was about to bestow.

Patrice pressed her mouth firmly against the woman, licking, suckling, teasing the swelling clit. Rachel had never felt a woman's mouth on her. Never experienced the softness of a feminine face buried in her tender folds. It was divine.

A sharp rap jolted Rachel in her seat, and then her door swung open. The Dean of Students.

"Rachel—" he began, leaning halfway in the door. "Hate to interrupt—"

Rachel fumbled to pick up her red pen, as if to present some semblance of normalcy. "Yes, Dean?" His name really was Dean. Mark Dean. The kids called him Dean Dean.

"There's a staff meeting tomorrow at eleven. Usual fare. Thought you might need a heads up. My secretary is at the dentist."

Damn secretary. Damn dentist. "Oh, thank you—" Patrice, bless or curse her, was still at it. She had not stopped her amorous licking and sucking. Rachel knew her face must have looked as hot as it felt.

Dean frowned at Rachel. "Are you okay? You look a little feverish..." He stepped forward, as if to offer a hand test of her forehead.

She held her palm out to him. "No! Don't...if I am coming down with something, don't want to give it to you—please—"

He paused. "Well, okay. Why don't you just knock off early today, get some rest?"

"Yes, yes. I will."

"It's nothing crucial tomorrow, if you don't feel up to it."

Yes, yes whatever...God, her tongue...please go away...please don't stop...go away! Get out! Close the door, for God's sake...Her mind whirled with overloaded sensation, wanting only for him to disappear, secure the door again. "I'll be...fine." He waved at her and stepped back into the hallway, leaving the door ajar.

Fuck!

She felt Patrice giggling, the vibration of it

against her pussy. "The door—Patrice...he didn't close...the door..."

She pulled back to peer up at the professor from her place between her legs. "I guess you'd better be quiet, then."

Rachel cringed as Patrice rededicated herself to oral bliss, and stared at the breach, even watched several of her colleagues pass by, unaware of the debacle that was taking place only a few feet away from their staid academia. She was terrified. Conflicted. Highly aroused. The taction of Patrice's masterful tongue overpowered her senses.

Rachel remembered reading somewhere that the tongue was the strongest muscle in the human body. The power of this one certainly demonstrated that bit of trivia with consummate precision. The longer the young woman's erotic crusade continued, the more Rachel wanted it never to end. The muscle made circles, figure eights; it teased the engorged clit, swept up and down in the tender trenches, flailed it side to side, beat it up and down as swiftly as the wings of a hummingbird, then returned to leisurely but deliberate licking. The intensity became almost unbearable. Rachel was shocked by the speed at which she traveled from arousal to the precipice of sweet release.

Her clit burned and ached as the climax latched onto her nerve endings and began to crescendo. She reached down and held one hand to the back of Patrice's head, mashing her closer, clenching her hair in a fist. The other hand went to her own mouth as the orgasm washed through her. A small squeal erupted from her lips, lost in the fierce clamping of her palm.

Patrice slowed her movements, softly kissing her intimate lips, her thighs, as Rachel tried to regain control of her pulse and breath.

Recovering somewhat, Professor Leeds peered down at the young woman wearing a smile the width of her face. "You are a bad girl."

"I'm YOUR bad girl." Patrice placed a hand atop the *mons pubis*, kissing Rachel's thigh again.

"Give me my pants."

Patrice rescued the slacks from the floor, the panties still sequestered inside them, and helped the professor put them both back on. She sat in the chair, still watching the doorway, afraid of another intrusion, this one more alarming than the last. Although she couldn't imagine what might be more alarming than having the Dean of Students lingering in your doorway, making conversation, while another woman was treating your pussy like a bowl of pudding without a spoon.

Fully clothed again, Rachel pushed her chair back and had to focus on the mechanics of walking. Her legs quivered with realized satisfaction. She made it to the door and closed it, turning the lock before finally relaxing.

When she turned around, Patrice was in her chair, casually wiping her face with the neck of her own T-shirt. Their eyes met. Rachel considered the woman. The luscious blond hair, the ever so slightly oversized lips—a *fuckable mouth*, they called it, then banished the thought, along with its destination. "Where is this going, Patrice?"

"Does it have to go anywhere?"

"I'm...this isn't the lifestyle I've had...I don't know how to process this situation in any way that

makes sense."

Patrice rose and went to the coffeemaker, pouring two cups. "Why do things always have to make sense to you?" She added cream to them and handed one to the Professor.

Rachel looked down at it. "How did you know how I like it?"

Patrice leered at the choice of words for only a moment, before responding, "Observation. The sugar is below on the cart, the creamer is above. Thus, you use only cream. The sugar is for visitors. You would always provide things for visitors, even if you didn't use it yourself. You're accommodating."

The professor reclaimed her chair, and pulled herself up to the desk, both hands around the cup. "So you think you know me, now?"

Patrice sat in the chair opposite the desk. "I think I know enough for now."

"For now?"

"For now."

She recognized a distinct craving for a cigarette, a glass of wine, a moment to luxuriate...yet that would be not only impossible here, but unprofessional. "What is it you want from me, Patrice?"

"I want to make you crazy with desire."

"You've...been doing that. Is that all you want?"

"Is there something else you'd like me to have?"

Chess. She's playing chess again. Just a fresh game; perhaps after placing me in checkmate on the previous round. "I'm out of my element with this, Patrice. And there's this large specter of impropriety that I can't ignore. You are a student, even if you're only auditing and not registered. This is wrong."

Patrice couldn't help but smile. The professor actually thought there were some damn sex police around every corner. "You think you're taking advantage of me?" A slight sound of amusement escaped her full lips. "I'm thirty years old."

"If we had met in a bar, maybe this would not be an improper coupling..."

"We did meet in a bar." Patrice winked and sipped her coffee.

"You know what I mean."

Patrice studied the flushed woman across from her, acquiescing. "Yes. I know what you mean."

"Can we stop playing this game?"

"The lifestyle you're curious about is a game. Twenty-four seven, it's a game."

Rachel finally took her first drink of coffee. "How long have you been in the lifestyle?"

Patrice stirred the coffee with one finger and plunged the digit into her mouth, looking up at the professor. "I'm not in it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm not in it."

"But you answered the ad because that was what you were after, right?"

"I answered the ad because you placed it. I wanted you." *That's when I also pilfered Dr. Bass's card*, she thought, but didn't say aloud.

Rachel frowned, still holding her coffee cup with both hands. "But... how could you have—"

"I saw the receipt for your submission—" She chuckled again. "Your submission...We're having *pun* now."

"How did you see it?"

She took a careful sip of the Hazelnut. "You

might not recall. I came to see you a week ago."

She frowned. "No, I don't recall that..."

"Well, I was wearing a wig. Short, red hair..."

Rachel had a quick, faint image of the student who had been in her office for only a few moments, asking for a schedule.

"You were summoned to a meeting with the Provost. I grabbed the schedule, and when I turned around, noticed the key dangling from the drawer, and recalled that you were behaving strangely about it when I came in. I pulled it out and saw the receipt for the ad you placed in the quarterly—"

"You violated my privacy—" she objected weakly.

"Oh please, Professor. That wasn't the first or last time I violated your privacy."

Rachel pressed her fingers to her eyes, unable to respond.

"So," Patrice continued, "all I had to do was answer the ad when it appeared in the paper." Pretty clever, if she did say so herself.

The professor leaned back in her chair, hand over her mouth for a moment, as if to quell some outburst. "You set me up."

"You got what you wanted and so did I. Does the method really matter now?"

She considered this for a minute. "I...suppose it doesn't. But what is this to be, Patrice? Just hotels and sex under my desk?"

"Isn't that the sort of thing you want?"

The phone buzzed, stilling her reply, and she thankfully pressed a line button. "Professor Leeds," she answered. "Yes, Armondo..." She opened her daybook and consulted some future pages. "...of

course, of course...no problem..." She chatted with him briefly, completed the call and hung up.

Patrice had an unexpected moment of fear, but did not allow the emotion to creep into her voice. "Is Armondo your boyfriend?"

She huffed. "No. My neighbor. He travels a lot, and I watch his house, water his plants, and—" She thought of the Jaguar. The gearshift. The apparatus she suspected she'd have no need for, now...

"And? What else do you do for Armondo?" *Please don't tell me you do anything else for Armondo.*

"No, no...it's nothing like that. We're only friends. I just..." She toyed with a paperclip, the visage of shifting the Jag, the power under her, as Patrice touched her while the—"Never mind."

"Let's go get a drink."

"What?"

"A drink. You're knocking off early because of your fever." She flashed a mischievous grin. "Let's go get a cocktail."

"I have...finals tomorrow..."

"So do I. Term papers are graded and tests are ready, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Then what's to do?"